‘Sydney Dance Company -
A study of a connecting thread with
the Ballets Russes’

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts by Research May, 2009.
Declaration

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original, except as acknowledged in the text, and that the material has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

..........................
Peter Stell
This thesis addresses unexplored territory within a relatively new body of scholarship concerning the history of the Ballets Russes in Australia. Specifically, it explores the connection between the original Diaghilev Ballets Russes (1909-1929) and the trajectories of influence of Russian ballets that visited Australia.

The study’s hypothesis is that the Sydney Dance Company, under the artistic direction of Graeme Murphy between 1976 and 2007, and the creation in 1978 of Murphy’s first full-length work Poppy, best exemplifies in contemporary terms the influence in Australia of the Ballets Russes. Murphy was inspired to create Poppy from his reading of the prominent artistic collaborator of the Ballets Russes, Jean Cocteau. This thesis asserts that *Poppy*, and its demonstrable essential connection with the original Diaghilev epoch, was the principal driver of Murphy’s artistic leadership over fifty dance creations by himself and collaborative artists.

This study sketches the origins of the Ballets Russes, the impact its launch made on dance in the West, and how it progressed through three distinguishable phases of influence. It summarises the important features of the visits to Australia of Russian ballet companies from Adeline Genee in 1913 to the culturally altering impact of the revived Ballets Russes companies over three extended tours between 1936 and 1940. It charts the formation of viable ballet companies in Australia, commencing with Kirsova in 1939 and Borovansky in 1940, to the Australian Ballet in 1962 and the Sydney Dance Company led by Murphy between 1976 and 2008. Drawing on distinctions between classical and contemporary dance, it attempts to demonstrate the groundwork of example established by the Russian ballet, and, particularly, the revived Ballets Russes visits up to 1940.

Data for this thesis was drawn from a personal interview with Graeme Murphy, original documentary research in public collections in Australia, government and Sydney Dance Company archives, newspapers and secondary literature.
Acknowledgments

I wish to thank my supervisor, Associate Professor John Murphy, who has not only been unswerving in redirecting me to the main thrust of my topic, but has demonstrated unmitigated support throughout.

I am inestimably grateful to Graeme Murphy for having so enthusiastically participated in an audiotape interview.

Invaluable help and advice was given by Janine Kyle, International Business Manager of the Sydney Dance Company, and her staff; Dr Michelle Potter (previously Curator Dance and Music at the National Library of Australia, and presently Curator Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, New York), staff at the Manuscript Room, National Library of Australia; the National Film and Sound Archives; Mitchell Library State Library of New South Wales, Sydney; Performing Arts Museum Collection, Adelaide Festival Centre, Adelaide; Performing Arts Museum Collection, Victorian Arts Centre (VAC), Melbourne; the Library at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA), Melbourne; the Baillieu and Education Resource Centre Libraries at Melbourne University; and the Barr Smith Library at the University of Adelaide.

I am grateful for the injection of enthusiasm so freely given by both the (late) Dr Helene Kandell; and my dear friend Margaret Cockram, who has kindly read through my drafts.

Substantial reference publications and theatre memorabilia relating to this topic belong in my own personal collection.

Finally, I acknowledge the five hundred dollars financial support toward four research trips undertaken to Sydney, administered by the Australian Centre at Melbourne University.
Abbreviations

References to newspapers and collections in the footnotes, figures, bibliography or appendices are identified by the following short titles and abbreviated forms:

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<td>RB</td>
<td>Royal Ballet.</td>
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Introduction:

This thesis argues that the Sydney Dance Company, under the artistic directorship of Australian dancer and choreographer Graeme Murphy\(^1\) between 1976 and 2008, demonstrated a continuum with the historic visits of Russian ballets to Australia. This distinct thread derived from the Ballets Russes de Serge Diaghilev between 1909 and 1929. It commenced with the visit to Melbourne and Sydney by prima ballerina Adeline Genee and her Imperial Russian Ballet in 1913, and was followed by extensive Australian and New Zealand tours of Anna Pavlova and her own Russian Ballet companies in 1926 and 1929. The tours in Australia of formal Russian ballet companies were described by critic and historian John Cargher as representing a move from “ballet improper to ballet proper”,\(^2\) an expression intended to convey maturation from informal entre-acts to seasons of formal classical repertoires given by authentic internationally accredited companies.

