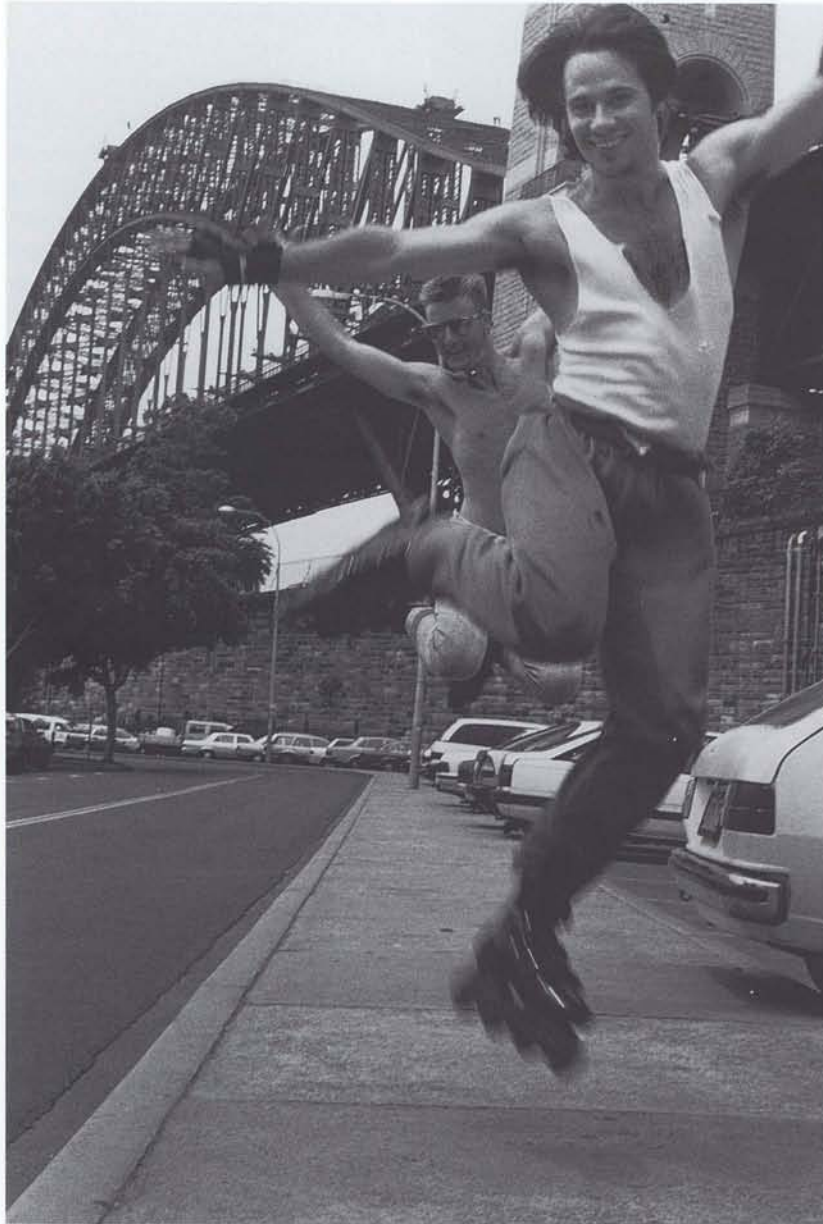


Documenting Australian Dance

Paul Mercurio and the Australian Choreographic Ensemble



Angela Lynkushka (b.1947)
Portrait of Paul Mercurio 1992
silver gelatin photograph ; 42.7 x 29.3 cm
From the Pictorial Collection (P621/1)

In this, the third in a series on dance, Michelle Potter discovers the vitality of Paul Mercurio as she reviews the papers of his short-lived dance company, Australian Choreographic Ensemble

