



The GEOFFREY INGRAM ARCHIVE OF AUSTRALIAN BALLET

One of the most important archives of the history of dance in Australia is held at the National Library. Michelle Potter brings to life the Ingram Archive and the cultural context of the Borovansky Ballet

FIFTY YEARS AGO, Geoffrey Ingram arrived at the Melbourne studio of Edouard Borovansky, director of the Borovansky Ballet, to take his first dance class. He had been inspired to take that initial step by two dynamic male dancers he had seen performing with Borovansky's company. Recalling the moment in an oral history interview recorded in 1988 he said

I got my running shoes and my footie shorts and I went to Roma House in Elizabeth Street. I can remember that to this day. I had no idea of anything about ballet training at all. I stood outside. There were two bay windows overlooking Elizabeth Street, and I could see the dancers sitting in the windows. I screwed up courage and went upstairs.

The encounter with Borovansky's ballet classes marked the beginning of Ingram's long career in the dance world, a career that included performing engagements in the 1950s with the Victorian Ballet Guild and the National Theatre Ballet Company, and an influential term as administrator of the Australian Ballet during the early years of its existence in the 1960s.

Ingram's relationship with Borovansky, and with his wife Xenia, was enduring but not always easy. Returning from a period of study in Europe in the early 1950s, for example, Ingram says he was taken into Borovansky's company but given no roles to perform. It was a situation he found so difficult that he temporarily severed his connections with Boro, as he was popularly known, and Xenia. By the same token, however, he said

I was impetuous and demanding, and wanted things in too great a hurry, and I was probably very rude and arrogant.

Despite such difficulties, after the death of Xenia in 1985 (Boro had died in 1959), Ingram acquired an extensive collection of material, now housed in the National Library and known as the Geoffrey Ingram Archive of Australian Ballet. This Archive consists of a large collection of letters, personal papers and other manuscript material, along with an extensive photographic component, some original paintings and sketches, and a collection of theatre programs. Photographically, the material spans a period of fifty years from the 1920s

to the 1960s, while the manuscript component focuses predominantly on the period between 1939 and 1959 when the Borovansky Ballet grew and flourished. The Archive

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provides an illuminating glimpse not only of the world of Boro and Xenia and of the ballet school and company they established in Australia, but also of the cultural milieu from which the company developed.

Born in Czechoslovakia, Boro first came to Australia in 1929 as a dancer with the company of the



Geoffrey Ingram and Michelle Potter, Oral History Interview for the National Library of Australia in 1988
From the Pictorial Collection

legendary dancer Anna Pavlova. He returned again in 1938 as a performer with the Covent Garden Russian Ballet, one of the Russian-inspired companies whose performances in Australia between 1936 and 1940 dazzled audiences across the continent with an unprecedented display of modernism in the arts. The earliest items in the Ingram Archive reflect Boro's performing career with Pavlova and with the Russian companies, although they are not so much items that document his own roles, as photographs, usually of the kind used for publicity purposes, of admired colleagues. Boro seemed to be especially fond of this kind of memento and many of these photographs are autographed to him or to Xenia. The roll call of the performers with whom he worked and whose portraits he collected reflects the heritage on which he would later build his own company. They included dancers like Pavlova, Tamara Toumanova, Tatiana Riabouchinska, Tamara Tchinarova, Serge Lifar and Anton Dolin, and choreographers like Léonide Massine and Michel Fokine, as well as the composers and visual artists to whose work he was exposed as a dancer with the Russian companies.

With the occupation of his homeland and the imminent outbreak of war, Boro did not continue on to America and back to Europe with the Covent Garden Russian Ballet at the close of its 1938–39 season. Along with several other dancers, he chose to remain in Australia. It was a decision he did not regret, as one letter written in 1943 to a friend in Czechoslovakia reports

I do not think I will ever regret my decision. It was a little strange for my wife and I to stay behind when the Russian Ballet left for America, after being associated with them for so many years, and the beginning of our new life here was quite hard, as all beginnings are; but in a very short time we overcame most difficulties and settled down to our life here.

In 1944 he became an Australian citizen and a number of photographs in the Ingram Archive suggest that he relished the relaxed Australian lifestyle. He did, however, continue to perform in his own company in Australia throughout the 1940s and 1950s, always, as he had done throughout his career, in character parts rather than classical

enthusiasm had been fired by the Russian tours of the 1920s and 1930s.