The most significant were the three successive tours of the revived Ballets Russes companies between 1936 and 1940, which photographer Max Dupain declared amounted to an “avalanche of dancing … and Australians just wallowed in it”.\(^3\) Despite dramatic changes in management and titles resulting from fierce legal contests, each company represented the finest contemporary offering, the most influential and exciting ballet theatre of the twentieth century. The Ballets Russes had revived ballet in the West in an explosion of public scandal and rich artistic collaboration over three successive evolutions (Nijinsky, Massine, and Lifar) altogether performing twenty-nine mostly original works in twenty-one countries

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\(^1\) Graeme Murphy, born in 1950, was awarded an AM for services to dance in 1982. He is the recipient of three honorary doctorates – Hon. D Litt Tas (1990), Hon. D Phil Qld (1992), Hon. D Litt UNSW (1999). He was honoured at the Inaugural Sydney Opera House Honours in 1998 and was named by the National Trust of Australia as a National Living Treasure in 1999. In 2001, he was presented with the Helpmann Award for Best Choreography for *Body of Work – A Retrospective, Gala Performance*. In 2002, he was given the prestigious James Cassius Award, in recognition of his career achievements. In 2003, he was awarded the Australian Government's Centenary Medal in honour of his contribution to the development of dance in Australia. In 2004 he was named Cultural Leader of the Year by the Australian Business and the Arts Foundation, receiving the Dame Elisabeth Murdoch Award in commemoration of this honour. In 2005 he was listed among Australia's fifty Most Glamorous Exports at a special celebration hosted by the Australian Government and Austrade. SDC. Online: http://sydneydancecompany.com/company/directors.shtml [Extracted 30/4/07].

\(^2\) Cargher, John, *Opera and Ballet in Australia* (Sydney: Cassell, 1977) 206.


Of all the contributors, it is arguable that the contribution of Frenchman Jean Cocteau most influenced the diversity that spanned all three periods. For this reason, in 1978, Murphy chose to portray the story of Cocteau the artist and his role in the Ballets Russes that has so indelibly influenced Australian dance. By drawing on comparisons between Murphy and the repertoire of the Sydney Dance Company, this thesis paints impresario Diaghilev as manipulative master motivator of the Ballets Russes with Cocteau as key integral collaborator.

In 1909, Diaghilev chose Paris, the artistic and intellectual centre of Europe, to be his stage of opportunity. Previously unseen in the West, the Ballets Russes repertoire juxtaposed class and ideologically based classical interpretations with raw exotic Russo-Oriental folk cultures and confrontational modern social idioms led by themes of sexuality. Cocteau, an avant-garde bohemian and darling of Parisien art circles, collaborated to conjure modern theatrical visualisations around psychoanalytical archetypes. Front-of-house showman Diaghilev promoted, juggled funding, and inspirationally pulled together the artistic genius of those who could do what he could not. Above all, his Ballets Russes consistently entertained. Murphy has proven to be all of this as well as a performer choreographer/dancer in the tradition of the Ballets Russes in Australia.

Out of these connections, Murphy was inspired to tell the story of Diaghilev, master manipulator, and Cocteau, the original multi-media artist. *Poppy* is fundamentally a narrative about Cocteau’s sexuality and how it informed the extroverted creativity of the Ballets Russes. Never afraid of controversy, Murphy paints candid sexual imageries in his efforts to represent social evolution. With a personal affection and self-confessed psychic association, it is significant that homosexual Murphy himself created the role of Cocteau.