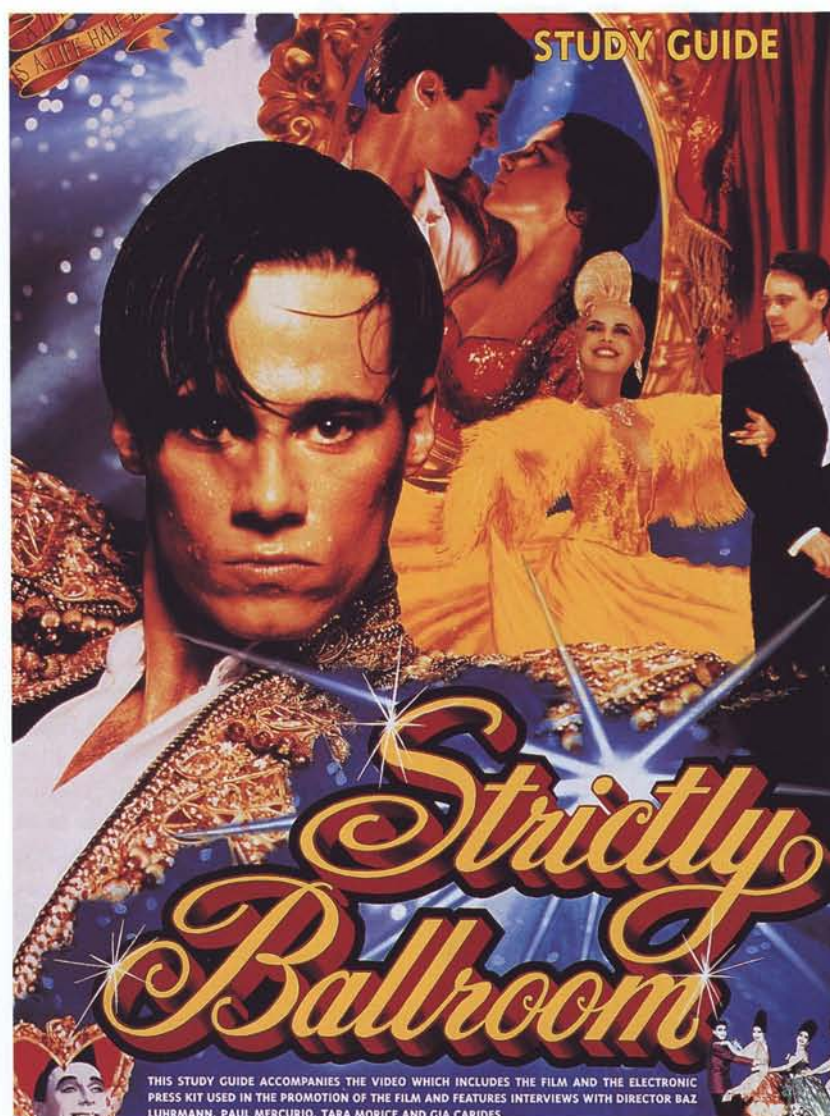
Paul Mercurio rocketed to fame in 1992 with the release of Baz Luhrmann's movie *Strictly Ballroom*. The film was a major box-office success and brought worldwide attention to its makers and its stars. In the leading role of Scott Hastings, the ballroom dancer who defied the rules of the governing body, the Federation, and in competition danced his own steps in his own way, Mercurio displayed his boyish, relaxed sexuality and his diverse

dancing abilities. Throughout the film he moved between two dance styles, ballroom and flamenco. Both were new ways of moving for him when he was offered the leading role in *Strictly Ballroom*, but he brought to each his particular dynamism and panache.

But while the achievements of *Strictly* gave Mercurio a new image and opened up new horizons for him, they also tended to obscure another side of Mercurio's career—that of an emerging choreographer and artistic director of a contemporary dance company. In an oral history interview recorded in 1996 especially for the National Library publication *A Passion for Dance*, Mercurio even suggested that, in a sense, the success of *Strictly* compromised his future in this area:

I feel a little bit, the conflict between doing the PR schedule of *Strictly* and trying to have my own company, affected in a negative way my ability to be a director and a choreographer. It took me away from the company more than was healthy for it perhaps. So, in some ways, I feel that's unfinished business ... I never really fulfilled my ability or my dreams perhaps. No, I take that back. I did fulfil the dreams but not to the potential I knew I could.

The records of Mercurio's short-lived dance company, Australian Choreographic Ensemble (ACE), which Mercurio had dreamt about since at least 1989, and which gave its first performance in 1992, the same year that *Strictly* burst on the scene, were acquired recently by the National Library as part of the Keep Dancing! project. Held jointly in the Manuscript Collection (98/180) and



(left) Pamphlet cover of *Strictly Ballroom*
From ATOM study guides (Carlton
South, Vic.: ATOM)

(opposite) Promotional flyer for the
Australian Choreographic Ensemble's
production, *Contact*
From the PROMPT Collection

clearly beyond his immediate experiences.

During the 1980s Mercurio also began in earnest to choreograph major works of his own, beginning at Sydney Dance Company workshops organised by artistic director Murphy to encourage emerging choreographers from within the ranks of Sydney Dance. Mercurio made *Still Life* in 1983 and a series of small pieces in 1987, all in a workshop environment, before being given an opportunity to choreograph for main Sydney Dance Company seasons. In 1989, in collaboration with Kim Walker, another choreographer who had emerged from Sydney Dance Company workshops, Mercurio made the fully-fledged and hugely popular *Cafe*, based on his and Walker's experiences at a Darlinghurst coffee shop. By 1992 he was making energetic and risky works like *Edgeing*, a piece that demanded that his cast perform onstage on rollerblades.

