

Giving a Voice to Dance

Michelle Potter discusses the rise of dance writing in Australia from early reviews and popular lifestyle magazine features to more analytical newspaper reviews of the present day

Australia has a tradition of dance writing that stretches back many decades. Books about Australian dance aside, dance reviews and short feature articles have proved to be popular items in newspapers and magazines wherever and whenever dance has been performed. Many early twentieth-century reviews were written anonymously and often focused on the event as a social occasion as well as a dance performance. When Adeline Genée led the tour of the Imperial Russian Ballet to Australia in 1913, an unnamed reviewer for the Melbourne *Argus* began:

A brilliant and fashionable house, which included the Governor-General (Lord Denman), with whom was Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Guise, accorded the most enthusiastic of welcomes to Mdlle. Adeline Genée, M. Alexander Volinin, Mdlle. Halina Schmolz, and other members of the talented company at Her Majesty's Theatre on Saturday night, and demonstratively acknowledged, not only by applause,

but by hearty cheering, the enchanting performance of the gifts and graces, subtle moods, ethereal charm and poetic expression of sane dancing in its highest and most fascinating form.

The National Library's Algeranoff Papers (MS2376) contain a selection of cutting books assembled by Algeranoff, an English-born dancer who toured to Australia with a variety of dance companies in the 1920s and the 1930s. Those cutting books indicate that a variety of dance reviews and news items was published in large circulation daily newspapers such as the *Herald* (Melbourne), the *Age* (Melbourne), and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. They also document the gradual appearance of longer articles, often with copious line drawings or photographs as illustration, in somewhat more glossy publications such as *Table Talk* and the *Home*. Such feature articles proliferated when visiting artists and companies arrived in Australia and provided alluring material about exotic overseas stars.

Cuttings from the *Dancing Times: A Review of Dancing in its Many Phases* in January 1930 with 'Five Russian character steps shewn by Algeranoff' Papers of Harcourt Algeranoff Manuscript Collection MS2376/23/20/3

The *Home*, published monthly by Sydney Ure Smith over several decades beginning in the 1920s, often gave strong coverage to dance. This focus was especially prominent in the late 1930s when the tours by the acclaimed Ballets Russes companies took Australia by storm. Max Dupain, whose dance photographs often featured in the *Home*, remarked when interviewed for the National Library's oral history program (TRC 2630) in 1990:

We were indebted, greatly, to Sydney Ure Smith who was one of the great patrons of the arts in Australia ... He edited the *Home* magazine and *Art in Australia* and used the ballet as a very important factor in his editorial matters.

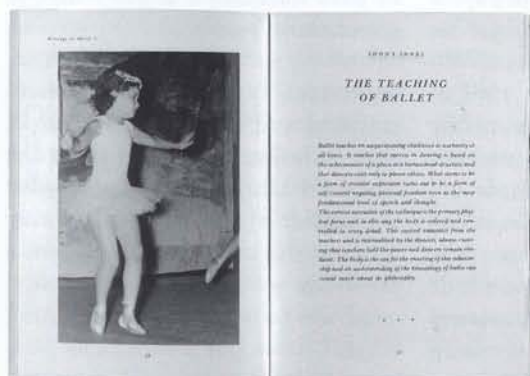


The *Home*, however, did balance its ballet coverage with articles about less prominent figures on the Australian dance scene including, as early as 1933, the Melbourne modern dance pioneer Sonia Revid. Clearly, however, the ballet was seen as socially and artistically pre-eminent and the prominence of ballet, which continued well past the era of the Ballets Russes, meant that modern and other non-balletic forms of dance were often judged against balletic standards. Basil Burdett, for example, the Melbourne-based visual arts critic who published many reviews and articles about dance in the 1930s and 1940s, wrote about a recital by Revid in the *Herald* in 1937 saying:

Last night's performance ... gave little evidence that [Sonia Revid] possessed the elevation considered so indispensable in the exponents of classical ballet, nor did it suggest a general control of the body movement superior to that of the average dancer in the older tradition.