Much has been written about Diaghilev, his overt sexuality, and impassioned vision for his Ballets Russes, as well as the faithful revival companies resurrected across Europe, England and North America after his death. Some biographies
researched for this work include those by Prince Peter Lieven, Cyril W.
Beaumont, Mikhail Fokine, Bronislava Nijinska, Romola Nijinsky, Serge
Grigoriev, Lydia Sokolova, Boris Kochno, Leonide Massine, Serge Lifar, Arnold
Haskell, Richard Buckle, John Percival, Mary Clarke and Clement Crisp, Charles
Spencer and Phillip Dyer, Militsa Pozharskaya and Tatiana Volodina, John
Drummond, and Professor Lynn Garafola and Nancy Van Norman Baer.4 One of
the most significant is Lieven, a fellow student and collaborator in Diaghilev’s art
circles in St Petersburg, who traced the inception of the Ballets Russes from the

--- L’Apres-Midi d’un Faune Vaslav Nijinsky – 1912 Thirty-Three Photographs by Baron Adolf de
Meyer (New York: Dance Horizons, 1983)
--- Speaking of Diaghilev. (London: Faber and Faber, 1997).
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--- Lifar, Serge, Serge Diaghilev. (London: Wyman and Sons, 1940).
--- MacDonald, Nesta, Diaghilev Observed by Critics in England and the United States, 1911-1929.
--- Pozharskaya, Militsa and Tatiana Volodina, The Art of the Ballets Russes. (New York: Abbeville Press,
1990).
--- Walker, Kathrine Sorley, Cyril W. Beaumont Dance Writer and Publisher. (Hampshire: Dance Books,
2006).
--- De Basil’s Ballets Russes (London: Hutchinson, 1982).
Maryinsky Theatre to the Paris opening with intimate detail. Imperial Ballet Master and choreographer Mikhail Fokine and Ballets Russes Regisseur Serge Grigoriev both departed the Kirov for Diaghilev’s vision. Composers Igor Stravinsky, Debussy, Ravel, Prokofiev, Poulenc, Satie, Milhaud and others left notable legacies of revolutionary scores written specifically for the Ballets Russes. Painter/designers Alexandre Benois⁵ and Leon Bakst followed Diaghilev from the Maryinsky and St Petersburg salons; Picasso, Matisse, Braque, Larionov, and others added lasting modernist dimensions. Coco Chanel created costumes that became iconic. Boris Kochno joined Diaghilev as assistant in 1921 until 1929. All published historical memoirs of these experiences.

British balletomane and bookseller Beaumont (1891-1976) first witnessed the Ballets Russes in London, in 1912. In 1918, the Ballets Russes awarded Beaumont a special pass enabling him to attend any performance and go backstage⁶. In 1935, he documented the entire Fokine repertoire, London reviews and a comprehensive chronology, noting Fokine’s philosophy that, “in place of the traditional dualism, the ballet must have complete unity of expression … a harmonious blending of the three elements – music, painting and the plastic arts”⁷. Commencing with his Complete Book of Ballets (1937) and its supplements (1940 and 1942), Beaumont recorded perhaps the most comprehensive accounts of the repertoires, performances and individual artists. His memoir Diaghilev Ballet in London, (1940), gives an intimate account of the theatrical spectacle of “a great tradition … all unknown to us … a whole range of ideas that we have never met before”⁸. Beaumont declared: “with the exception of the first visits of 1911, I saw every season in London until their final appearance in 1929 … the standard established by Diaghilev remains unequalled⁹. Beaumont’s 1937 compilation was the first attempt at a complete directory from ballet’s origins: the iconic handbook that the esteemed The Definitive Kobbé’s Opera Book¹⁰ is to opera. Beaumont categorised the epoch in its historic context, from balleto at the sixteenth century Italian Court, ballet and ballet-comedy at the French Court after Louis XIV established the

⁶ Drummond, Speaking of Diaghilev 132.
⁷ Beaumont, Michel Fokine and his ballets 6.
⁹ Ibid vii-x.
Danse Acadamie Royale in 1661, to the 1940s Sadler’s Wells and the Royal Ballet (1956). Popular and convivial, Beaumont was regarded as the foremost authority and educator of his time, and was also responsible for recording the Cecchetti teaching manual and founding the Cecchetti Society in London, in 1922, the foremost teaching standard to the entire trajectory. Many writers drew from their association with Beaumont. Until his retirement in 1965, Beaumont operated the world famous Ballet Bookshop in Cecil Court St Martin’s Lane London, an intimate meeting place and centre for research.

