

BETWEEN 1936 and 1940 three eventful tours were made to Australia by dance companies who performed under a variety of often confusingly similar names, including Colonel W. de Basil's Russian Ballet Company, the Covent Garden Russian Ballet and the Original Ballet Russe. The tours were momentous for Australians, isolated as they were then from first-hand contact with European developments in the art; they provided Australian audiences with a panorama of modernism in the performing and visual arts, on a scale that they had not previously encountered.

The visits sparked debate in contemporary newspapers and journals about a variety of issues including the authenticity of the works Australians were seeing, and the role of the Russian Ballet in fostering well-informed audiences.



Colonel Wassily de Basil
Photograph by Max Dupain
From the Pictorial Collection

For Australians it was also important to emphasise the stature of the artists—dancers, choreographers, visual artists and musicians—whose work was seen and heard in Australia. Names like Baronova, Riabouchinska, Toumanova, Dolin, Lifar, Youskevitch, Nijinska, Fokine, Massine, Gontcharova, Bakst, Benois, Stravinsky are clearly a validation for subsequent developments at a local level. The impact the tours had, not only on an emerging Australian dance, but on the development of the performing


and visual arts in general in Australia has, in fact, become legendary.

The finer details of the legend, however, have often been ignored in an initial effort simply, and importantly, to document the history of the tours. Today there are few accessible records remaining of the Russian Ballet tours that might provide a basis for developing a

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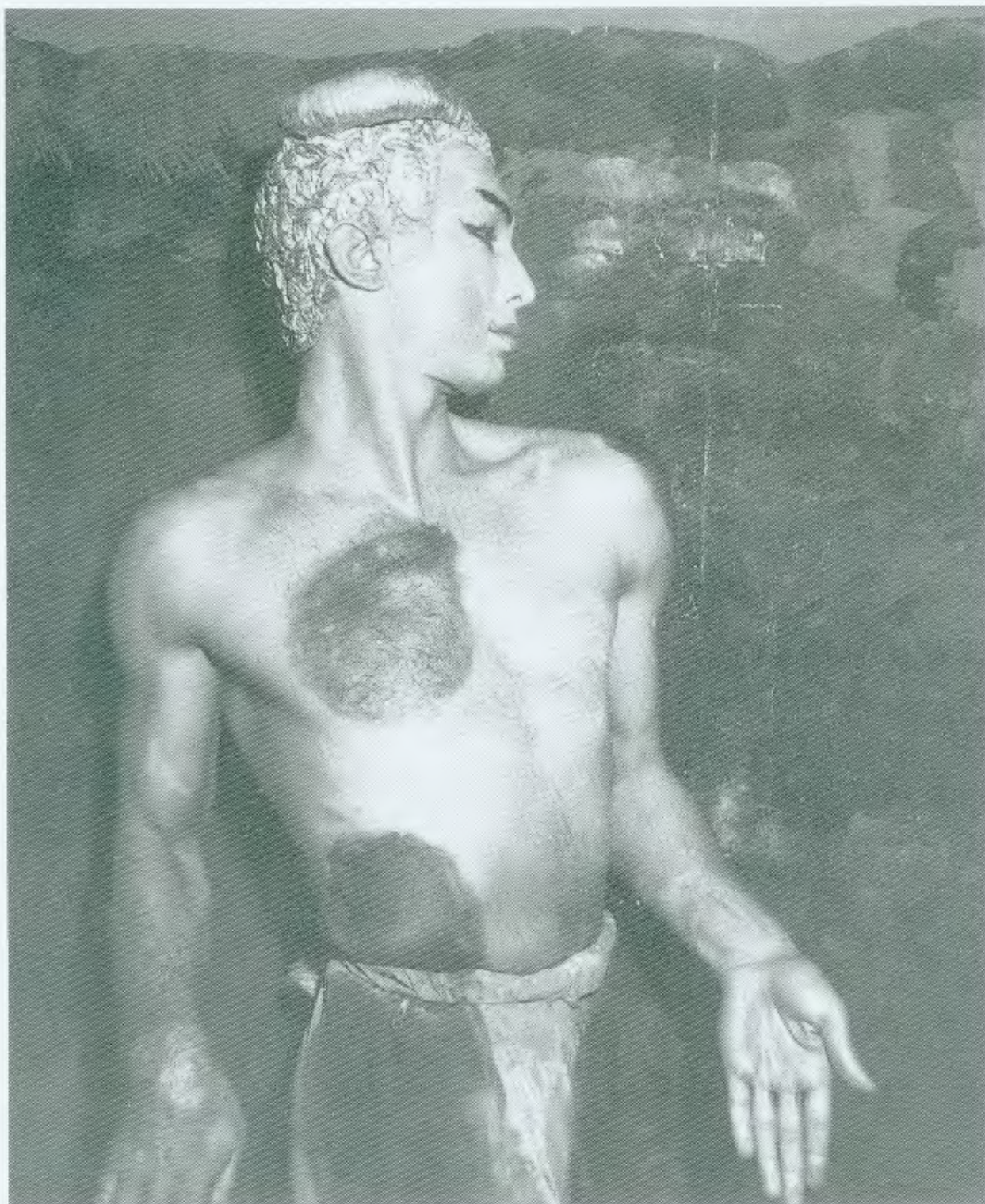
deeper understanding of the nature of their impact on Australian cultural life. In terms of visual records, those that do exist are scattered, often poorly preserved, and sometimes of dubious quality, although a few photographers, and one pioneering home-movie maker, have made major contributions. One particular opus of work, that of photographer Max Dupain, is outstanding. As documentation Dupain's Russian Ballet shots reveal more than the obvious, and have much to say about a photographer who is particularly demanding both of his own medium and of the medium he is recording. As the work of an unashamedly Australian photographer, they at times highlight his attempts to make an Australian statement about a very non-Australian group of people. What emerges is a distinctive collection of dance photographs.

