

Setting the Scene:

Australian Stage Design 1940-1965 Carolyn Laffan

Prologue

The impact made by the three Russian Ballet tours of 1936, 1938–39 and 1940 loom large in the story of the development of stage design in Australia. To fully appreciate the degree of influence exerted by these companies, it is necessary to reflect on the theatrical climate in Australia prior to their arrival. Before experiencing the excitement of the legendary Russian companies, audiences in Australia had been accustomed to scenic design that either provided a realistic backdrop created to convey the geographical and temporal setting of a story, or the larger-than-life fantasy worlds evoked for pantomime, vaudeville and burlesque.

As the dominant theatrical management in twentieth century Australia, J.C. Williamson Theatres Ltd led the way in providing spectacular scenery and scenic effects on stage. From the workshop of their Melbourne headquarters at Her Majesty's Theatre, Williamson's created costumes and scenic art for opera and ballet, musicals and drama. Scenic painters such as George Upward designed and painted hundreds of backdrops which were kept and re-used for both revivals and for shows requiring similar thematic material. Many of the costume and set designs used by Williamson's were acquired contractually with shows purchased from the United Kingdom or the United States.¹ These design drawings were then used by wardrobe

and paint-room staff to re-create the original designs.

During the 1920s and 1930s, opportunities for designers were greatly limited by the impact of the Depression and the threat of another war. Following the stock market crash of 1929, J.C. Williamson's reportedly cancelled future contracts for international performers to the value of £20,000.² The organisation famous for presenting the best in international talent including ballerina Anna Pavlova (1926 and 1929) and soprano Dame Nellie Melba (1911, 1924 and 1928), was reduced to reviving old musical favourites such as *Maid of the Mountains*, *The Desert Song* and seasons of Gilbert & Sullivan operetta. A number of theatres owned and operated by Williamson's were forced to close as film and vaudeville offered cheaper, more escapist forms of public entertainment.³

Determination to present quality drama, however, was undiminished in selected theatrical circles as evidenced by the emergence of the 'Little Theatre' and 'New Theatre' movements. Of particular importance was the Melbourne Little Theatre founded by Hal Percy and Brett Randall in 1931 as the Little Theatre Laboratory of Dramatic Arts. Like Doris Fitton's Independent Theatre in Sydney, the Melbourne Little Theatre provided a training ground for actors, writers, technicians and designers to develop their skills in a supportive non-

commercial environment. The fast turn around of productions and extreme practical and financial constraints led to great innovation. Designers 'trained' in this system included John Truscott and Anne Fraser who were to become two of Australia's most sought after professional designers.

The New Theatre was part of an international movement of workers' theatre especially prominent in the United Kingdom and the United States. Inspired by Russian agitprop groups, their mission was to present 'plays with a purpose'. The Australian New Theatre Movement included chapters in Melbourne, Sydney, Newcastle, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth. Early New Theatre productions caused controversy, such as Clifford Odet's anti-Nazi play *Till The Day I Die I* which was banned in Melbourne and Sydney in 1936 on the advice of the Attorney-General Robert Menzies.⁴

As New Theatre writer Catherine Duncan explained, 'the thirties and the war years were a seeding time intellectually and artistically for such countries as Australia and the U.S. For the first time (or so it seemed to us) we ceased to be parochial, feeling ourselves physically joined to an international fraternity.'⁵ Although primarily a writer's theatre, New Theatre designers such as Harald Vike, William Constable, Vane Lindesay and Cedric Flower experimented with Russian and European styles of constructivism and expressionism, creating highly stylised sets for both serious political drama and topical comic revue.⁶

Act I

Between the late 1930s and the mid 1960s, stage design in Australia underwent a remarkable metamorphosis as a result of several important events, including the 1936 tour of the Monte Carlo Russian Ballet, the 1938-39 tour of the Covent Garden Russian Ballet and the 1940 tour of the Colonel de Basil's Original Ballet Russe. These tours opened Australian eyes to the theatrical possibilities of combining the greatest dancers, choreographers, composers and designers of the day. They also raised awareness of, and interest in, Russian culture and notions of modernism. Here for the first time was a practical application of modernism on a grand scale. For most Australians exposure to European modernism had been limited to seeing works reproduced in art books and journals.