Haskell, Buckle, Percival, Clarke and Crisp were all respected British critics, who contributed regular columns, including Crisp for the Spectator between 1966 and 1970 and for the Financial Times since, as well as countless reviews and publications. From the 1930s, Haskell, who was a tireless advocate of teaching and funding, significantly popularised all forms of dance. He urged that mounting public enthusiasm should develop a “critical attitude”. For him, “the Russian balletomane was a critic and not merely a fan … who realised his responsibilities and knew something of the traditions upon which the art is based”¹³. Promoting emerging talent, in Australia with the Ballets Russes for seven months in 1937, Haskell urged Australians to form their own national ballet company. He recognized the importance of uninterrupted structured classical teaching, continuous evolving of new choreographers and the value of entrepreneurial creativity in artistically sympathetic leaders. Buckle, an Oxford graduate who founded Ballet Magazine in 1939, became a modern authority on the entire Ballets Russes. As London Observer critic between 1948 and 1955, he organised many important Ballets Russes exhibitions including notably in Edinburgh and London, in 1954.¹⁴ Nesta MacDonald compiled an extraordinary chronology of press reviews together with valuable historical commentary.¹⁵

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¹¹ Enrico Cecchetti (1850-1928), Imperial Ballet School St Petersburg and Assistant Ballet Master and Mime on Ballets Russes tours, was the most significant classical teacher of the era. History of Enrico Cecchetti. Online: http://www.cecchettiusa.org/enrico.htm [Extracted 23/2/09].
¹² Ballet Bookshop continued until recently under Ballet Rambert soloist Australian Johnny O’Brien, and is now operated from Hampshire as Dance Books UK Ltd. by critic and writer David Morgan. Online: http://www.dancebooks.co.uk/ [Extracted 24/1/09].
¹³ Haskell, Dancing Around the World 338.
¹⁵ MacDonald, Diaghilev Observed.
British writers dominate in the literature on ballet, doubtless largely due to the surge of English ballet under Ninette DeValois, who danced with the Ballets Russes between 1923 and 1926, and Frederick Ashton,16 who saw Pavlova and the Ballets Russes and was trained by Markova, Dolin and Rambert. British writers all ascribe the ascendancy of the Royal Ballet under De Valois and Ashton to its Ballets Russes origins. For example, John Drummond’s collection of question and answer commentary by Beaumont and performing survivors of the epoch, together with his own valuable input from forty years of arts management was the first significant intellectual study. Drummond, who produced two documentaries on Diaghilev for the BBC in the 1960s, emphasizes the virile masculinity of the epoch and convincingly argues the success of Diaghilev’s autocratic leadership style based on recognising artistic merit and a willingness to trust new ideas and new people. “Diaghilev is for me almost a synonym for artistic authority … Diaghilev came to typify a new figure in the arts, the artistic director”.17

The historian and critic, Lynn Garafola, explores the Ballets Russes epoch in a more modern idiom including the contemporary lexicon of gender and sexuality studies, as well as racial and religious observations. Garafola’s investigations are perhaps the leading contemporary overviews of the epoch. Her candid assertions were sometimes controversial and have brought criticism from traditional quarters. For example, her assertion that Diaghilev was responsible for “dethroning the ballerina”, her focus on homosexuality amongst dancers, and the inaccurate charge that Lifar was “dismissed from his post as Director of the Paris Opera for collaboration with the Nazis” have all brought controversy, but Garafola leads an enthusiastic emerging field of scholastic study.18

In his 2007 study, *A Queer History of the Ballet*, Peter Stoneley examines Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes around aspects of sexuality that are as much to do with audiences and western culture as any analytical introspections of the participants. He concluded that “the extraordinary thing about Diaghilev was that

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16 DeValois and Ashton created Vic-Wells Ballet (1930), changed to Sadler’s Wells (1940), and the Royal Ballet (1946).
17 Drummond, *Speaking of Diaghilev* ix-x.
18 Garafola, Lynn and Nancy Van Norman Baer (Eds.), *The Ballets Russes and Its World*, (Yale: University Press, 1999).
he was perhaps the first grand homosexual who asserted himself and was accepted as such by society”. 19

There is some substantial archival material, which has been consulted for this thesis. Sotheby’s (London) catalogues of important Diaghilev memorabilia were consulted, including the Max Reinhardt Collection, 1969. 20 Reviews of the Genee and Pavlova tours of Australia are mostly recorded in British publications as well as some Australian, and newspapers and journal archives. In 1945, Peter Bellew edited *Pioneering Ballet in Australia*, a kaleidoscope of the brief Hélène Kirsova Company between 1941 and 1944. Since the first visits, J.C. Williamson’s maintained regular programme notes and published an eagerly sought popular monthly magazine, now collector’s items, to boost audiences. (The most comprehensive archival collection of the Pavlova and Ballets Russes tours in Australia was assembled under Dr Michelle Potter at the National Library of Australia.)

