

## Creating a Scene:

### The Art of Stage Design Lesley Harding

Unsurprisingly, artistically the performing arts in this country experienced a shift in expectation and understanding following exposure to the spectacular productions of the Ballets Russes. A number of modern artists were eager to lend their visual skills to stage design, and the first commissions came from the émigrés of the Russian ballet tradition, Hélène Kirsova and Edouard Borovansky, and from Australian-born Laurel Martyn in the 1940s. In the 1950s and 1960s, the National Theatre Opera, Elizabethan Theatre Trust and The Australian Ballet engaged painters as designers, and the crossover between the stage and art worlds was contrariwise. Well-known designers William Constable, Kenneth Rowell, Loudon Sainthill established themselves as studio painters, while artists Elaine Haxton, Frank Hinder and Louis Kahan made a distinct mark in Australian stage design. This exhibition investigates the latter phenomenon - the rich and challenging contribution of Australian painters to the performing arts.

This was not the first time that Australian painters were lured to the stage. Will Barnes, probably Australia's first professional stage designer,<sup>1</sup> trained at the National Gallery School and was an accomplished painter before working for J.C. Williamson's organisation in the late 1890s. Barnes' facility as a designer took him to employment with New York's Metropolitan Opera. In addition, although many of Williamson's designs came from overseas, with local scenic artists and costumiers translating the originals, the performances themselves

influenced visual artists. Charles Conder, Thea Proctor, Daryl Lindsay, William Dargie, Len Annois, John Rowell and Norman MacGeorge all executed drawings, prints and paintings as a result. But it was not until Colonel de Basil's Original Ballet Russe toured in 1940 that the shift from influence to practice was truly consummated.

Dancer and choreographer Serge Lifar of the de Basil's company saw a painting by Sidney Nolan and asked him to re-design the sets for a forthcoming production of *Icare*. Nolan's first concept, inspired by his interest in Russian constructivist design, included a striped black and white floorcloth and constructed set, into which a black and white costumed *Icare* would merge. It did not meet with Lifar's approval - the dancer was camouflaged. So a second design was conceived in short order: an abstracted image on the backcloth inspired by the motif of a simple rainbow over Melbourne's St Kilda pier. (plate 55) Nolan travelled to Sydney to paint the cloth and flats; it was his first theatrical commission and he was overwhelmed, nearly abandoning the job.<sup>2</sup> Peter Bellew, then art critic for the Sydney Morning Herald asked artist Frank Hinder to help out. Hinder described a sequence of events of comedic proportion, <sup>3</sup> but Nolan's designs for *Icare*, which premiered in Sydney on 16 February 1940, were graphically simple and impressively modern.<sup>4</sup> Nolan later reported that Lifar thought them perfect.<sup>5</sup>

Crossovers between the arts in Australia met with mixed success. Some artists had a natural flair for the scale,

three-dimensionality, narrative restrictions and collaborative capacity offered by performance design. Others found it a problematic diversion, and did not pursue the practice. Importantly though, ballet, opera and theatre became indelibly marked with the modernist aesthetic in its many and varied forms.

## A cultural context

Australian modernism was long-lived, with multiple phases and facets. It was loosely shaped as a complex, evolving, overlapping series of styles, which found its stirrings during the First World War and extended through to the 1960s. The post-impressionist beginnings, seen in the Sydney art of Grace Cossington Smith, Roy de Maistre and Roland Wakelin in Sydney, coincided with, but did not meet philosophically or aesthetically, the modernist art of Melbourne artists George Bell, Arnold Shore and William Frater, whose influence can be traced to Cézanne and whose politics veered rather more to the left. Sydney's second wave of modernism, centred around the Grace Crowley and Rah Fizelle school in the mid 1930s, owed much to French theory, constructivism and the compositional theory of dynamic symmetry. As these artists headed towards abstraction, there appeared another modernism - one which found its basis in politics, the Depression, humanism and the psychological state of the population.

The broader cultural context saw increased interest in the quality of public life. The performing arts, like the visual arts, were poised for mobilisation by the late 1930s. Geoffrey Serle identified the shift thus:

Perhaps the most significant development of all in the 1930s was the

growth of a much more diverse intellectual and cultural class. Professional men and artists had been almost identified, socially and intellectually, with the mercantile class. The new diversity was created not so much by the products of new educational opportunity or by a natural growth in numbers but rather by the effects of the depression and an increasing consciousness of Australian isolationism. For in this generation large numbers of teachers, journalists, writers and artists and a few lawyers, doctors and engineers came to reject the conventional wisdom of their elders, and in the long run a deep gulf was to develop between governments and the intelligentsia.<sup>6</sup>

Serle also pointed to the critical contribution of the Australian Broadcasting Commission. The ABC employed musicians and developed a music policy that enabled the financing of public concerts and supported the genre of the radio-play, which employed actors and dramatists during the 1930s and 1940s, a period in which work on the stage was scarce.