The Monte Carlo Russian Ballet and its sister companies performed many works originally commissioned by Serge Diaghilev for the Ballets Russes between 1909 and 1929.⁷ Diaghilev's policy of commissioning leading contemporary choreographers, composers and designers set the template for many of the companies to emerge post-war both in Australia and internationally.

Ballets presented in Australia by these Russian companies featured costume and scenic design by avant-garde European artists such as Juan Gris (*The Gods Go A Begging*), André Derain (*La Boutique Fantasque*), Georges Roualt (*The Prodigal Son*), André Masson (*Les Présage*), Joán Miró (*Jeux d'Enfant*) and Giorgio di Chirico (*Protée*).⁸

The aesthetics of indigenous Russia featured heavily in designs by Russian artists Nicholas Roerich (*Prince Igor*)

and Alexander Golovin (*The Firebird*) born of their involvement with art colonies such as those in Abramtsevo and Talashkino which championed the traditional arts and crafts of Russia and its satellites.⁹ The Ballet Russes designers also displayed a marked interest in modernism through the neo-primitiveness and exoticism seen in the work of leading figures in the Moscow avant-garde: Alexandre Benois (*Aurora's Wedding*), Léon Bakst (*Schéhérazade*), Natalia Gontcharova (*Le Coq D'Or*) and Mikhail Larinov (*Port Saïd/ Soleil de Nuit*).

Some idea of the imaginative power exerted by the scenic design employed by these Russian companies is conveyed in the words of the *Argus* critic who noted of Alexander Golovin's backdrop for *The Firebird*:

The backcloth is a thing of fascination, imagination and beauty – an artist's crystallisation of a dream by Edgar Allen Poe. Weird amorphous castles arise out of the gloomy forest, mystery lurks in the shadows, and monsters creep from their caverns to weave diabolical spells over simple mortals wandering in the woods.¹⁰

Melburnians enamoured with these visions of Russian culture beyond the stage door congregated at Café Petrushka, 144 Little Collins Street. Opened in 1937 by Mina Wolman and partner Jessie Sumner, Café Petrushka became a haven for writers, artists, performers and intellectuals. Habitueés of the café included dancers Hélène Kirsova and Léon Woizokowski from the Russian ballet companies, writers Jim Crawford and Hal Porter, designers William Constable and Loudon Sainthill, artists George Bell, Albert Tucker, Justus Jorgenson and Max Meldrum, along with art critic for the *Herald* Basil Burdett.¹¹

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For the less bohemian crowd, interest in Russian culture was kept alive by the 1937 Williamson production *Balalaika*. A musical on a grand scale, *Balalaika* featured every conceivable Russian motif from 'Bolshevism to the Maryinsky Theatre' while evoking and celebrating the old aristocratic Russia.¹² The storyline revolved around a dancer from the Imperial Ballet and included several gypsy dances as well as a complete ballet choreographed by Thadee Slavinsky, who had performed with both the Diaghilev and Colonel de Basil Russian ballet companies.

In 1940, an exhibition of international design for theatre provided the public with an opportunity to appreciate costume and set designs as artworks. Mounted by journalist Harry Tatlock Miller under the auspices of the British Council, the exhibition was the first of its kind in Australia and featured works by British designers Cecil Beaton and Oliver Messel, Australian Loudon Sainthill and Ballets Russes designers Alexandre Benois and Giorgio di Chirico.

In the same year, the Colonel de Basil design competition was announced to encourage Australian artists and designers to create a new work inspired by Australia's colonial past. The judging panel included de Basil, artist Will Ashton, writer Basil Burdett and publisher Sydney Ure Smith. A cash prize was offered along with the opportunity to execute the design for the de Basil company. Seventy-six entries were received and the competition was won by artist Donald Friend for a ballet called *Hold Up*, inspired by the life of bushranger Ned Kelly. Although this work was never produced, the 1940 Original Ballet Russe season directed by Serge Lifar included two works designed by

Australian artists. These were *Lutte Eternalle* designed by sisters Kathleen and Florence Martin and *Icare* by Sidney Nolan.¹³

Act II

In the aftermath of the Russian ballet tours, it is perhaps not surprising that it was those involved in the development of ballet, rather than drama or opera, who took the lead in ensuring that design remained a vital part of the commissioning of new Australian works.

