

Dancing on the Web



Michelle Potter shows how the Web is becoming an important resource for researching international dance holdings and also offers a way of preserving the history and heritage of this ephemeral art form

Surfing the net and hitting the information super highway are contemporary ways of seeking information about a vast array of subjects. But what about dance and dancing? Do they have a place in the world of electronic communications?

Dance is often thought of as the most ephemeral of the arts—the moment of its performance is also the moment of its disappearance. And unlike music, dance does not have a system of notation that is widely understood by practitioners and that is learnt as a matter of course by students. Even film and video recordings, if they have been made and if they have survived, have their limitations as documentation, limitations that are associated with a variety of issues including the validity of using a single recording as documentation when in fact performances vary from night to night. Dance is often thought of, too, as the most trivial of the arts, one without even fundamental records.

Max Dupain (1911–1992)
*Portrait of Emmy Towsey
(Taussig) and Evelyn Ippen,
from the Bodenwieser Ballet* 1939
gelatin silver photograph; 47.3 x 38 cm
Pictorial Collection P59

It is an attitude that is perhaps partly linked to the notion of ephemerality but that also perhaps reflects the connections between dance (and in particular ballet) and the music hall in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Dance does have, however, an ever-growing presence on the net. Such a presence has, in many instances, a purely practical function. It is an easy matter, for example, to check out performance schedules of major dance companies and book a ticket



(left) Darren Jew
Portrait of Natalie Weir 1994
 gelatin silver photograph; 20.3 x 15.4 cm
 Pictorial Collection P1785

(right) Tamara Toumanova as the princess
 in 'Les Cents Baisers', 7 August 1940
 photograph probably taken
 by Colin Ferguson
 Collection of photographs of Ballets
 Russes performances in Australia, 1940
 Pictorial Collection P873/14

(right below) Max Dupain (1911–1992)
*Portrait of Valentina Blinova
 and Valentin Froman, Ballets Russes,
 in 'The Firebird' c.1936*
 gelatin silver photograph on
 fibre-based paper; 49.9 x 34.5 cm
 Pictorial Collection P53

for a chosen performance—at the Royal Opera House, London, the Metropolitan Theatre, New York City, the Royal Theatre, Copenhagen, the Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris and a host of venues round the world. But the online presence of dance also reflects the burgeoning interest in dance as an area for research. While it is rare, at least at the moment, to see moving images on a dance site, there are growing numbers of web sites that provide information about the dance resources of large public institutions. Some sites are extensive catalogues of the holdings of individual dance collections such as that of the New York Public Library (www.nypl.org/catalogs/catalogs.html). Others are sites representing projects initiated by clusters of organisations that have grouped together for the benefit of dance. The Dance Heritage Coalition, for example, is an organisation based in Washington DC that is dedicated to communication, joint activities, policies, programs and projects that strengthen a national dance documentation and preservation

network in the United States of America. Its member organisations are the American Dance Festival, the Dance Collection (New York Public Library), Harvard Theatre Collection (Houghton Library, Harvard University), Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, Library of Congress, Ohio State University, and San Francisco Performing Arts Library and Museum. The site of the Dance Heritage Coalition (www.danceheritage.org), in addition to giving a history of the project and providing users with a host of useful news items, has a continually growing list of online finding aids to selected collections held by the member organisations of the Dance Heritage Coalition.

When it comes to making dance resources accessible electronically, the National Library of Australia is a player of major significance. The Library hosts the directory to the Australian Dance Collection, a flourishing online resource that directs researchers to dance holdings in the National Library and ScreenSound Australia (the National Collection of Screen and Sound).

More than a listing of items, the directory to the Australian Dance Collection is a diverse collection of biographical information, descriptive summaries of items, digitised images and links to electronic finding aids and other databases. And the items listed on the directory are themselves diverse. References appear to film and video material, oral history interviews, radio and other sound recordings, photographs, scrapbooks, items of ephemera such as theatre programs and flyers, and manuscript material such as letters, clippings and personal documents. Represented, in fact, is the full range of unique items collected by ScreenSound and the National Library.

Currently the material on the directory to the Australian Dance Collection is organised under six subject headings: artistic directors, choreographers, dancers, dance companies, dance festivals and dance productions, with a quick search facility also available. The collective entries under these headings vary in size, reflecting both the vagaries of collecting and the stage of development of the directory. The older categories, 'choreographers' and 'dance companies', are significantly larger than the newer ones. 'Choreographers', for example, lists collective entries for 32 Australian choreographers from the German/Australian expressionist artist, Gertrud Bodenwieser, to the newest resident choreographer for the Australian Ballet, Natalie Weir. Some of the newer categories currently



contain only a single collective entry comprising just a few individual items, although on occasions these individual items are exceptional. The entry for Anna Pavlova, currently the sole entry in the category 'dancers', contains few individual items but one is a snippet of film footage of Pavlova arriving at Spencer Street railway station to begin the Melbourne leg of her Australian tour in the 1920s—an exceedingly rare item.