Notions of democratic humanism were alive and well, and artists were conscientiously bringing art to the people. During the Second World War, there was pressure on government to prepare for social reconstruction on cultural grounds. The recognition that artists play a key role in defining and developing creative values and the core qualities of our civilization resurfaced in this context. In 1943 Sydney Ure Smith called on the federal government 'to see that plans are laid for the effective use of artists for the country's advantage, and a post-war reconstruction committee has that opportunity.' He contended that 'The people do expect a better world, and they should have it.'<sup>7</sup>

It took some years for targeted public funding of the arts to be enacted. Ben Chifley led the Labor party to election success in 1946 on the strength of reconstruction promises. His strategies were first conceived under John Curtin's leadership; a Ministry of Post-war Reconstruction was established in 1942. Chifley, as Minister, and H.C. 'Nugget' Coombes devised a model for full employment, and the critical point of intersection with cultural planning was in the rethinking of citizenship. It was a strange coalescence of control and freedom.

In terms of cultural planning this could have looked to the President Roosevelt's successful 'New Deal for Art and Theatre' to deliver outcomes for artists and inspire a national culture. Instead, with the echoes of Fascism still resounding, there was a fear of censorship and reluctance to 'plan' such activities too closely; freedom in the arts was aligned with anti-facist sentiment. Adelaide's progressive Les Ballets Contemporains publicised this intention: 'In a world of war, Les Ballets Contemporains is concerned to keep alive locally the art of ballet; to keep firm one plank of the humanities from which our brave new world must necessarily be built.'<sup>8</sup>

Labor focused on art education and welfare rather than program development and management. Chifley's government tried to establish a National Theatre, but it was not until 1954 that the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, the first publicly funded organisation for the establishment of national drama, opera and ballet, was founded. The performing arts in Australia during this period saw the desired 'freedom' in the arts and a rich period of collaboration ensued.

## Commissions for dance

Hélène Kirsova, Edouard Borovansky and the Ballet Guild's Laurel Martyn made important contributions to dance and stage design. Each commissioned new Australian ballets and deliberately experimenting with the look of their productions by working with local artists.

While it is clear that a community of performers, writers, artists and musicians was born of like interests and social connections, Kirsova's links to the art world were likely due to friendships formed through her partner, and later husband, Peter Bellew. Bellew was a journalist who 'stage managed' the Melbourne launch of the landmark 1939 'Herald Exhibition' of modern art after its curator, Basil Burdett, became ill.<sup>9</sup> Bellew moved to Sydney in 1939, where he worked as an art critic for the Sydney Morning Herald and briefly as editor of Art in Australia until it closed in 1942. He was at the time 'one of Australia's most powerful advocates of avant-garde art'.<sup>10</sup> He started the New South Wales Branch of the Contemporary Art Society in 1939, of which artist and stage designer Frank Hinder was a foundation member.

Bellew published a book on the history of the Kirsova Ballet in 1945, *Pioneering Ballet in Australia*, an admiring hagiography that celebrates the innovations of Kirsova. Bellew remarked that by working with her, 'Talented young artists have been given opportunities which the Australian theatre would never have offered otherwise and their work brought to the attention of a wide and appreciative audience.'<sup>11</sup> Kirsova famously gave Loudon Sainthill his early work as a designer and he later became celebrated on the world stage. She also commissioned colourists Wolfgang

Cardamatis and Wallace Thornton, and talented designer Amie Kingston, who had studied stage design in England and whose décor and costumes were strikingly bold, simple and confident.