Many of the works Boro produced for his company were versions of the repertoire he had learnt during his time with the Russian companies, and the Ingram Archive provides a fascinating visual record of the eclectic repertoire of



Edouard Borovansky, 1902–59,
Self portrait (left) and Portrait of Xenia Borovansky (right), oil paintings
From the Pictorial Collection

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roles in the repertoire. The Ingram Archive records some of his best known roles—the Strong Man in *Le Beau Danube*, the Shopkeeper in *La Boutique Fantasque*, Dr Coppélius in *Coppélia* and Pierrot in *Le Carnaval*.

But, in addition to providing a portrait of Borovansky, the Ingram Archive also provides an invaluable record of the development of Boro's company, variously known throughout its history as the Borovansky Australian Ballet, the Borovansky Ballet of 40 and, most commonly, simply the Borovansky Ballet. From modest beginnings in 1939 in the studio at Roma House, Boro's company supplied, for just over twenty years, work for dancers, opportunities for choreographers, composers and designers, and, as importantly, continued to provide dance for audiences whose

the Borovansky Ballet. Some works, like *Schéhérazade*, *Le Carnaval*, *Aurora's Wedding*, and *Graduation Ball* became perennial favourites with Australian audiences. Some remain in the repertoire of the Australian Ballet to this day.

Others, like *Terra Australis* were efforts to make authentically Australian dance, although often these pieces had what in the 1990s would be regarded as patronising and awkward Aboriginal themes. *Terra Australis*, for example, produced in 1946 with a commissioned score from Esther Rofe and designs by William Constable, relied heavily on what now appears as outdated symbolism. Program notes for the piece stated that it was the story of 'the symbolic beginning of Terra Australis'. Australia, the virgin unspoiled country, is represented by a beautiful young woman and she is courted by her Aboriginal lover. Their peace is shattered by the arrival of the explorer who is transfixed by the unexplored riches of the land. Australia is drawn to the explorer, and in an ensuing fight the

Aboriginal is killed and is returned to the Earth, to which both Australia and the explorer then also turn for the promise of future prosperity.

But the Ingram Archive looks far beyond a mere visual record of the Borovansky Ballet. It also provides an insight into the political machinations and manipulations of running the company Boro established. The Archive contains the text of a speech announcing the establishment of a ballet company, financed by a group of Melbourne businessmen, that would give its first performance in December 1940 at the Comedy Theatre in Exhibition Street, Melbourne. It records the first season of that same company once it had acquired the backing of the commercial management of J.C. Williamson Theatres Ltd in 1943 with a series of letters and contracts between Borovansky and Frank Tait,

then managing director of the Williamson organisation. It follows the successes and failures of the company through the 1940s and into the 1950s.

One of Borovansky's most successful ventures in the 1950s, for example, was the presentation of a number of guest artists from England in a season with his company. In 1957, four most distinguished dancers, Margot Fonteyn, Michael Somes, Rowena Jackson and Bryan Ashbridge, performed with the Borovansky Ballet. The Ingram Archive preserves a number of items of correspondence between Fonteyn, Boro and London representatives of the Williamson enterprise in which the contractual details of the season are discussed. For the sake of his box-office takings, Boro was anxious to have Fonteyn perform as many times as possible.

Fonteyn was equally determined not to be overworked.

Other difficulties, apparently of a more personal nature emerged. Initially, the appearance of Fonteyn was an event of great significance for Boro. He wrote to Nevin Tait in the J.C. Williamson office in London saying

...her presence in my Company is an important step in the History and Progress of the Borovansky Australian Ballet.

His letters after the season had been completed were not so enthusiastic and he had many trivial matters over which to grumble to the Tait, even suggesting that Fonteyn had been an ungracious visitor!

From the material in the Geoffrey Ingram Archive of Australian Ballet, Boro emerges as something of an energetic manipulator who worked his dancers

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incredibly hard, but who embraced Australia and its way of life with undiluted and flamboyant enthusiasm. The company he set up was the most enduring of those that were established in Australia during the 1940s and 1950s, and largely prepared the ground for the genesis, in the early 1960s, of current flagship company, the Australian Ballet. That the development of the Borovansky Ballet is recorded with such an extensive range of primary documentation makes the Geoffrey Ingram Archive of Australian Ballet of exceptional importance to the history of dance in Australia.

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*Tamara Tchinarova, leading dancer with the Ballets Russes and the Borovansky Ballet.
Photograph dedicated to Edouard Borovansky, 1939
Geoffrey Ingram Archive of Australian Ballet, Pictorial Collection*