Max Dupain (1911–92) is widely esteemed as one of Australia's most eminent photographers. Over a long professional career, he photographed the Australian landscape, Australian cities, Australian architecture, and Australians at work and play. Many of his images, such as *The Meat Queue* and *The Sunbaker*, have been imbued with the status of Australian icons. Standing as something of a curiosity in this kind of output, Dupain's Russian Ballet photographs were taken as part of a commission from publisher and patron of the arts, Sydney Ure Smith. Some of the photographs appeared in



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Michelle Potter discusses Max Dupain's distinctive collection of dance photographs taken between 1936 and 1940



David Lichine in L'Après-midi d'un faune
Photograph by Max Dupain
From the Pictorial Collection

publications with which Smith was associated including the once highly popular but now defunct monthly journal *The Home*, which, between 1936 and 1940, devoted considerable space to the activities of the Russian companies. During 1989 and 1990, Dupain printed around sixty photographs from the Russian series for a travelling

exhibition entitled *Max Dupain's Dancers*. Many of the images had never been printed before. In 1990, the National Library of Australia purchased a portfolio of 22 of these works for its pictorial collection. Located in the Library's Pictorial Collection, the photographs provide an astonishing glimpse of the group of artists whose presence in

Australia created such a furore in the 1930s.

Most of Dupain's photographs in the series are of dancers, although he also photographed some non-dance personnel including the English writer Arnold Haskell who travelled with the Russian Ballet on the 1936–37 tour, and the entrepreneur Colonel Wassily de



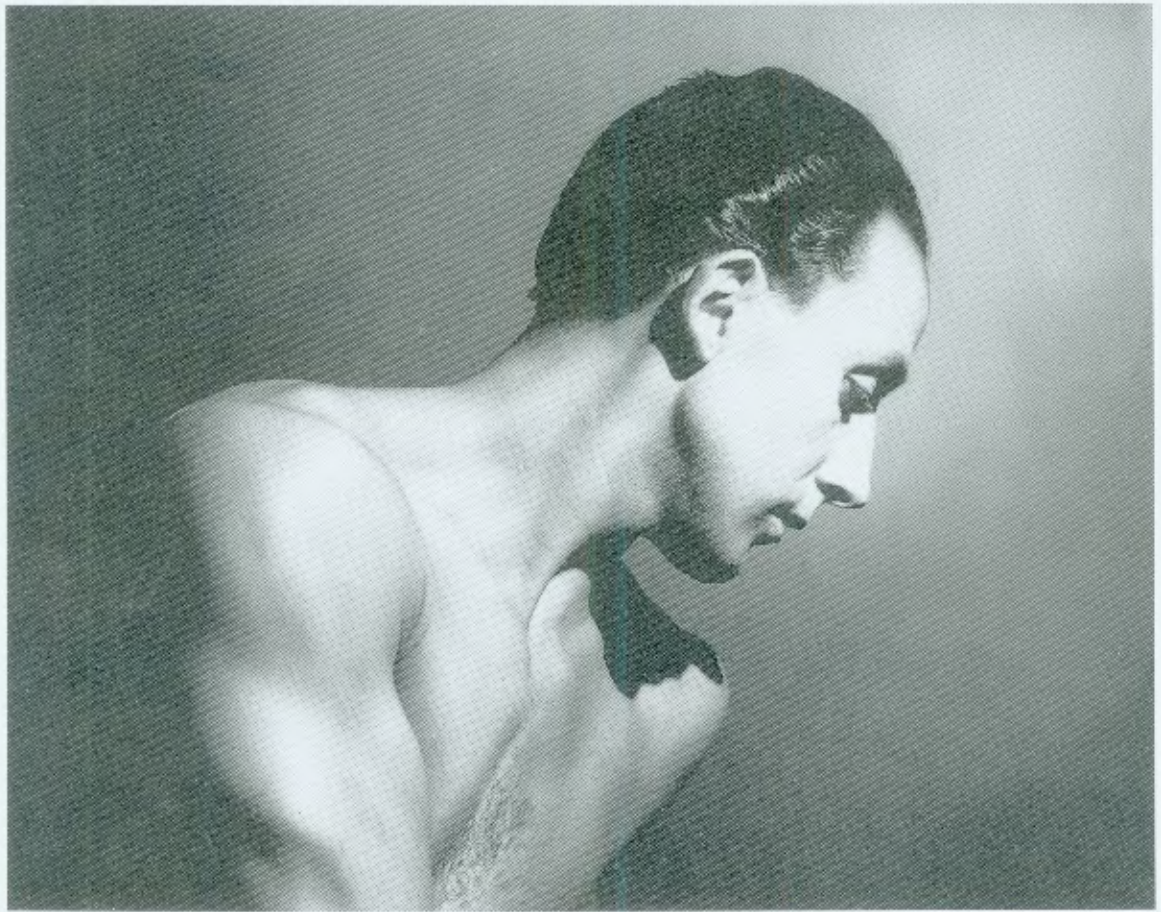
Tamara Toumanova in Le Spectre de la rose
Photograph by Max Dupain
From the Pictorial Collection

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Basil who came to Australia during the 1939–40 visit. Dupain rarely photographed the dancers in

performance. Performance shots he felt were limiting, allowing him neither choice nor the possibility of distilling the essence of what he was photographing. Instead he mostly took studio shots, posed and manipulative, emphasising what he spoke of in an oral history interview recorded for the National Library in September 1990 as the ‘artificiality

of the whole situation’ of the ballet. Some, such as the portrait of the Danish-born dancer Hélène Kirsova as the Ballerina in Michel Fokine’s *Petrushka*, with its emphasis on horizontal and vertical lines, highlight the photographer’s interest in form and composition. Many, including the Kirsova portrait, can also be viewed as studies of light and



