



Peggy van Praagh (second from right) in the 'Tiny Tots Troupe'
8 April 1916

Peggy van Praagh Collection; from the Pictorial Collection

Documenting Australian Dance *The Peggy van Praagh Collection*

In the first of a series looking at recent additions to the Library's dance holdings, Michelle Potter reviews the papers of Peggy van Praagh

The National Library of Australia's dance collections have been enhanced since the establishment of the Keep Dancing! project in 1997, an Australia Council funded initiative between the Library, ScreenSound

Australia and the Australian Dance Council (Ausdance) to encourage preservation of Australia's rich dance heritage. Among the key holdings—preserved as MS 7223—are the personal papers and photographs of Peggy van Praagh.



Peggy van Praagh teaching the Australian Ballet in Melbourne, 1961
From the Manuscript Collection; MS 7223

Van Praagh, founding artistic director of the Australian Ballet, most likely could not remember a time when dancing was not part of her life. In photographs taken in England in the early part of the twentieth century, when she was just four or five years old, her commitment is already clear. There she is, a tiny tot with chubby legs and baby curls and a fiercely determined look on her face. Her personal papers and photographs, acquired by the Library in three stages between 1986 and 1999, record that as a child in London she passed various examinations in ballet, Greek and ballroom dancing, mostly with very good results despite what one examiner thought was 'a tendency to exaggerate'. By 1929 the legendary dancer Anna Pavlova decreed that van Praagh was ready to begin a career as a professional dancer. In her studios

at Ivy House in Hampstead, Pavlova watched van Praagh and two of her friends and wrote:

I consider that all three girls are sufficiently advanced in their training to become professional dancers and would do credit to any company of which they might become members.

Later photographs from the Library's collection show van Praagh's growing artistic maturity, and record the important roles she danced throughout her career. Perhaps most notable among her early roles in London in the 1930s and 1940s were parts in the ballets of choreographer Antony Tudor. Van Praagh danced in *Jardin aux lilas*, *Dark Elegies*, *Soirée musicale*, *Gala Performance* and *The Planets* and in many cases created roles

for Tudor in these works. The choreographer's psychological insight and the dramatic and interpretative skills his works demanded affected her deeply. Other early roles included some, such as the principal part in *Coppélia*, that would have special significance in van Praagh's later career in Australia. (She would eventually mount two new productions of *Coppélia* here—the first for the Borovansky Ballet in 1960 and the second for the Australian Ballet in 1979. Her 1979 production, designed by Kristian Fredrikson and made in association with George Ogilvie as dramaturge, remains in the repertoire of the Australian Ballet to this day and is to be restaged in several Australian cities during 2000.)

Van Praagh came to Australia in 1960 to direct the Borovansky Ballet after Edouard Borovansky's death in 1959. Shortly afterwards there were concerted moves, in which van Praagh was deeply involved, to establish a national company. The eventual outcome was the establishment of the Australian Ballet, which in 1962 gave its inaugural season with van Praagh at the helm as artistic director. While the background to the setting up of the Australian Ballet has been documented in a number of official accounts, the correspondence to and from van Praagh that impinges on her appointment as artistic director gives a rather more personal picture.

In early negotiations and proceedings, she certainly reveals herself as committed to the idea of a national company, but there is also a strong indication in her meticulously kept papers that she felt she was in a vulnerable position: she was engaged by the Australian Ballet Foundation initially for one year only. Correspondence in 1962 with Rudolf Bing (general manager of the Metropolitan Opera, New York) indicates that she was concerned for her future and was negotiating a

position as ballet director and teacher at the Met for 1963 and beyond. A salary significantly in excess of what she would earn as artistic director of the Australian Ballet was on offer. Ultimately, however, van Praagh did not take up the New York offer. She went on to direct the Australian Ballet from 1962 to 1974, and then again in 1978. Between 1965 and 1974 she shared the directorship with Robert Helpmann.