In 1977, John Cargher’s *Opera and Ballet in Australia* was the first comprehensive history and intellectual study of the major theatrical arts in Australia from its colonial roots. By combining the two related disciplines into one study, Cargher (1919-2008) painted a rich pastiche of almost two hundred years of theatre possibly unsurpassed in the colonial British Empire. His authoritative commentary, especially in identifying the timely historic nexus between Borovansky and the Australian Ballet and the significant granting of government support, marked the end of cultural cringe in the Australian performing arts. Much loved, Cargher, whose balanced commentary and indefatigable knowledge made him a respected reviewer and critic of opera, music and ballet spanning altogether over forty years, was the first Australian writer to definitively ascribe contemporary Australian excellence to the influence of the Ballets Russes.


Borovansky soloist Frank Salter recorded his insight into the most influential performer and entrepreneur in the Australian trajectory, Czechoslovakian Edouard Borovansky, in *The Man Who Made Australian Ballet*. Early accounts of the Australian Ballet include Ian Brown’s *The Australian Ballet* and David Formby’s *Australian Ballet*, after the style of Keith Monet who photographed Britain’s Royal Ballet. Since the 1970s, various biographies and popular picture books like Patricia Laughlin’s *Marilyn Jones* have been published. The biographies of Robert Helpmann by journalist June Salter, *Helpmann: The Authorised Biography*, and the comprehensive Ph D dissertation by Anne Bemrose, *A Servant of Art: Robert Helpmann in Australia*, serve both to connect the significant Australian

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contribution to British Ballet as well as reinforce Helpmann’s formidable international ranking as an Australian trained artist. His lifetime having spanned almost the entire trajectory that is the subject of this work, it is regrettable that Helpmann did not live to witness Murphy’s *Poppy*.

There are significant photographic archives and publications. Amateur photographer Hugh P. Hall (1920s-1950s) and professional Max Dupain (1930s-1950s) catalogued extensive images of the Ballets Russes tours and the Kirsova and Borovansky companies. Dupain pioneered modernist studies of the dancers near naked in typically Australian sporting, coastal and bush settings, suggesting subliminal connections with the Australian spirit of expression in sport. There are archived delightful images of artists relaxing in Australian homes. These images demonstrate the affection between all artistic participants, and suggest the roots of Australian collaboration. Émigré Walter Stringer (1940s-1990s), who first saw the Ballets Russes as a lad in London, contributed the most prolific photographic collection of all, extending from Borovansky, Ballet Guild, Ballet Victoria, and the Australian Ballet and to the Sydney Dance Company in the 1990s. All are catalogued at the NLA.

The Victorian College of the Arts catalogues the most complete dance library and the University of Adelaide collection warrants mention. Augmented by bequests, including considerable Ballets Russes content, they are a testament to public endearment. International dance magazines such as *Dance and Dancers and Dancing Times* (UK), *Dance Magazine* (USA), and *Dance Australia Magazine*, teaching journals, and visual performance recordings of elite companies and biographical portrayals have promoted public awareness. The NLA collection extends to audiotape interviews, personal manuscripts, theatre programmes and photography. In 2001, scholar and NLA dance and music curator Dr Michelle Potter produced a film study of Borovansky. The National Film and Sound


24 Potter was appointed inaugural curator of dance at the NLA in 2002 and, between 2006-2008, became the third curator of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center.

Archive catalogues limited footage of the Sydney Dance Company, including the important Chesterman Collection captured by amateur Ewan Murray-Will.\textsuperscript{26} Other than popular contemporary articles, there exists little reference to the history of the Sydney Dance Company, about which no significant academic research appears yet to have been undertaken. The field remains entirely uncharted.