One Kirsova artist-designer, Donald Friend, had an auspicious start when he won de Basil's 1940 competition to create designs for a ballet with an Australian theme. But like that work for *Hold Up*, most of his stage designs went unrealised. The *Hélène Kirsova Ballet Archive* at the National Gallery of Australia contains five Friend designs for a proposed ballet about the exploits of provocative nineteenth century dancer Lola Montez.<sup>12</sup> Friend also worked on designs for another planned Kirsova ballet on an Australian theme. It was to be about the whores and characters of *Kings Cross*, set to Gershwin's *An American in Paris* music.<sup>13</sup>

Kirsova wrote to Donald Friend that when working with her, he had complete freedom: 'I never interfere with my artists'.<sup>14</sup> Despite her initial assurances, Friend's designs for the *Kings Cross* ballet were not altogether to Kirsova's liking. Friend related his consternation after receiving 'very long-overdue' correspondence from Kirsova's secretary, the letter 'rather in the manner of a communication from a pre-revolutionary grand duchess-turned-prima-donna':

Madame is at present talking a rest from the studio, and has asked me to acknowledge the receipt of the décor and costume sketches for the *Kings Cross* ballet. She is very pleased with the designs, but there are certain alterations which she would like to discuss with you at length – and will do this in another letter. She thinks that the atmosphere might perhaps be a

little too French and not quite *Kings Cross*ish enough'.<sup>15</sup>

Friend's debut in stage design appears to date to his time in the Australian army during late 1943 when he designed and painted the sets for an army production *Spring Meeting*. It was the first time he had painted sets<sup>16</sup> and, using paints from the camouflage section and scrounged materials, the resulting scene was 'positively Cecil Beaton in its 1935 version of eighteenth century elegance.'<sup>17</sup> Friend's diaries also reveal he reluctantly designed costumes for former *Bodenweiser* Ballet dancer Bettina Vernon and her dance partner in Sydney in 1946, though no mention is made of a production.<sup>18</sup>

The sumptuous designs displayed in this exhibition were for an unrealised ballet. (plates 21,23) Produced for choreographer Walter Gore, they most likely relate to the tour of the London-based *Walter Gore Ballet* (named the *Australian Theatre Ballet* for its tour of 1954).<sup>19</sup> Gore and Friend probably met at the artists' house at Merioola, where Friend was in residence until September 1947.<sup>20</sup>

Edouard Borovansky, like Kirsova, performed with the *Ballets Russes* in the 1930s, and based his professional company in Melbourne. Borovansky engaged William Constable as designer for many productions, but also worked with the talented and tireless Sydney artist Elaine Haxton.

Haxton made her start in stage design with the *New Theatre League*, completing set and costume designs for *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (1941/42), *Molieres'* satirical comedy making fun of the *nouveau-riche*. Her next designs were completed in Sydney for *Darya Collin* in *Musette* (1945) her work already showing a natural affinity for

the artform. Collin was a Dutch dancer and former prima ballerina of the Amsterdam Opera House. Haxton travelled to New Guinea in early 1945 as set designer and manager of a troupe comprising dancers Darya Collin, Esmee Monod and Alison Lee, and pianist Audrey Barrow. In 1946 Haxton travelled to New York to study mural painting. She also attended the New York New School of Design and trained in stage design and décor.

Sydney Ure Smith remarked when opening a 1942 exhibition at Macquarie Galleries in Sydney, that Haxton's art 'was like the ballet, in that it wafts the onlooker into a world where all is light and colour – like dreams come to life.'<sup>21</sup> This fitted well with her philosophy, that the designer's task 'is to open the world of make believe, where stage landscape, the domain of good and evil, beauty and ugliness, colour and contour, music and text, wit and passion unite to enthrall.'<sup>22</sup>

The Borovansky Ballet created big productions, even by today's standards. The new ballet, *Los Tres Diabolos* (1954) was modern, innovative, and like all of Haxton's designs, extremely well realised. (plates 30,31) Her young assistant in those days, Paul Kathner, recalls she painted her cloths and sets herself. She had 'enormous energy' and added and improvised as she went; 'she approached stage design as a painter would approach a picture.'<sup>23</sup> Haxton's work in ballet and opera had a broad exposure; her designs for *Casse Noisette* for Borovansky Ballet remained in use for many years, eventually being used in The Australian Ballet repertoire.

Haxton also created sets and costumes for Laurel Martyn at Melbourne's Ballet Guild, including charming designs for *Coppelia* (1951). (plate 27) Haxton was

one of many artists commissioned by Martyn, the first of whom were Alan Sumner and friends Len Annois, Harald Vike and Alan McCulloch. While Kirsova and Borovansky could be said to have sparked a designing tradition in Australia through their early support of now acclaimed international designers Sainthill and Constable, Martyn's focus was collaboration. She fostered the creative talents of Australian artists and composers, and worked on over thirty original ballets. An early review captured the atmosphere of the Guild: 'the team work of this company is one of its most admirable features. With the enthusiastic aid of some of the best of our musicians and painters, the Ballet Guild ought to develop in all directions: its performances should become an outstanding event in the artistic life of Melbourne.'<sup>24</sup>