While much of the dance material published in the *Home* and elsewhere in the first half of the twentieth century was strongly visual in focus, some articles of a more analytical bent appeared in various newspapers and magazines, including the *Home*. These articles were not always, or even often, written by Australians. The Englishman Arnold Haskell was one of the most conspicuous dance writers whose work was published in Australia in the 1930s, and whose

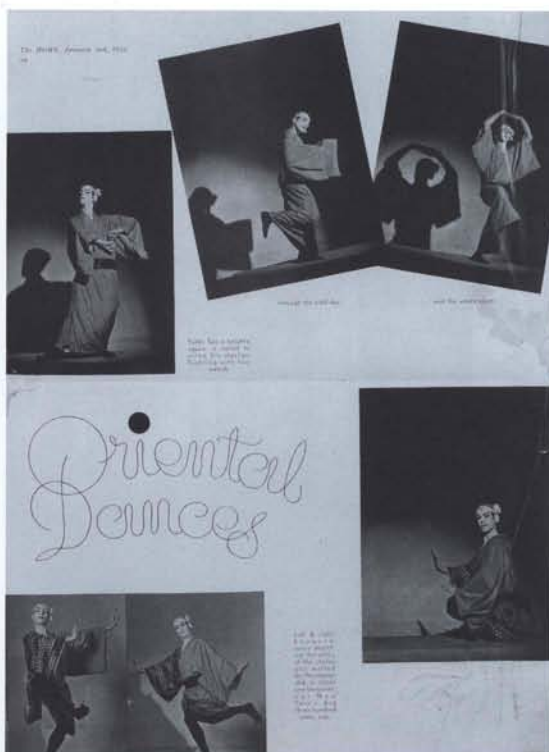
'The Teaching of Ballet' article reproduced from *Writings on Dance*, winter 1988 issue (Melbourne: *Writings on Dance*, 1985–99)



writing perhaps set a model for subsequent years. He came to Australia with the Monte Carlo Russian Ballet in 1936 as a kind of publicist and reporter and wrote articles and reviews for several Australian newspapers and journals, sending reports home to England for magazines such as the *Dancing Times*. He returned in 1938 to gather material for a book about Australia, subsequently published as *Waltzing Matilda* in 1944. On this second visit he wrote again for Australian newspapers and magazines, this time about the Covent Garden Russian Ballet.

Haskell had been sent to Australia to promote the Ballets Russes tours and to educate Australians about the content and importance of the dance they were seeing. This he did with unabashed enthusiasm, although his writing was usually kindly didactic rather than critically provocative. Writing for the Melbourne *Herald* in 1938, Haskell was even moved to inform his readers of the importance of ballet, with its close associations with scenic design and musical composition, in the development of a national cultural identity:

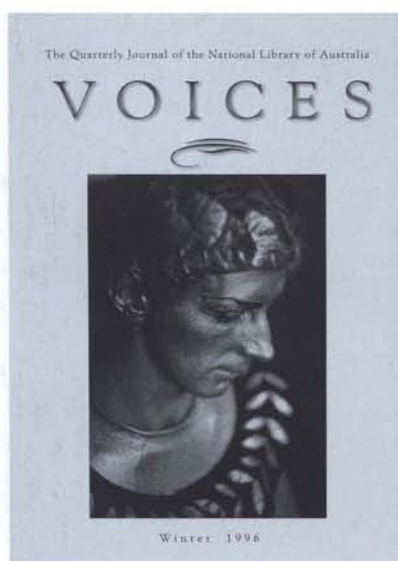
Governments the world over have recognised the enormous propaganda value of the travelling, living museum that is ballet and I firmly believe that Australia will ultimately benefit from the ballet to a far greater extent than the entertainment provided. It will be able to use the ballet to prove to the world what is obvious to any conscientious observer, that it has a vigorous and truly national school of art and a deep tradition of musical appreciation.



Cuttings from the *Home* on 2 January 1935 with the 'Oriental Dances' Papers of Harcourt Algeranoff Manuscript Collection MS2376/23/20/4

By the mid decades of the twentieth century Australian dance companies had begun to flourish, working in the genres of both ballet and modern dance. The Borovansky Ballet had been active since the 1940s, as had the Bodenwieser group. West Australian Ballet was established in 1952, the Queensland Ballet in 1960, and the Australian Ballet in 1962. Australian Dance Theatre gave its first performance in 1965. Popular magazines, such as *Pix* and the *Australian Women's Weekly* began to run features about the latest Australian productions, often promoting rising young Australian artists. *Pix*, for example, carried photos and text about Beth Dean's production of *Corroboree* in 1954; *Women's Weekly* published an article about a young and promising Marilyn Jones after she won a competition sponsored by *Women's Weekly* in 1955.