Principal references about Cocteau were sourced from \textit{Poppy} the performance DVD,\textsuperscript{27} Cocteau’s own \textit{Le Livre Blanc},\textsuperscript{28} Paris Album 1900-1914,\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Opium The Diary of a Cure},\textsuperscript{30} \textit{The Difficulty of Being},\textsuperscript{31} Elizabeth Sprigge and Jean-Jacques Kihm’s \textit{Jean Cocteau: The Man and the Mirror},\textsuperscript{32} Annie Guedras’ (ed.) \textit{Jean Cocteau Erotic Drawings},\textsuperscript{33} and Edourd Dermitt’s editing of \textit{129 Drawings from “Dessin”}.\textsuperscript{34} Paramount as an intellectual study, with intimate appreciation of the diversity of Cocteau’s talents, is W. D. Ries’ \textit{The Dance Theatre of Jean Cocteau}.\textsuperscript{35} Particular connection with Cocteau’s literary peer Jean Genet is drawn from the fantasy figure of \textit{Querelle de Brest},\textsuperscript{36} who inspired Cocteau as an emerging modern homosexual idiomatic stereotype. Although dance is a kinetic experience for performers, it is largely a visual encounter for audiences whilst still allowing for micro-kinetic involvement. Therefore, images and illustrations are valuable tools of demonstration in this thesis.

This thesis draws on the Sydney Dance Company’s own archives including Australian and international press cuttings, programmes, communications including diplomatic, some personal letters, itineraries, box office plans, posters, and unreleased visual archives held at the company’s studios. Loosely boxed by production name in a dusty room accessed through the male dancers’ change


\textsuperscript{27} SDC, \textit{Poppy}, Film Producer and Director: Philippe Charluet, SBS, 1980.


\textsuperscript{29} ---. \textit{Paris Album 1900-1914} (London: W.H. Allen, 1956).


\textsuperscript{31} ---. \textit{The Difficulty of Being} (New York: Owen, 1967).


\textsuperscript{36} Genet, Jean, \textit{Querelle de Brest} (Paris: Paul Morhlien, 1947).
room, they were made available by Sydney Dance Company Business Manager Janine Kyle, who devotedly compiled the collection over thirty years. Ms Kyle’s intimate knowledge of the company commends her as a prime research asset. Lee Christofis, Dance Curator, and his staff at the NLA, are now cataloguing the collection for the nation.

On a hot sultry day imbued by harbour aromas and the noise of helicopters and ferries, Graeme Murphy kindly consented to an audio taped interview in his office at Walsh Bay. The company at class was loudly audible below. The interview was taped and transcribed, and he agreed to have the transcript included as an appendix to this thesis. Murphy participated gregariously and generously. Throughout, he emphasised the importance of collaboration, defining his role as: “harnessing the collaborative process of interactions between the extreme emotions of human behaviour” that often results in, “something that is shatteringly exciting, different and shocking, which is part of the theatrical process”. Enthusiastic to identify similarities between the Ballets Russes and his own company, he cites the “discovering of diverse talents and bringing them into the dance camp” as parallels. He likes to agree with Cargher that he had “returned to the showmanship of Diaghilev”. Murphy underlines that: “Poppy was the innovation – that triggered all the other innovations … it paid off in spades … [I] lived the role”38. This will be elaborated in Chapter Three.

Aligning with Diaghilev’s paramount principle that a sound classical training is essential, Murphy emphasises the unrelenting daily drilling by Australian Ballet trained Janet Vernon that equips his dancers to perform whatever style is required. Murphy blends different body shapes in contrast to the strict uniform composition of classical constructs. Just as Diaghilev demonstrated, Murphy explained that nothing is taboo about the essential themes of androgyny and sexuality in his repertoire.

This thesis also highlights some other Ballets Russes creations reproduced by Murphy. Murphy cites Daphnis and Chloé (1980), a personal favourite, as: “a

37 Appendix One.
38 Graeme Murphy, audiotape interview, 16/2/07.
direct attempt to evoke the Diaghilev era and the creativity of the era”. The sexually explicit *Late Afternoon of a Faun* (1987) followed. Murphy drew psychodramatic connections between *Poppy* and *After Venice* (1984), and explained that creating *Shades of Gray* (2004), from Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*, proved painful because he felt it was misunderstood when reviewed unfavourably by some critics. These complex creations demonstrate the connection with the Ballets Russes.