Alan McCulloch became Director of Décor for the fledgling Ballet Guild, and introduced Martyn to painters he suspected would have a talent for the medium. McCulloch, his brother Wilfred and their young friend Arthur Boyd were in the audience of the 1936 Russian ballet productions. The impact of the spectacle lingered, and McCulloch designed a book on the phenomenon, *Colonel W. de Basil's Ballet Russe on Tour* (1937).<sup>25</sup> The illustrated work portrays the behind-the-scenes action in the style of the popular black and white cartoons at the time. With its sunburnt ballerinas and quarantine officers, deal-brokers and fanatical balletomanes, it permits, even with the benefit of distance, an opportunity to reconsider the company's fame and cultural hold. It is a clear precursor to McCulloch's *Ballet Bogies* (1938),<sup>26</sup> a series of witty written portraits of stereotypical figures of the ballet scene.

McCulloch was the ideal designer for Laurel Martyn's *Contes Heraldique* (1946), also called *The Witches Whim*, an imaginative burlesque ballet based on characters of medieval fiction. (plates 49,50) Martyn recalls that she would meet with McCulloch and Dorian le Gallienne to discuss the story, which they made up, 'the three of them in hysterics.'<sup>27</sup> McCulloch respected Martyn's desire to have 'costumes which were the ballet, were the movements',<sup>28</sup> and his first designs provided visual cues for the story, without excessive embellishment. The popular production remained in the Guild's repertoire for more than twenty years, and some re-worked designs from the late 1950s show his fresh enthusiasm for the ballet.

Norwegian Harald Vike arrived in Perth in 1929 and in the face of Depression-hit Australia, his art soon came to reflect his politics. Vike signed up as a member of the Communist Party in 1935, and had previously joined Katharine Susannah Pritchard's Workers Art Guild, where he ran art classes. Pritchard's politically charged plays were staged by the Guild,<sup>29</sup> and the crossover was inevitable. Mary Eagle has gone so far as to suggest that 'Ideas and action, which came together in theatrical productions, were to be the major forces in 1930s painting', pointing to the staging devices used in the work of James Cant and Albert Tucker's night-time streetscapes.<sup>30</sup>

Vike moved to Melbourne in 1941, where he laboured at the Commonwealth Steel Store. In 1945, he began executing illustrations for the Australasian Post. Alan McCulloch, as art critic for the Post's parent paper the Argus, was charged with the responsibility of selecting the black and white drawings for publication. The two became close friends and together

with Len Annois, McCulloch introduced Vike to Laurel Martyn. The three artists completed designs for the Ballet Guild, using the paint frame at the Palais Picture Theatre to execute the backcloths and scenery.<sup>31</sup>

Stylistically, McCulloch described Vike as 'a van Gogh in an Australian climate'<sup>32</sup>, though his Depression paintings owe much to Cézanne, and his politics and subject matter to the Australian social realist movement. While Vike's artwork is little discussed these days, his costume designs for ballet are notable because they show the dancer in movement, rather than as a static figure. His early *Ruritaniana* (plates 68,69,70) and *The Selfish Giant* designs have the bright colours and modernist aesthetic of Alexandre Benois' work for the Ballets Russes, especially those for Diaghilev's most famous ballet, *Petrouchka*. That Vike, an ardent communist, became involved in design for dance seems at first consideration a curious anomaly – at the time, theatre was the preferred medium. However, the comradeship and collaboration of ballet design must have appealed to him, and it offered a very public exposure, new audiences and, as Roger Leong has pointed out, 'a forum for the exchange of new, liberating and often radical ideas'.<sup>33</sup> Scenic art for stage, and then for television, became part of Vike's life. He worked at the Palais and Princess theatres in the 1950s, and joined HSV 7 as a scenic artist in 1958.<sup>34</sup>

Alan Sumner came to stage design with training in art by George Bell and a burgeoning career as a stained-glass window designer. He started at the Bell-Shore school in 1933 and enjoyed the tone, pace and experimentation of the classes. Sumner designed for the Ballet Guild and like McCulloch, suggested other artists to Laurel

Martyn. She recalls, 'they all wanted to do the work. It was quite a community – painters, musicians, actors, dancers - we all knew each other and encouraged each other.'<sup>35</sup> Sumner had a working class background with its attendant political persuasion, but true to his training with George Bell, he stayed clear of psychological paintings, and created intimate rather than grand landscapes.

