



Every Picture Tells a Story

Anton Dolin in scenes
from *Les Sylphides*
Reproduced from
Dolin's first album
Australia, 1938–1939;
London 1948
gelatin silver
photograph; 43.2 x
35.6 cm and smaller
Pictorial Collection

Michelle Potter describes how the personal photograph albums of two dancers reveal their personalities

There is something immensely pleasurable about looking through old photograph albums. Apart from the intrinsic interest that the photographs themselves might have, with each turn of the page a host of questions arises about the owners of the albums. What did the pictures mean to the original owners? Why did they select those particular photographs? What was their purpose in putting the album together?

Some of the National Library's most alluring albums of photographs were assembled by people connected in some way with the dance world, including artists, both established and emerging, as well as fans and dance

photographers. Albums assembled by artists are perhaps the most intriguing. Dancers, directors and choreographers are usually peripatetic beings. They tend to travel extensively within their own country, either in search of work or because they belong to a touring repertory company. They often cross the world many times to collaborate with an especially admired colleague or to experience conditions in another company. In such circumstances they rarely have the time or the energy to collect material let alone assemble it into an album. When they do, those albums tend to have special significance in their lives.

Among the Library's extensive and growing collection of dance materials,

the albums of Anton Dolin and Margaret Walker are especially attractive. Not only are they intrinsically appealing as albums, they also shed light on the personalities and dance careers of their creators. Dolin mostly assembled images of himself. Walker rarely did so, preferring to collect photographs of other dancers she admired.

Anton Dolin, born in England in 1904 as Sydney Francis Patrick Chippendall Healey-Kay, had one of the most illustrious careers of any male dancer working in the early to mid-twentieth century. He made his debut as a child performer in 1916 and from then on appeared with many leading ballet companies. The



Anton Dolin applying make-up for his role as Prince Siegfried in *Swan Lake*, Covent Garden Russian Ballet, Australian tour 1938–39
 Reproduced from Dolin's first album *Australia, 1938–1939; London 1948*
 gelatin silver photograph; 43.2 x 35.6 cm and smaller
 Pictorial Collection

Dolin liked to present himself as a theatrical personality



Anton Dolin as
 The Young
 Musician in
*Symphonie
 fantastique*,
 Covent Garden Russian
 Ballet, Australian tour
 1938–39
 Reproduced from Dolin's first album
Australia, 1938–1939; London 1948
 gelatin silver photograph; 43.2 x 35.6 cm
 and smaller
 Pictorial Collection

Dolin appears here as the anguished young man tormented by his feelings for his beloved

list of female dancers he partnered during his career reads like a roll call of legends. They included the striking Cuban star Alicia Alonso, the ethereal British ballerina Alicia Markova and Irina Baronova, who danced with the famous Ballets Russes and later starred in Hollywood. During his lifetime Dolin travelled extensively through Europe and the Americas. In 1938 he came to Australia as a leading dancer with the touring Covent Garden Russian Ballet. He performed in some of the most important and innovative works that the Russian company brought to Australia between 1938 and 1939.

Dolin died in 1983 and in 1995 the National Library successfully bid at a Sotheby's auction in London for his albums of photographs. The first of the two albums that were purchased spans the period 1938 to 1940 and consists of 67 photographs, 60 of which cover Dolin's Australian experiences. The second album covers his career during the 1940s with the newly formed American company, Ballet Theatre, and contains a further 350 photographs. Although slightly water stained, the heavy brown paper pages of the two albums provide an attractive background for an impressive array of images.

The first album is rather more intriguing than the second. Dolin clearly had an eye for displaying himself at his best and the album is more than a mere record of his performances in Australia. In fact, there is a degree of narcissism in the way the photographs have been organised and in the pattern that emerges. The photographs are grouped according to individual ballets and each grouping usually begins with one or two posed portraits of Dolin in costume followed by a series of performance shots from the ballet (see illustration of a double page from the album on p.7). In arranging his photographs Dolin has been careful, too, to

show himself as a versatile artist. He is the epitome of the romantic dancer in portraits and scenes from *Les Sylphides*; he becomes thoroughly 1930s in the ballet *Protée* with its unusually sculptural choreography by David Lichine and designs by the surrealist artist Giorgio de' Chirico; he is the classicist in *Swan Lake* and he shows his dramatic skills in another of Lichine's ballets, *The Prodigal Son*. *The Prodigal Son* had its world premiere in Sydney in 1938 with Dolin in the lead. These particular images have the added significance of being probably the earliest photographs of this ballet.

