

# A Passion for DANCE

Dancers are vibrant people. Encountering them out of their more familiar theatrical environment is, as author Michelle Potter discovered, a lively, engaging and sometimes provocative experience

What is it like being a dancer, a choreographer, a director of a dance company working in Australia in the 1990s? In the rehearsal studio, in the classroom, on stage, a host of images jostle for attention in the mind of the outsider: visions of athleticism, virtuosity, glamour, commitment, daring and passion. Dance is a vital art form.

But how do these same artists react when they are placed behind a microphone, when they are asked to reveal in depth, and in words rather than movement, their ideas, their aspirations, their hopes and their fears? Ten choreographers and artistic directors who have made a major impact on Australian dance in the 1990s were asked to do just that: to record an interview for the significant and growing collection of dance recordings held in the National Library's Oral History Collection. *A Passion for Dance*, launched by the Library in June this year, is the published record of those conversations.

As I set about recording the interviews for *A Passion for Dance*, one thing emerged very clearly and very early on in the process. The range of emotions that dancers and choreographers reveal on stage, they also reveal in conversation in their living rooms, in their dressing rooms, over coffee or a shared meal. These people, who may seem quite distant figures



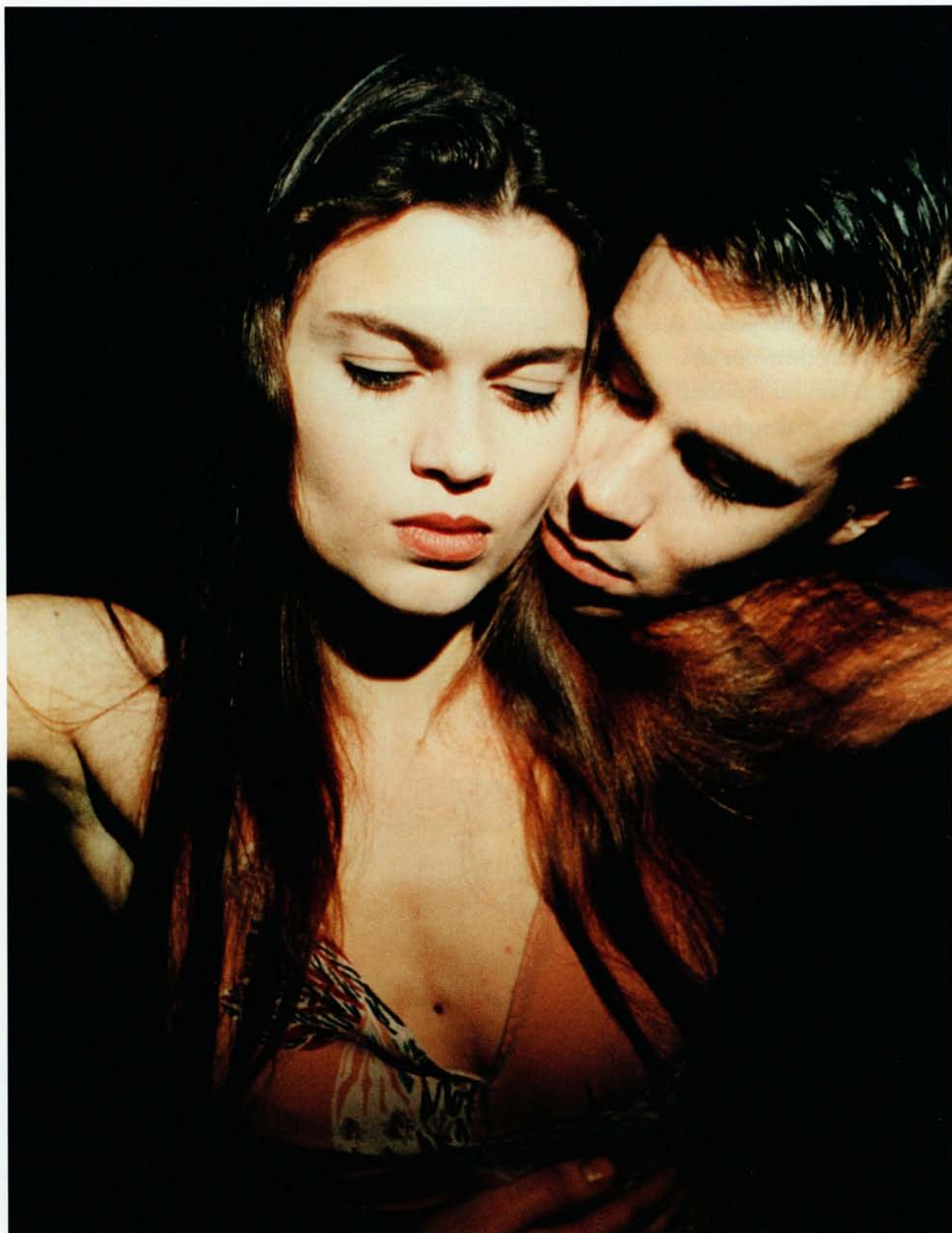
leading a glamorous and peripatetic lifestyle, are immensely human.

When I arrived at Graeme Murphy's Sydney apartment, with its spectacular and uninterrupted outlook over the Pacific Ocean, he almost immediately asked me if I liked his much-treasured orchid plant—in full, exquisite bloom in his living room, its colour made whiter by the deep cobalt blue of the wall against which it was displayed. Murphy is perhaps Australia's best-known contemporary choreographer, with a prodigious body of work to his credit made over the past 25 years. As

Graeme Murphy and Janet Vernon, 1995  
Photograph by Branco Gaica  
From the Pictorial Collection

I discovered, he is also warm, friendly and immediately likeable in face-to-face conversation.