Design was particularly important to Sumner's work practise. He had also worked with artist William Frater, who headed the stained glass department at W. B. Yencken & Co. It was invaluable training, Sumner observing that Frater was the only person he knew who could complete the design of a stained-glass window in one day.<sup>36</sup> That Sumner's work aligned more with classical modernism, in terms of simple forms and careful colour, probably made his adaptation to stage design – like that of his successful work in stained-glass and screenprinting – a seamless one. His *May Day* (1949) designs are colourful, functional, simple and effective, and the cloth design is clearly identifiable with his studio practice. (plates 63, 65, 67)

Leonard French worked on only one ballet, generating bright and exotic costume designs for a 1953 production of *The Nutcracker* for the Ballet Guild. (plates 14, 16,19) These, of all the designs in this exhibition, despite their modest size, evoke something of the form, styling and modernity of the designers of the Ballets Russes. French seems a likely stage designer, with a particular skill and aptitude for large projects and public art. His first wife, Joy McDonald, was a Borovansky dancer, introducing French to classical music and ballet. Borovansky, on the other hand, was known to take dancers to exhibitions and cultural activities as a group.<sup>37</sup> He was also an amateur

painter. As Laurel Martyn suggested, the creative community was close.

Erica McGilchrist, similarly ably equipped to undertake large projects, designed for Martyn's Blythe Ballet (1953), her backcloth design perhaps more modernist and progressive than any of its predecessors. (plate 54) McGilchrist had connections in both the dance and art worlds. She was born in Adelaide, and there danced with Les Ballets Contemporains while a teenager. Dorrit Black had designed for the company in 1944 and McGilchrist worked with her and other art students on a mural commission for the Adelaide Childrens' Hospital in 1945. McGilchrist was studying part time at the South Australian School of Arts and Crafts before training as an art teacher. Interested in modern dance, she took classes in improvisation in the late 1940s with Ruth Bergner, artist Yosl Bergner's sister, before coming to Melbourne (where she later settled) in the school holidays to study with Ruth's teacher, Elisabeth Weiner. Her designs for the Ballet Guild were a happy link of her chief interests. McGilchrist also designed *Arena* (1969) for The Australian Ballet. The edgy black and white 'paper bag' designs are now lost, stolen from the foyer of the theatre while on display during the Sydney season.

John Brack, like Leonard French, designed for the stage only once. He was an inspired choice for The Australian Ballet's production of *Roundelay* (1964) – his abiding interest in the rituals and routines of everyday life were a good fit with the story of a socially askew young man who just wants to be accepted. (plates 7,9,13) The ballet itself received mixed reviews, with the length, 'part wistful, part clumsy' main character and apparently 'gimmick-laden' score adding up to an

uncomfortable result. 38 Brack's strong, angular designs were not without their challenge – as a painter of modern life, they were up-to-the-minute portrayals of suburban life and people, but also true to his sense of irony and in keeping with his preference for a flat picture surface. His designs draw faithfully on his studio practice, providing another dimension to his well-known paintings of dancers of the late 1960s. The static costume designs are a logical precursor to these works, anticipating the lighting, mood, orchestration and drama of the live performance.

After his professional start in stage design in 1940, Sidney Nolan only briefly kept his hand in – designing *Orphée* (1948) for Sydney University – until he took up the practice enthusiastically in the 1960s. His designs for The Australian Ballet's *The Display* (1964), however, are most memorable for Australian audiences. The inspiration for this production is local ballet folklore. Robert Helpmann took an early morning trip to the bush outside Melbourne with Katharine Hepburn. They two observed a male lyrebird performing his 'display'. 39 Nolan used gauzes to evoke the misty forest landscape.

## DESIGNS FOR DRAMA AND OPERA

While the lineage for painters working in design for ballet was clear and comprehensive, there existed a more random approach in the theatre and opera. Opera designs were often imported, and a different rationale surrounded small-scale and community theatre. Perhaps indicative of the different aesthetic requirements, the painters in this exhibition often found a niche where either opportunity or personal preference saw them focus on one art form.

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It seems inevitable that Nolan was involved in the staging of Douglas Stewart's play *Ned Kelly* (1956). His scenery design was fitting but his costume designs went unused and Desmond Downing was called in to contribute. (plates 58,59) Nolan's original costume designs, as simple and typical as they are, leave much to the imagination and little to the wardrobe staff's instruction. Still, the play was a fine intersection of artistic and narrative prowess. Nolan's grandfather had been a police sergeant in the party pursuing Kelly at Beechworth and the artist Nolan had read all of the literature available on the bushranger and had visited Kelly country. 40 Andrew Sayers has pointed out that while both Nolan and Stewart were little concerned with the facts of the Kelly story, 'Stewart's play has at least one strong parallel with Nolan's series – a vivid evocation of the Australian landscape.' 41 Nolan continued to design for the stage throughout the 1980s, in Australia and the United Kingdom, and this work formed a significant part of his oeuvre.