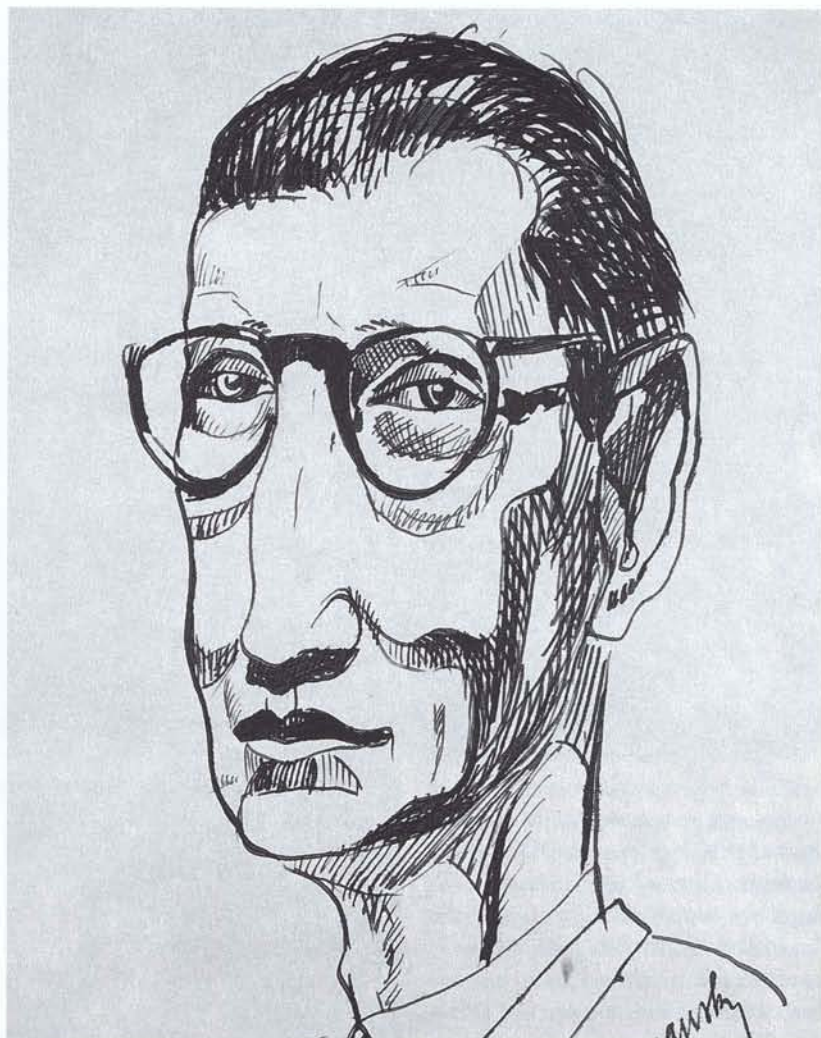
The entry for the 1936–1940 Australian tours by the Ballets Russes companies, located in the category 'dance companies', is currently the most extensive entry on the directory and is richly layered in the levels of information it provides. It lists and summarises the content of many individual items. They include a remarkable collection of archival film footage held by ScreenSound, much of which was shot in Sydney and Melbourne between 1936 and 1940 by two medical doctors and amateur film-makers, dermatologist Dr Ewan Murray-Will and ophthalmologist Dr Joseph Ringland Anderson—a collection that is the envy of the world. The Ballets Russes entry is also enhanced by an alluring selection of digitised images from three major photographic collections (the Max Dupain ballet series, the Geoffrey Ingram Archive of Australian Ballet



and a collection of photographs thought to be the work of Colin Ferguson) and one collection of original drawings held in the National Library (the drawings and paintings of Edouard Borovansky). The inclusion of these digitised images highlights the capacity of the directory to link up to and use to maximum advantage the National Library's image digitisation project. All images that appear on the directory to the Australian Dance Collection are part of the Library's digitised image databank, Images1. Among the other resources listed in the Ballets Russes entry are several electronic finding aids, perhaps the most significant of which is that to the collection of Ballets Russes programs and other ephemera held in the National Library. This finding aid is a resource in its own right providing a chronology of the three Ballets Russes tours, a full listing of the ballets performed in Australia and lists of the personnel involved in each tour.

Of all the entries, which number over 60 collective entries comprising thousands of individual items, the Ballets Russes entry gives the clearest insight into the nature of the directory. It highlights the importance of the Australian Dance Collection as a resource for researchers and makes clear the directory's potential for unlimited development in a relatively untapped but growing area of interest. From mid-1998, when the directory first went online, additions have been made each month and web statistics indicate that user sessions have increased markedly. User sessions for the month of January 2001 were 2506, compared with 806 in January 2000, with most users being located in Australia and the United States of America. Other users accessed the directory from the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Sweden, Finland, Japan, Canada and Norway. The site was also identified by the Computer Sciences Department, University of Wisconsin-Madison in its November 2000 report as a 'new or newly-discovered' Internet resource of significant interest to researchers and educators.

The directory to the Australian Dance Collection is an outcome



of Keep Dancing!, an Australia Council funded partnership between the National Library, ScreenSound Australia and the Australian Dance Council (Ausdance). Established in mid-1997 as an active collecting partnership and now in its fourth year of operation, Keep Dancing! encourages the preservation of Australia's choreographic heritage and the building of the Australian Dance Collection. The project has allowed new dance material to be acquired both by ScreenSound and the National Library and for existing dance holdings in the collections of both institutions to be located and made accessible. The directory is the public face of the Keep Dancing! partnership and of major interest around the world as a prototype for the future development of research collections where material exists across a variety of media and must, for reasons of best practice preservation, be located in more than one institution.

Edouard Borovansky (1902–1959)
Portrait of Wassily de Basil c.1935
 pen and ink drawing; 24 x 15.2 cm
 Geoffrey Ingram Archives
 of Australian Ballet
 Pictorial Collection R10988

Dance is of course an ephemeral art and there's nothing like being there to savour the uniqueness of the live performance. But without efforts to preserve the history and heritage of the art form it will forever languish as trivial and not worthy of serious research. The directory to the Australian Dance Collection indicates that there is an Australian dance heritage to document. It makes a significant contribution to doing just that.

The directory to the Australian Dance Collection is at www.nla.gov.au/ausdance

MICHELLE POTTER manages the Keep Dancing! project and is the author of the National Library of Australia publication, *A Passion for Dance*