Stanton Welch, the youngest choreographer whose hopes and dreams are recorded in *A Passion for Dance*, initially forgot our appointment. A dancer's life—and Welch is a full-time dancer as well as a choreographer—is a busy and hectic one. Welch was in the throes of preparing to dance in an Australian Ballet season of *Anna*



*Karenina* in Melbourne. He was full of apologies for his forgetfulness and, to make amends, he skipped his daily class and talked to me instead. Sitting there in practice clothes ready for the onslaught of the day's activities he did make amends with his enthusiasm, exuberance and passionate commitment to his work.

Maina Gielgud's interview, conducted over four sessions, spans that difficult time in the Australian chapter of her dance career when she was dealing with intense public scrutiny of her leadership of the Australian Ballet. The criticisms of her management of the company, publicly voiced during much of 1995, led to her eventual departure from

Mia Mason and Shaun Parker in the Meryl Tankard Australian Dance Theatre production of *Furioso*, 1993  
Photograph by Régis Lansac  
From the Pictorial collection

Australia at the end of 1996. On tape, Gielgud reveals herself as a determined and assertive woman, but also as a vulnerable and perceptive human being.

And Paul Mercurio, who rocketed to stardom in the film *Strictly Ballroom*, arrived for his interview, slightly late, on his beloved Suzuki motorcycle, mobile phone in hand and anxious about the imminent arrival of his third child. We talked first about how to describe his current multifaceted occupational activities and he opted for 'general all-round nice bloke'. He was. And he also displayed throughout the recording session a kind of larrikin, tongue-in-cheek sense of humour.

Dancers communicate in a unique way through the medium of the human body, and choreographers and directors strive to maximise that special capacity dancers have. But in creating *A Passion for Dance* it also became very clear that those who make dancing a lifelong commitment, whether as a performer, choreographer, director or through some combination of those career paths, are by no means inarticulate. Some of the interviewees whose thoughts and recollections are recorded in *A Passion for Dance* are younger than others, and their range of experiences is perhaps less varied than that of their older colleagues. But whatever their age and life experiences, what each one has to say indicates quite clearly that these people have an intellect, and that they are quite open and forthright about presenting their ideas in words. They engage head-on with ideas.

Gideon Obarzanek, an independent choreographer who is daringly distinctive in his attitude to dance, contemplates, for example, the very nature of Australian culture when he says:

What I like very much about Australia is there's a certain kind of raw vigour, a certain naivety, in a positive way. And also our New World type of culture—what could almost be argued by Europeans as this culture-less culture becomes a culture of its own, this cultural-less-ness.

And Stephen Baynes, resident choreographer with the Australian Ballet, ponders on the relevance of the classical idiom and considers whether it is possible to manipulate the classical vocabulary so that it

speaks to a contemporary audience. He says:

I think what I'm trying to stress is that the very roots of this art form have been diminished, or they don't stand up anymore. So what we're left with is the discipline, the form itself, but none of the things that led it to be developed are able to be used in the same way anymore—in contrast to opera, for instance. If you look at Verdi they were very relevant political things that were being written about. So they can be looked at in context today ... I'm so aware of the difficult point that ballet has reached now. What can we do to make it as vibrant as opera seems to be now, but not throwing away entirely the classical idiom?

But Obarzanek, on the other hand, rejects classical aesthetics. Speaking of the company he formed in 1995, and which he named Chunky Move, he says:

I guess 'chunky' was a nice word because it doesn't have any held notions of professional dance or the aesthetics of dance; it's a word that really grates against it. It's nice for us because I get a feeling it frees us up. We're not held to any kind of notions of, you know, all that clean line and the ethereal beauty of dance.

These artists care, too, about where their art form sits in the wider culture, however they might define or perceive that culture. Stephen Page, Aboriginal director of Bangarra Dance Theatre, is clear about where he wants his company to position itself. He says:

The interesting thing for me was to set a vision statement that made Bangarra very much a contemporary meeting place. It was really meant to be quite diverse and at the same time able to nurture a respect for the traditional culture. I'd love to think that this resource is the bridge between traditional and urban lifestyles. I'm interested in housing a foundation for the next generation.

Along with Murphy, Welch, Gielgud, Mercurio, Obarzanek, Baynes and Page, *A Passion for Dance* contains interviews with Indian–Australian dancer and choreographer Padma Menon, who rejects the idea of a fusion of Indian and Western dance styles; Meryl Tankard, current director of the Adelaide-based Meryl Tankard Australian Dance Theatre, whose work emerges from a strongly emotional

Maina Gielgud, c.1990  
Photographer unknown  
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The Australian Ballet





base—it bombards the senses and besieges the emotions, while still having the capacity to engage the mind; and Natalie Weir, Brisbane-based freelance choreographer whose pieces are in the repertoires of many Australian regional companies, including Expressions Dance Company, the Queensland Ballet and the West Australian Ballet.

*A Passion for Dance* is not meant to be a collection of mini-biographies, although often biographical information is an intrinsic part of the interview. It is meant, however, to reveal some of the thinking that goes on behind the scenes and to provide a small insight into the intentions of artists, whether we as outsiders and as

potential audience members agree with those intentions or not. What emerges is a series of vibrant and diverse encounters with vital, creative and passionate minds, with artists whose interviews, along with their works, reveal strength, courage, humour, warmth, determination and a host of other emotions and characteristics. People who work in the dance field are vibrant human beings and to encounter them on the page and out of their more familiar theatrical and backstage environment is a lively experience.

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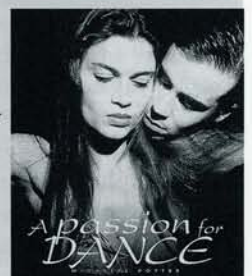
Paul Mercurio, 1995  
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