Arthur Boyd first designed for theatre in the 1950s, working with Peter O'Shaughnessy on dramatic and musical productions. An actor and director, O'Shaughnessy formed his own company in Melbourne in 1954, and collaborated with Barry Humphries during the years 1955-58. Boyd designed O'Shaughnessy production of *King Lear* (1957), for which twelve costume designs survive. (plates 1,2,3) The timeframe, Ursula Hoff has commented, coincides with the most important paintings of Boyd's Melbourne years, bearing the influence of the symbolic fantasy narrative paintings of Russian artist Marc Chagall. 42 The designs, like Nolan's Kelly costumes, are more concept sketches

than fully-fledged designs. However, they are evocative of Boyd's vision for the play, albeit conventional, and executed in his familiar style. Boyd designed for the stage through to the 1960s. His work for Elektra (1963), choreographed by Robert Helpmann and performed at Convent Garden in London, the Metropolitan Opera House in New York and the Adelaide Festival, remains his most celebrated.

Louis Kahan arrived in Australia in 1947 and, like other émigré artists (including designers for the stage, Wolfgang Cardamatis and Harald Vike), contributed knowledge, experience and a quintessentially European flavour to the art practice of post-war Melbourne – one where art and life are integrated.

Born in Vienna, Kahan's career as an artist began in Paris in 1925. After training as a master tailor, he worked for Paul Poiret's fashion house, but also designed costumes for film and stage, gaining access to an exciting world of art, opera, dance and music. While with the acclaimed fashion house, he was introduced to artists such as Picasso (whom he observed making etchings), Vlaminck, Derain and Dufy. Kahan was not attracted to one particular art style or movement, but his time in Paris before the Second World War instilled a love of the grace and charm of the French art of Odilon Redon and Henri Matisse. The hallmarks of Kahan's lively approach became observation, craftsmanship and performativity.

Kahan came to Australia initially to visit his parents and sister who had settled in Perth before the war. He stayed, however, and devoted his time to painting and drawing, before moving to Melbourne where artists George Bell and Alan McCulloch, and Meanjin editor Clem Christesen became

important influences and friends. Alan McCulloch introduced Kahan to Stefan Haag, a fellow Viennese then directing for the National Theatre Opera, and so started a serious program of work for the stage. (plates 40, 44, 46)

Kahan's understanding of the human form had its genesis in his trade. His designs, unlike those of the other artists in the exhibition, include fabric swatches; Kahan's attention to detail and dedication to the artform were unswerving.

Frank Hinder returned to Australia in 1934, after eight years in the United States, where he studied, worked as a commercial designer and taught art and design. Hinder first studied stage design at the Chicago Art Institute under Emil von Forsberg, and then encountered Nicholas Roerich while studying at the Master Institute at the Roerich Museum. Roerich had designed for Diaghilev, and Hinder's designs, such as those for Troilus and Cressida (1964) exhibited here, share his interest in lighting, atmosphere and space. 43 (plates 34,35) Though he had not yet had professional experience, Hinder taught stage design at the Child-Walker School of Fine Arts in Boston for two years from 1932, before returning to Sydney with his family. In Sydney, Hinder and his American wife Margel quickly identified with the George Street Group, which was pivotal in the development of second-wave Australian modernism. Hinder also became involved in May Hollinworth's Leonardo Group, associated with Sydney University, for whom he designed a series of productions in 1935.44

Hinder was interested in movement and light throughout his career, and these fascinations transcended media – his early art and commercial design used

dynamic symmetry, where movement and composition are harmonised, and he later produced kinetic light sculptures. Stage design seems an obvious fit for his predilections: he enjoyed collaboration and company, and was an avid collector of ideas, photographs, magazine clippings, quotes and all manner of useful 'bits and bobs', which informed and inspired his work. 45

Hinder's involvement in theatre and opera, as with so many artists, was a happy mix of interest and happenstance. While lecturing at Sydney Teachers College, he became involved in university theatre productions. By the late 1950s, he began working professionally with the Elizabethan Theatre Trust. Hinder had a close friendship with director and producer Robin Lovejoy and they worked together on two productions for the Adelaide Festival of Arts. The number of designs and extensive archives still extant for these productions gives some indication of Hinder's rigour as a designer. Unlike other designs on display, where the artist's hand is instantly recognisable, Hinder's show that he altered his style to serve the production. And while his interests in light and colour adapted well to the stage, Hinder's friend John Henshaw remarked that his theatre work 'profoundly influenced his handling of light and transparency in painting and printmaking.' 46