A woman of tremendous drive, Hélène Kirsova had been a prima ballerina on the 1936 Monte Carlo Russian Ballet tour. She excelled in works created by the legendary Michel Fokine and is best remembered for her portrayals of Columbine in *Carnaval* and the Doll in *Petrouchka*. Her company presented the professional face of Australian ballet in Sydney from 1941 to 1944.

Hélène Kirsova's company presented the professional face of Australian ballet in Sydney from 1941 to 1944. A woman of tremendous drive, Kirsova had been a prima ballerina for the 1936 Monte Carlo Russian Ballet tour. She excelled in works created by the legendary Mikhail Fokine and is best remembered for her portrayals of Columbine in *Le Carnaval* and the Doll in *Petrouchka*.

The Kirsova Ballet was launched on 8 July 1941 with *A Dream and a Fairy Tale* and *Vieux Paris*, both choreographed by Kirsova, and Massine's *Les Matelots*. From the outset, Kirsova was dedicated to the principle that 'although Ballet is frequently called an art, it is, in reality, a combination of three – painting, music and dancing – a marriage in which no one component should overbalance

another.' In this she took her lead from Diaghilev who she credited with employing 'the best contemporary painters to design his decors, the best contemporary musicians to compose his music, his choreographers were never permitted to mark time; they were constantly encouraged to see new fields, new forms of choreographic expression.'¹⁴

On the development of Australian stage design, arts writer Peter Bellew lamented in 1944 that:

Decor has always been a secondary consideration in the Australian theatre. It has been the custom to present musical comedies and straight plays, imported from Europe and the United States, before scenery executed 'after' the original – often from black and white photographs – by commercial scenic painters. Locally designed sets have been produced, with few exceptions, in the same manner – by commercial scenic painters and not, as is the only possible way if any aesthetic value is desired, by original creative artists.¹⁵

Kirsova's contribution to righting this balance was simple: 'We have a number of talented young Australians whose attitude to paint is readily adaptable to theatre décor. I have been able to commission four of them so far to design and execute décor, and I am intensely proud to have had the opportunity of working with them.'¹⁶

Artists who designed for Kirsova included Amie Kingston, Alice Danciger, Wallace Thornton, Loudon Sainthill and Wolfgang Cardamatis. The latter three were members of a group dubbed by art critic Robert Hughes the Sydney 'Charm School'. Hughes' appraisal of the group as consisting of 'various decorators and designers

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whose work is generously regarded as painting,' reveals a prevailing disregard for artists working in the 'applied arts'.¹⁷ To this group he also added Elaine Haxton and William Constable whose work with the Borovansky Ballet, Ballet Guild and the National Theatre influenced the development of scenic design in Australia.

Kirsova's dream of creating work for Australian dancers, artists and composers was to be short-lived. By 1944 the company had disbanded and many of her dancers joined the Borovansky Ballet in Melbourne. Charismatic and enthusiastic, Edouard Borovansky had first visited Australia as a dancer with the Anna Pavlova touring company of 1929. Following a return visit in 1938 as a member of the Covent Garden Russian Ballet, Borovansky decided to stay in Australia rather than to return to Europe. In 1940 he established the Melbourne Ballet Club and by 1944 had secured financial backing from Williamson's for a national tour of his new company, the Borovansky Ballet.

During the 1940s, the company premiered works by local choreographers such as Laurel Martyn and Dorothy Stevenson, however, the main repertoire was built around works made famous by the Ballets Russes. With the notable exceptions of Alan McCulloch's design for *Sea Legend* (1943) and Eve Harris' design for *Terra Australis* (1946), most of the company's productions during the 1940s and 1950s were designed or re-interpreted by William Constable. Like Sainthill, Constable had studied theatre design in London and he was described as 'a master of the mechanics of stage settings.'¹⁸

Between 1948 and 1951, the Borovansky Ballet was unsuccessful in

securing funding from the Williamson organisation. The company went into recess with many dancers subsequently leaving the country to gain experience overseas. During this period, audiences flocked to see Ballet Rambert whose 1947-49 national tour exposed Australians to a burgeoning British ballet scene. Led by dancers Sally Gilmour and Walter Gore, the company performed new works by British choreographers such as Ninette de Valois and Antony Tudor. Designers for the company included Nadia Benois, Hugh Stevenson and Australian artist Kenneth Rowell, who was to become a pivotal figure in the development of local design aesthetic for Australian ballet and opera.