The last few pages of the first album, however, reveal a more haphazard arrangement and by the time he came to assemble his American album Dolin's interest in establishing a particular self-image seems to have somewhat waned. The photographs in this second album retain, of course, their intrinsic



Page from Margaret Walker's album of clippings showing some of the artists she admired
Margaret Walker Archives
Manuscript Collection

(below)
Irina Baronova—
domestic study
Reproduced from the
Special Album No. 1,
1938–40 of the
Margaret Walker
Archives
Manuscript Collection

interest as documentary images. Many are important reminders of the works that were created in the historic first years of American Ballet Theatre when choreographers like Agnes de Mille, Antony Tudor and Jerome Robbins were working with the company. Images of Dolin's own staging of the old Romantic classic *Pas de quatre* are represented too, but it is clear that Dolin the creative album-maker has disappeared from the pages of this second album.

While Dolin was in Australia, Margaret Walker, a Victorian pharmacy student born in Bendigo in 1920, was busy assembling her own photographic album. In 1938 Walker's chemistry lecturer, believing that the arts had much to offer her students, took them to see a performance by the Covent Garden Russian Ballet, the very company in which Dolin was dancing. Walker was much moved by the company and the direction of her life changed dramatically as a result of her night out. Shortly after her visit to the theatre Walker started taking ballet classes with Edouard Borovansky,

who was also a former dancer with the Covent Garden Russian Ballet.

With his wife Xenia, Borovansky had established the Borovansky Ballet Academy in Melbourne early in 1939 and Walker threw herself into all the activities of the Academy. Classes and rehearsals led to performances in Borovansky's early studio productions. Dance was to occupy Walker's life for the next five decades until her death in 1996.

The Margaret Walker Archives were purchased by the Library in 1991. It is a large collection filling over 80 manuscript boxes and spanning the period 1938–1991. It consists of Walker's professional and personal papers as well as records of the various dance organisations with which she was connected over the years, along with correspondence, newsletters, diaries, programs, clippings, scrapbooks, periodicals and photographs. It records not only



Irina Baronova with her collection of stuffed animals and dolls
Reproduced from the *Special Album No. 1,* 1938–40 of the Margaret Walker Archives
Manuscript Collection



Irina Baronova sits with a piece of needlework on her lap
Reproduced from the *Special Album No. 1, 1938–40* of the Margaret Walker Archives Manuscript Collection



Irina Baronova breakfasts with her husband Gerry Sevastianov
Reproduced from the *Special Album No. 1, 1938–40* of the Margaret Walker Archives Manuscript Collection

Walker's initial encounter with dance but also the major changes that her life took after her early experiences with the Covent Garden Russian Ballet and Borovansky. Walker eventually opted to devote her energies to a dance form that seemed to her more egalitarian. She became a passionate pioneer of folk and character dance in Australia and in 1977 established the Margaret Walker Folk Dance Centre for the resourcing, teaching and demonstration of folk dance. She was also a political activist who believed that issues of social justice should be reflected in arts practice and she championed dance in Aboriginal and multicultural communities.

Three albums of photographs and clippings document Walker's early interest in the ballet. They record the excitement of a newly discovered passion. Walker scoured newspapers and magazines, including the highly popular magazine *The Home*, for photographs and articles about ballet and arranged them charmingly and carefully. Another album is filled with photographs that were available for sale to fans in theatre foyers. All the stars of the Covent Garden Russian Ballet are represented there, photographed in poses from the works for which the company was best known in Australia, from the exotic *Schéhérazade* to the classical *Swan Lake*.

But among the most interesting items that Walker collected from this series of publicity shots are those photos that show the Russian Ballet stars in domestic surroundings. These images are arranged intimately, one to a page, in a small, rectangular album with thick blue-grey cardboard pages. In identifying her collection before it came to the Library, Walker called these photographs 'domestic studies' and the number that she collected suggests that she was as fascinated by these shots as by the balletic shots. Mostly these 'domestic studies' feature the leading ballerina Irina Baronova, clearly Walker's favourite Covent Garden Russian Ballet dancer, and they show Baronova in a variety of situations. Baronova sits with a piece of needlework on her lap; she relaxes by the fire; she admires her collection of stuffed animals and she breakfasts with her husband. Walker's interest in connecting dance with day-to-day living rather than with the more idealised world of the international stage was already blossoming. It became her life's work.

Walker never created a personal album after these early ones. Her life filled up with so many other activities that doubtless there was never time. But like Dolin her carefully preserved albums illuminate a particular aspect of her life and allow us to understand a little more about what drove her to devote her life to dance.

The Dolin and Walker photograph albums are attractive items with unusual significance in the National Library's collection of dance materials. They present us with an informal look at two artists at different stages in their careers and reveal a particularly human side of dance and dancing. If official records provide us with a collection of facts, these more personal items provide us with the faces and personalities behind the more formal documents.

The Anton Dolin albums are held in the Pictorial Collection (P1106/1–2). The Margaret Walker Archives are held in the Manuscript Collection (MS8495). The National Library also holds two oral history interviews with Margaret Walker (deB 767, recorded by Hazel de Berg in 1974 and TRC 1770, recorded by Barbara Blackman in 1985).

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