By the mid 1960s, notions of spectacle and illusion in theatre, and the use of backdrops and the picture-frame of the proscenium, were being upstaged by increasing interest in (or one could say a return to) the open stage and theatre-in-the-round. Three-dimensional sets, prop placement, lighting effects and sound began to be explored and exploited. By this time, design for the

stage did offer a possible career and, although it was some years before tertiary courses were fully implemented, designers were increasingly included in company staff and an apprenticeship-type training system was in place. The next chapter about Australian painters as stage designers – the mid 1960s to the present – moves into new interests and ideas, and sees the impact of technological advances.

While it is clear that dance provided rich possibilities for artistic interpretation in costume and décor, the artists in this exhibition had varied introductions to design for the stage, but commonly in community theatre. The phenomenon of modernist Australian painters working in stage design may not always have had convention or financial reward on its side, but it had an enduring effect on the creative manifestation of Australian performance. Diana Woollard has suggested that the post-Ballets Russes period 'gave birth to almost all the ideas that have shaped theatre arts in this country to this day.'<sup>47</sup> In commissioning artists, there was never the risk of sameness. By the time John Brack and Sidney Nolan were designing for ballet in the 1960s, audiences were well prepared for costuming and scenic elements which were experimental, cutting edge, modern and integral to the product.

Elaine Haxton wrote of stage design: 'With all its anxieties, design for the theatre is very rewarding. In no other branch of design can the designer see his dream come to life, see and hear his drawings move and dance and sing and speak in a setting of his imagination. This is the ultimate joy of creation for an artist.'<sup>48</sup> But perhaps the most revealing last word comes from Donald Friend, who encapsulated both the good will and the potential digressions

of the early painter-as-stage designer position: 'I enjoy theatrical design. I am inefficient at it – ignore all the needs of the dancers and necessary stage mechanism, create appalling and insoluble problems, but I like doing it.'<sup>49</sup>

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Alan McCulloch, *Art and the Theatre in Victoria 1844-1984*, exhibition catalogue, Mornington Peninsula Arts Centre, Mornington, 1984, p.8
- 2 See Frank Hinder's account, *Memoirs of Icarus*, 198 in the Appendix to this catalogue, pp.43- 44
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 Michelle Potter has written excellent account of Sidney Nolan's work for theatre. See Michelle Potter, 'Spacial Boundaries: Sidney Nolan's Ballet Designs', *Brolga*, no3, December 1995, pp. 53-67
- 5 Sidney Nolan, 'Painting and the Stage', lecture delivered to the Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1988, published privately, quoted in T G Rosenthal, *Sidney Nolan*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2002, p 255
- 6 Geoffrey Serle, *From Deserts the Prophets Come. The Creative Spirit in Australia 1788-1972*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1974, p. 154
- 7 Sydney Ure Smith, 'Bringing Art to the Australian People', the first of a series of talks on national ABC Radio broadcast in 1943, summary reprinted in *Society of Artists Book 1943*, Ure Smith Pty Ltd, Sydney, 1943, p 65
- 8 Foreword, *Les Ballets Contemporains*, booklet, Adelaide, 1945, cited in Ian North, *The Art of Dorrit Black*, Art Gallery of South Australia and Macmillan Melbourne, 2979, p. 94
- 9 Barrett Reid and Nancy Underhill (eds), *Letters of John Reed: Defining Australian Cultural Life 1920 – 1981*, Viking, Melbourne, 2001, p. 126
- 10 *ibid.*
- 11 Peter Bellew (ed.), *Pioneering Ballet in Australia*, Craftsman Bookshop, Sydney, n.d., (1945), pp. 17-18
- 12 Kirsova's last season was May 1944, but she had plans for four ballets to be produced in September-October: two by Wolfgang Cardamatis, one by Amie Kingston, and 'Waltzing Matilda', score commissioned. Bellew's book makes no mention of the *Lola Montez* production, though Kirsova and Bellew did not leave Australia until 1947. Bellew (ed.), *op.cit*
- 13 Donald Friend, diary entry for 12 August 1944, in Paul Hetherington (ed.), *The Diaries of Donald Friend*, volume 2, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 2003, p. 146
- 14 Diary entry for 18 August 1944, *ibid.*, p. 148
- 15 Diary entry for 25 October 1944, *ibid.*, pp. 173-74
- 16 Donald Friend, diary entry for 30