On a more intimate scale, Laurel Martyn's Ballet Guild was striving to embed the lessons learnt from the Ballets Russes in the local scene. A prolific choreographer and internationally experienced dancer, Laurel Martyn had works presented by both the Borovansky Ballet and the National Theatre Ballet while establishing her own company to create original work drawing on the talents of local dancers, choreographers, designers and composers.

In 1946, Martyn was approached by the Melbourne Ballet Club to form a small local company to concentrate on the production of new Australian works. In November that year, the company premiered four new one act works choreographed by Martyn: *Ballade* designed by Len Annois; *Contes Heraldique* designed by Alan McCulloch, *Dithyramb* designed by Alan Sumner and *Ruritaniana* designed by Harald Vike.¹⁹ Throughout the 1940s and 1950s Martyn commissioned many other artists including Charles Bush, Erica McGilchrist, Elaine Haxton

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and Leonard French to design for Ballet Guild.

In 1935 Gertrude Johnson founded the National Theatre Movement in Melbourne. In 1949 she approached Ballet Rambert dancers Walter Gore and Joyce Graeme to take on the artistic directorship of the National Ballet School with the aim of developing it into a professional company. In 1950, the company presented the new Australian work *Corroboree*, choreographed by ex-Rambert dancer Rex Reid to music by John Anthill, with set design by William Constable and costume and mask design by Robin Lovejoy. Set in the central Australian desert, the design played a pivotal role in evoking the outback.²⁰

The success of *Corroboree*, however, did not necessarily encourage local companies and designers to use the Australian bush or urban environment as the inspiration for new works. During the 1950s, the Borovansky Ballet presented several new Australian ballets, but their setting had little to do with the Australian landscape. These included *Los Tres Diabolos* (1954) and *Journey to the Moon* (1960), both choreographed by Paul Grinwis and designed by Elaine Haxton. *Journey to the Moon* was the first full-length ballet to be created in Australia and was set in an entirely fictitious environment. Of Haxton's designs, *The Sydney Morning Herald* noted that the success of the piece was 'due mainly to the inspired imagination of the creator of its costumes and décor, Miss Elaine Haxton...each scene convinces one that this Australian artist has found her true medium in her collaboration with ballet.'²¹

Act III

In 1954 the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust was founded as a non-profit public company with the aim of establishing national drama, opera and ballet companies which would provide work for Australian performers and associated theatre practitioners.

Although the dream of a national drama company was never realised, the Trust did facilitate the presentation of new Australian plays to a larger national audience through its 1955-56 touring program of works such as Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* designed by Anne Fraser, Peter Scriven's puppet plays *The Tintookies*, and Douglas Stewart's verse play *Ned Kelly* designed by Sidney Nolan and Desmonde Downing.²² In the main, the presentation of drama was left to local companies such as St Martin's Theatre Company, the New Theatre, the Union Theatre Repertory Company and the Arrow Theatre in Melbourne, and the Independent Theatre in Sydney. These companies staged a steady stream of classical and contemporary plays from the United Kingdom and United States along with the occasional Australian work.

The establishment of a national opera company, however, had been envisioned many years earlier with the establishment of Gertrude Johnson's National Theatre Movement. The National Theatre Opera presented their first season in 1938 and by 1948 boasted 45 principal singers, a 110-strong chorus, 45 dancers and the use of the ABC orchestra.²³ The popularity of the company peaked in the early 1950s with a visit by the internationally acclaimed Australian soprano Marjorie Lawrence in 1951 and a Royal Command Performance before Queen

Elizabeth II in 1954 of *The Tales of Hoffmann*, designed by Louis Kahan. Limited touring capacity, however, resulted in a company that was national in name only and in 1956 the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust began its own opera company with the aim of touring throughout Australia.