Paul Petroff
Photograph by Max Dupain
From the Pictorial Collection

shade. But some, like the portrait of Tamara Toumanova in Fokine's *Le Spectre de la rose* and that of David Lichine in Vaslav Nijinsky's *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, sit at the conjunction of photography and Dupain's view of ballet by seeming to capture that luminous moment when ordinary mortal is transformed into illusory being. In part this is achieved technically, particularly with lighting, but in part it is also a result of Dupain's sensibility. Perhaps intuitively, he challenges the viewer's perception of the dancers he is photographing both by insisting on pursuing the 'artificiality of the situation' and by being unable to ignore its human element.

In some of the works this human element is transcendent. Many of the images, including the head and shoulders portrait of Paul Petroff, exude strength and pride and as such are documents of social history in an unusual sense. They are unable to be divorced from Dupain's assertion that the

'avalanche of dancing' which the Russian Ballet brought to Australia made an enormous impact on the country's cultural life. They are works which record with a photographer's admiration the strength of that impact and the allure of the artists who created it. They document a presence which is considerably more than a geographical presence.

Then, just as Dupain was unable to ignore the human element while underscoring the ballet's artificiality, he was also unable, and no doubt unwilling anyway, to ignore his Australian heritage. Some of the most unusual photographs in the series were taken outside the studio. Interested in pursuing his long-standing interest in the effects of natural light on a subject, and wanting to wrap the dancers in what he has referred to as 'an Australian ethos', as a refreshing change from the studio he took Tamara Toumanova and Paul Petroff to the Sydney suburb of Frenchs Forest, whose

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bushland setting allowed him to photograph them against a varied, but distinctively Australian, landscape.

In juxtaposing the dancers against the bush, Dupain was in essence pursuing the common preoccupation of visual artists with the theme of the figure in the landscape. In some works, such as the view of Petroff supporting Toumanova in arabesque on a sweeping line of rocks, Dupain highlights the 'foreign element' which he felt the Russian Ballet brought to Australia. Although seeming to echo the line of the rocks, their classical pose clearly alienates them from the surrounding landscape. Their costumes further emphasise a very



Hélène Kirsova in Petrushka
Photograph by Max Dupain
 From the Pictorial Collection

non-Australian heritage. Others, like the shot of Toumanova in a more relaxed pose and costume against a cliff face, establish a closer rhythm with the surrounding countryside and



Tamara Toumanova in Frenchs Forest
near Sydney
Photograph by Max Dupain
 From the Pictorial Collection

suggest a desire to absorb rather than exclude the figure. The Frenchs Forest photographs show Dupain, the

Australian photographer, attempting to remove 'the dictatorial presence of the subject' by locating that subject in surroundings which can both alienate and engulf. They are one more step in establishing the Ballets Russes tours as influential not just *per se* but for the effect they had on Australian creative artists.

Dupain, however, did not place great importance, on what he called his 'ballet series'. He referred to them as 'largely illustrative' and without 'the interpretative scope' that he felt was a feature of his non-dance output. Dance photographs, whether performance or studio shots, often seem to be regarded, even by those who make them, as items of nostalgia, little more than record shots of the past. Perhaps many of them *are* little more than this. But the National Library's collection of Max Dupain's dance photographs, despite the photographer's remarks about the qualities these works lack, is distinctive and valuable. The photographs reflect the exacting

standards and the sensibility of a photographer challenged by a particular group of dancers, who after their Australian tours pursued distinguished careers around the world, and transfixed by the medium that those dancers represented. But perhaps more importantly, Dupain's photographs make visible something of the cultural shock that hit Australia when the Russian Ballet arrived. His photographs are documentation reflecting more than a geographical presence and showing more than details of costuming and make-up. They reveal not just the power of photography but the power of dance as well.

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