- October 1943, in Anne Gray (ed.), *The Diaries of Donald Friend*, volume 1, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 2001, p. 349
- 17 Diary entry for 11 November 1943, *ibid.*, p. 386
- 18 Diary entry for 30 July 1946, in Hetherington (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 398
- 19 Walter Gore worked with the English company Ballet Rambert, which toured Australia in 1947-49. He spent another brief period in Australia, at the helm of the National Theatre Ballet in 1952, but Friend was abroad from 1949 – 1953.
- 20 There is a photograph of Gore at Merioola at the National Library, attributed to Alec Murray, 1948, Walter Gore Collection, nla.pic-an23737685. See also [www.australiadancing.org/subjects/33.html](http://www.australiadancing.org/subjects/33.html)
- 21 'Women's letters', *The Bulletin*, 18 November 1942, p. 24
- 22 Elaine Haxton, 'Design for the Theatre', *Society of Artists Spring Exhibition*, Education Department Gallery, Sydney, 1957, p. 13
- 23 Interview with Paul Kathner, Melbourne, 10 December 2003
- 24 Unannotated newspaper clipping, c 1947, Laurel Martyn Collection, the Arts Centre Performing Arts Collection
- 25 Susan and Emily McCulloch kindly provided access to these designs.
- 26 J. Lionel Smalley and Alan McCulloch, *Ballet Bogies*, illustrated by Wilfred McCulloch, J Lionel Smalley, Melbourne, 1938
- 27 Interview with Laurel Martyn, Melbourne, 11 November 2003
- 28 *ibid.*
- 29 Pritchard's plays include *Women of Spain* (1935), *Forward One* (1937) and *Penalty Clause* (1940). Katharine Brisbane, 'Katherine Susannah Pritchard' in Philip Parsons (ed), *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, Currency Press, Sydney, 1955, p. 464
- 30
- 30 Mary Eagle, *Australian Modern Painting Between the Wars 1914 – 1939*, Bay Books, Sydney, 1989, p. 137
- 31 Alan McCulloch, Foreword, in Julian Goddard, *Harald Vike: A Retrospective*, Kingstream Fine Art Pty Ltd, Perth, 1990. Here McCulloch describes Vike as 'an accomplished and versatile draughtsman with a weird Nordic sense of humour.' Len Annois designed I for Laurel Martyn at The Melbourne Ballet Club in 1946, and *Les Sylphides* for its successor, The Ballet Guild in 1947.
- 32 *ibid.*
- 33 Roger Leong et al., *From Russia with Love: Costumes for the Ballet Russes 1909-1993*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1998, p.6
- 34 Biographical notes, Goddard *op. cit.*, p. 92
- 35 Interview with Laurel Martyn, *op. cit.*,
- 36 Dick Wittman, interview with Alan Sumner, 15 March 1989, in Dick Wittman, *William Frater: A Life with Colour*, The Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2000
- 37 Interview with Anna French, Melbourne, 8 December 2003
- 38 Ian F. Brown (ed.), *The Australian Ballet 1962 – 1965*, Longmans, Melbourne, 1967, p. 92
- 39 Sidney Nolan, 'Painting and the Stage', in Rosenthal, *op. cit.*, p. 260
- 40 Andrew Sayers, 'Kelly's Words, Rousseau and Sunlight', in Murray Bail and Andrew Sayers, *Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2002, p. 3
- 41 *ibid.*, p. 6
- 42 Ursula Hoff, *The Art of Arthur Boyd*, Andre Deutsch Limited, London, 1986, p. 49
- 43 The National gallery of Australia held an excellent survey exhibition of the work of the Ballets Russes in 1999, including Roerich's work. See Roger Leong et al, *op. cit.*
- 44 Hollinworth later became a producer for the Elizabethan Theatre Trust, and she worked with Hinder again on a 1957 production of *The Shifting Heart*.
- 45 The Art Gallery of New South Wales Archive holds many of Hinder's research files along with his personal records and papers.
- 46 John Henshaw, *Frank Hinder Lithographs*, Odana Editions, Sydney, 1978, p. 15
- 47 Diana Woollard, 'Theatre arts', *Art and Australia*, vol 20, no 1, 1982, p. 103

- 48 Elaine Haxton, *op. cit.*, p. 15  
49 Donald Friend volume 2, *op. cit.*, diary  
entry for 2 August 1944, Hetherington  
(ed.) *op. cit.*, p.141
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