Correspondence during that time sets out what expectations her employer, the Australian Ballet Foundation, had of her, and how the Foundation envisaged the co-artistic directorship would operate. As her papers indicate, her years as director were not without their problems, some of which concerned the joint directorship with Helpmann. But her period with the Australian Ballet also had many highlights. During that time the company welcomed guest artists of the calibre of Erik Bruhn, Sonia Arova, Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev, commissioned its first all-Australian ballet—Robert Helpmann's *Display*—and made its first overseas tour. Van Praagh's pleasure at the gradual growth of the Australian Ballet is evident in her personal correspondence with friends and colleagues, and in the photographs and programs she collected as mementos of those years.

The papers also give a clear idea of how van Praagh operated on a day-to-day level in rehearsing and restaging her ballets. She had everything written down in exercise books, in longhand and with diagrams to indicate choreographic floor patterns for particular dances. The Library's van Praagh collection contains written descriptions, scene-by-scene, step-by-step, for excerpts from *Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake*, *Coppélia*, *Giselle*, *Gala Performance* and *Lady and the Fool*. Director's notes for certain ballets also appear in a number of annotated musical scores in the collection. Van Praagh also kept notebooks in which she recorded particular exercises she had learnt and found valuable with some of her own dance teachers, or with teachers who had been invited

to work with the Australian Ballet. The teaching strategies of some of the best-known ballet teachers of the twentieth century are hidden in these notebooks, including Olga Preobrajenska and Lubov Egorova (the two legendary ballerinas from the Imperial Russian Ballet who set themselves up in Paris after the Russian Revolution), Hans Brenaa from the Royal Danish Ballet, and Asaf Messerer from the Bolshoi Ballet.

As well as leading the Australian Ballet through its early years, van Praagh made a particular contribution to the development of dance through education. Her own formal education had been at the King Alfred School in London and in

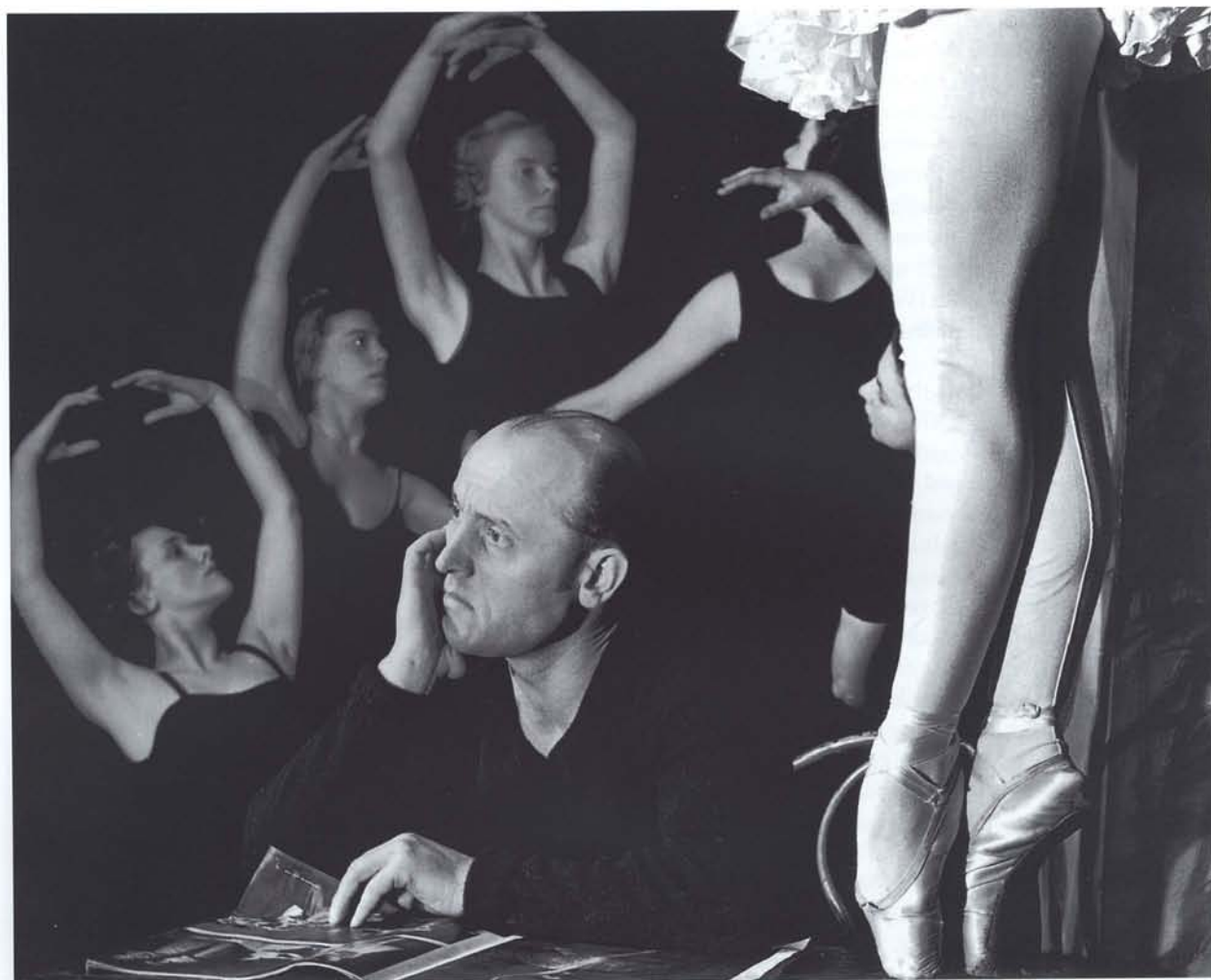
those early years she had been especially influenced by the liberal and reformist attitudes of one of her teachers, A.S. Neill. Her own early creative ventures as a writer appear in school magazines from the King Alfred School (some of which are also preserved in the Library's van Praagh papers). A consuming interest in creativity and its role in the education of dancers and