The launch of the Adelaide Festival of Arts in 1960 provided a valuable context for the Elizabethan Trust Opera Company performances which headlined many of the festivals during that decade. Operas including *Madame Butterfly* designed by Elaine Haxton in 1960 and *Troilus & Cressida* designed by Frank Hinder in 1964, demonstrated the potential of Australian artists to re-envision classical works.

The 1960s marked a highpoint for the involvement of visual artists in developing a new aesthetic for Australian theatre. A joint ballet and opera season presented by the fledgling Australian Ballet and the Elizabethan trust opera in 1964 provided other examples of these cross artform collaborations. The season included *The Display*, which was choreographed by Robert Helpmann to music by Malcolm Williamson with designs by Sidney Nolan, and *Roundelay*, choreographed by Ray Powell to music by James Penberthy with designs by artist John Brack.²⁴

Recognition for theatrical design as a profession grew steadily during the 1950s and 1960s. For example, Anne Fraser was appointed the first full-time designer with a non-commercial company, the Union Theatre Repertory Company, in 1955. The creation of awards such as the Irene Mitchell Award for Set Design in 1961 and the Loudon Sainthill Scholarship in 1967 also encouraged critical debate about the work being produced by designers.

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With the establishment of government subsidised state theatre companies, the opening of the Sydney Opera House, and the later development of new venues such as the Adelaide Festival Centre and the Victorian Arts Centre in the 1970s and 1980s, the possibility of a full-time career in theatre design had at last become a viable option for artists committed to extending the boundaries of theatrical presentation.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The Arts Centre's Performing Arts Collection holds many fine examples of costume designs acquired by J. C. Williamson's in this manner. Designers include Attilio Comelli, Percy Anderson and Alias of London and Paris.
- 2 John West, 'J.C. Williamson's', in Philip Parsons (ed.), *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, Currency Press, Sydney, 1995, p. 301
- 3 Annette Bain, "'Brighter Days'", Challenges to live theatre in the thirties', in Jill Roe (ed.), *Twentieth Century Sydney: Studies in Urban and Social History*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1980, pp. 34-47
- 4 Dr Angela O'Brien, 'New Theatre', in Parsons (ed.), op. cit., p. 400
- 5 Catherine Duncan, letter to Juliet Peers, 22 February 1990, in Juliet Peers, *Café Petrushka: A Slice of Melbourne's Artistic Life of the 1930s*, McClelland Gallery, Langwarrin, 1990, n.p.
- 6 O'Brien, loc. cit.
- 7 Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1989, pp. 379-415
- 8 National Library of Australia, *Australia Dancing*, Canberra, 1999, viewed December 2003, www.australiadancing.org.au
- 9 Garafola, op. cit., p. 14
- 10 Argus as quoted in Edward H. Pask, *Ballet In Australia: The Second Act 1940 – 1980*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1982, p. 146
- 11 Peers, loc. cit.
- 12 ibid
- 13 Michelle Potter, 'Designing for Dance', in John Whiteoak and Aline Scott-Maxwell (eds), *Currency Companion to Music and Dance in Australia*, Currency House Inc., Sydney, 2003, p.231
- 14 Hélène Kirsova, *Kirsova Australian Ballet*, Clem Dirago for Mareca Pty Ltd, Sydney, n.d, n.p.
- 15 Peter Bellew (ed.), *Pioneering Ballet in Australia*, Craftsman Bookshop, Sydney, n.d., (1945), p. 17
- 16 Kirsova, loc. cit.
- 17 Robert Hughes, *The Art of Australia*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1970, p. 180
- 18 *The Studio: Australia in Art*, October 1942, p. 144
- 19 Pask, op. cit., pp. 159-160
- 20 Frank Van Straten, *National Treasure: The Story of Gertrude Johnson and the National Theatre*, Victoria Press, Melbourne, 1994, pp. 124 & 126
- 21 Pask, op. cit., p. 92
- 22 Helen Musa, 'The Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust', in Parsons (ed.), op. cit., p. 72
- 23 Thérèse Radic, 'National Theatre Opera Company', in Whiteoak and Scott-Maxwell (eds), op. cit., p. 476
- 24 Pask, op. cit., pp. 126-27