But just like *Strictly's* Scott Hastings, in many respects an alter ego, Mercurio was constantly keen to do things his own way. The establishment of ACE was, in fact, Mercurio dancing his own steps as a choreographer and director:

We started shooting *Strictly* in '91, but, ever since 1989, I'd really been planning to start my own company. I'd been developing the idea of becoming a choreographer, a director of a company, of dancing my own steps, of finding that freedom, and also of creating a company that allowed other people that freedom.

The records of ACE indicate that Mercurio's vision for his company was to create a company that would 'fire the imagination, challenge ideas and express the emotions'. His philosophy was to develop the notion

the PROMPT Collection of theatrical ephemera, these records document another side of Mercurio's career and augment the oral history interview (TRC 3395) and photographs of Mercurio held in the National Library's Pictorial Collection.

Before *Strictly Ballroom* Mercurio had established himself as a popular performer with Graeme Murphy's Sydney Dance Company. Murphy had cast him in some plum roles. One of the most memorable of these was that of the young Polish boy, Tadzio, in *After Venice*, Murphy's powerful and moving work, made in 1984 and based on the Thomas Mann novella *Death in Venice*. In *After Venice* Mercurio played opposite a veteran performer, Garth Welch, as Aschenbach. The work was remarkable for the way in which Murphy played with age as a choreographic tool, to which both

Mercurio and Welch responded with singular success. The youthful vigour of the 21-year-old Mercurio, hair died blonde, gained extra dynamism when juxtaposed against the slower, more ponderous yet nevertheless luminous movements of a slightly portly, close to 50-year-old Welch. Mercurio also scored considerable success in Murphy's 1983 piece, *Some Rooms*, where he played the role of a voyager dancing out his fantasies in a series of rooms each representing inner states of mind. For audiences, *After Venice* and *Some Rooms* consolidated Mercurio's reputation as a charismatic, contemporary dancer, although a personal Sydney Dance Company favourite for Mercurio was his role in Murphy's monumental *King Roger*. In this work, made in 1999, Mercurio played an old man, an adviser to the king. He felt it gave him a chance to act, since the role was

PAUL MERCURIO

CONTRAST



ACE



AUSTRALIAN CHOREOGRAPHIC ENSEMBLE

STAR OF 'STRICTLY BALLROOM'
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CONTEMPORARY DANCE COMPANY



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that theatre is a place to exchange ideas, to develop lines of communication between audience and performers. In the company's inaugural season in Sydney in September 1992 Mercurio showed a new work, choreographed especially for the occasion. Called *Contact* it was a piece about the journey of self-discovery that we all make as human beings. Its themes of conflict, confrontation and competition made it an emotional journey and inspired Mercurio and his then-manager Catherine Beall to make a film documentary called *Life's Burning Desire*. It recorded the establishment of ACE and the creation of *Contact* but also firmly put *Strictly* in the wider context of Mercurio's diverse theatrical career.

After ACE's opening season Mercurio was unrelenting in his efforts to make his company

accessible to a wide audience. He toured ACE not just to large cities but to small regional centres as well. As the company records show, a regional tour in 1993 took in Wollongong, Gosford, Orange, Bathurst, Griffith and Lismore in New South Wales and Whyalla, Port Pirie and Renmark in South Australia, as well as Alice Springs and the Gold Coast. Surveys conducted by ACE indicate too that Mercurio's company was attracting a young audience. And the list of venues ACE played is unusual, ranging from regular proscenium theatre spaces to historic houses and a variety of outdoor venues.

But by 1998 ACE had folded. Mercurio's continuing struggle to shrug off an image of himself as nothing but the star of *Strictly Ballroom* was perhaps a factor in its demise. Yet in *Life's Burning Desire*

Mercurio reflects that while dreams and ambitions are initially consuming they eventually burn themselves out. Then, he suggests, it is time to light another fire. The confidence and charisma of Paul Mercurio indicate that the experiences of Sydney Dance, *Strictly Ballroom* and ACE will provide a strong basis from which Mercurio's next major project will undoubtedly emerge.

MICHELLE POTTER manages the Keep Dancing! Project, an Australia Council funded partnership between ScreenSound Australia, the National Library of Australia and the Australian Dance Council (Ausdance). She is author of the National Library of Australia publication *A Passion for Dance*

(right) Promotional flyer for the dance company The Australian Choreographic Ensemble
From the PROMPT Collection

(below) Program for the Australian Choreographic Ensemble's production, *In-side-Out*
From the PROMPT Collection