Dance reviews, too, were more and more being written by Australians with some kind of dance background rather than being taken on by music and visual arts critics. Influential in the 1950s and 1960s as a dance



Cover reproduced from *Voices: The Quarterly Journal of the National Library of Australia*, vol. 6, no. 2, winter 1996 (Canberra: National Library of Australia). The issue was dedicated to the subject of dance

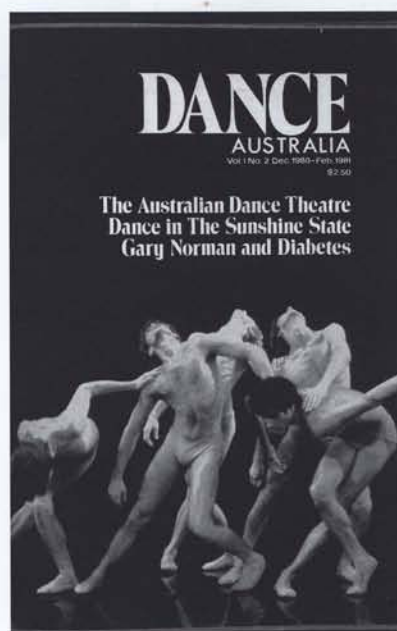
reviewers, however, began to be more accepting of the diversity of dance styles being offered to the Australian public. Throughout the 1970s, for example, Jill Sykes, writing for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Mary Emery, writing in the *Australian*, championed the Sydney modern dance scene when it was still relatively unfashionable to accept modern dance as a serious art form. Now,

reviewer was Roland Robinson, a widely published Australian poet, who wrote about dance for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. In an oral history interview recorded by Hazel de Berg in 1967 (deB 348–351), Robinson records that his interest in dance was nurtured by Hélène Kirsova, with whom he took dance classes and in whose productions he occasionally appeared in the 1940s:

Eventually I got into the ballet. I was just a drifter and Hélène Kirsova made me feel like a prince in *Swan Lake*. I became a member of the company and I used to go to classes. I went on tour with them. It was a wonderful three years. It was through this that I eventually became ballet critic for the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

However, Robinson, like his predecessors, still had an idealised vision of what dance should look like. Ballet was still the norm and he was prone to dismiss works that veered towards a modernist aesthetic. In a review of *The Genius*, a work created for the experimental ensemble Ballet Australia in 1962, Robinson wrote that it was 'a rather tedious attempt at humour and a deterioration of the ballet tradition in the Bodenwieser manner'.

Dance features continued to appear in glossy, lifestyle magazines throughout the last decades of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, usually, as before, focusing on glamour and sensational events rather than ideas and issues. Newspaper



Cover page of *Dance Australia*, vol. 1, no. 2, Dec. 1980–Feb. 1981 (East Malvern, Vic.: Listen & Learn Productions, 1980–)

modern dance is reported and reviewed equally with ballet and gets particular focus in free arts papers across the country, of which the bi-monthly *RealTime* is a prominent example. The foundation in 1981 of the dance profession's bi-monthly magazine *Dance Australia*, with its range of reviews, popular features and news items, gave dance a voice it had not had before.

From the mid-1980s onwards readers with a more serious bent, and with an appetite for analytical writing about dance in Australia have also

been catered for on a regular basis. Two journals, both publicly funded at least in part, have published in-depth articles on a range of dance issues. *Writings on Dance*, of which 20 issues appeared between 1985 and 1999 when publication of the journal was suspended, has focused largely on topics relating to modern dance in the contemporary world. *Brolga: An Australian Journal about Dance*, which has appeared twice yearly since 1994, has published an eclectic range of articles on ballet, modern dance, musical theatre and contextual studies from a variety of perspectives. A small number of one-off publications has also been the source of absorbing dance writing. In 1996 the National Library, for example, produced a dance-related issue of its journal *Voices*. It contained a diverse selection of articles, which were accompanied by photographic images from the Library's extensive pictorial collections. It featured the work of some of Australia's most admired dance writers.

The publication of a body of in-depth critical and historical writing about the art form, however, has only just begun. Moreover, the country has yet to produce a truly great dance writer in the tradition of the American critic and poet Edwin Denby whose body of work is regarded as influential by scholars, aficionados and practitioners alike. It has yet to produce, too, a respected historian with the breadth of approach of the American scholar Selma Jeanne Cohen. Public collections of primary and secondary source material about Australian dance are now, however, substantial and continually growing, giving unlimited scope to writers. Perhaps now it is only a matter of time before Australia, too, can claim to have nurtured a dance writer of international repute.

MICHELLE POTTER co-researched, scripted and produced the video, *Boro's Ballet*, (available from the National Library Bookshop) and is the author of the National Library of Australia publication, *A Passion for Dance*