Peggy van Praagh in
Gala Performance,
London Ballet, 1939

Peggy van Praagh Collection; from the
Pictorial Collection



Peggy van Praagh
in 'GALA PERFORMANCE'
1939



Edouard Borovansky
 During rehearsal with (left to right)
 Pamela Wyatt, Lesley Sexton, Grace
 Macleon, Noel Murray, Joan Potter, and
 showing the legs of Edna Burse
 Geoffrey Ingram Archive of Australian Ballet;
 from the Pictorial Collection

choreographers, as well as in the need to educate the general public about dance in all its aspects, remained with van Praagh all her life. On a formal level she played a leading role in the 1970s in the formation of the Australian Association for Dance Education, now Ausdance. One of her most interesting ventures associated with Ausdance was a series of residential summer schools organised with the assistance of Bernard James for the Centre for Continuing Education at the University of New England. These summer schools, held on several occasions between 1967 and 1976, were largely opportunities for emerging choreographers—including, in 1976, a young Graeme

Murphy—to explore and experiment with their craft. The same records also reveal the depth of van Praagh's approach: the tutors she invited, the musicians she included as part of the team, and the associated seminars on history and criticism, all speak of a woman committed to the total education of choreographers, dancers and potential audience members.

Peggy van Praagh's personal papers and photographs are augmented by an oral history interview recorded by Hazel de Berg in 1973, and two recorded addresses—one given to a 1980 meeting of the ACT Division of the Arts Council of Australia, and another recorded at the National Press Club in 1985 for the launch of her biography. Further photographs relating to van Praagh's career were recently acquired for the Library's Pictorial Collection.

Together, this material provides an in-depth, personal look at a

woman who, having been awarded both a DBE and an honorary doctorate, often used to joke about whether she was Dr Dame Peggy or Dame Dr Peggy. Van Praagh died in 1990. Her influence on Australian dance in the middle decades of the twentieth century is of exceptional significance.

MICHELLE POTTER manages the Keep Dancing! project, an Australia Council funded partnership between ScreenSound Australia, the National Library of Australia and Ausdance