It is essential to understand Diaghilev’s flamboyant figure as fibulateur of the exotic and erotic, and outright manipulator, in order to recognize his genius as impresario and master collaborator. Diaghilev was unabashed about displaying his homosexuality and intimacies with his male principals, whom he ruthlessly exploited for commercial gain. His twenty-year collaboration included many open homosexuals. This thesis emphasizes this element as integral to the artistic success of the epoch.

The five-year phenomenon of the Ballets Russes in Australia has produced an independent Australian dance theatre of world standing. Playwright David Williamson, who lamented that the attitude of the patronising elite in 1970s Australia was, “the view that the job of the arts was to lift the uneducated public out of their bestial state”, also contended: “Australians have always taken overseas trends and interpreted them in their own way”. A product himself of the exciting 1960s and 1970s, Murphy continued the hierarchy-free Borovansky and Ballet Club traditions of drawing grassroots audiences and enticing wide collaboration. Murphy has demonstrated that Australian trained dancers can perform all modes of choreography, and that Australian artists can produce all forms of innovative representation, thus expanding the genre. The Dionysian spirit of sensuality evoked by the original Ballets Russes, and implicit in the creativity of Cocteau, is demonstrably evident in Murphy’s own outré personality and creativity. *Poppy* demonstrates this link by evoking the style and themes of the earlier period.

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39 Ibid.
Poppy instantly established Murphy’s career, setting a course for the Sydney Dance Company under his direction. Specific themes and imagery from ancient mythology, exotic cultural diversities, sexual representations without taboo, international choreographic influences notably all oriental stylisations, musical experimentation, and story-lines that explain contemporary society however confronting, are all methodologies inspired by the Ballets Russes. Whilst it is recommended to examine all these collaborative influences, this immense task is not within the scope of this thesis.

Prolific collaboration extending to choreographic fusion, diverse musical composition, lighting, art design, costuming and the extensive and even bizarre use of textiles, innovative prop initiatives, merging performance genres even to vaudeville, the circus, and pop, historical Australian representations, and excursions into grand opera all distinguish the Sydney Dance Company from other performing companies. Like Diaghilev, Murphy has made stars of emerging talent, like Stephen Page (later to direct Bangarra Aboriginal Dance Company, 1991-) and Paul Mercurio.

Poppy is a psycho-biographical narrative of the life of Jean Cocteau. Cocteau spearheaded the forward thrust of the Ballets Russes out of classical re-interpretation into artistic modernism, the leading exponent of the mouvement nouveau. Together with Bronislava Nijinska’s complex new choreographies, Cocteau picked up Diaghilev’s mantle of succès des scandals to dramatise themes of sexuality and classless play in the new genre of the short performative narrative. The comprehensive medium was modernism. Having first established the ‘Group of Six’ School of formative musical artists after the First World War (1914-1918), Cocteau engaged his friends Picasso, Matisse, Poulenc, Milhaud and Proust in ambitious, groundbreaking collaborations. Poppy expresses Murphy’s own particular appreciation of Cocteau, his personal muse and shadow, and his specific importance to the Ballets Russes.

This thesis aims to portray Murphy in the spirit of Diaghilev. Murphy leads with contemporary expressions of sexuality. Most existing literature speaks vaguely about themes of sexuality in the early Ballets Russes repertoire, mentioning
abstract visualisations with measured temerity. Authors use coy euphemisms, no matter the public scandal that erupted at performances. For example, when describing the vivid and crucial masturbation scene with a scarf left by the handmaidens in *L’Après Midi d’un Faun*, Beaumont wrote carefully of “the questionable character of Nijinsky’s movements and poses”, and noted cautiously, “the symbolism was plain … the implication was obvious”.41

No matter how prurient for some at the time, open discussion of themes of sexuality cannot be omitted today. Diaghilev, who consulted Oscar Wilde in exile in France, was an unapologetic homosexual of the outré Wildean genre. Diaghilev charged his principal protégés and lovers, Vaslav Nijinsky, Leonide Massine, and Serge Lifar, with the task of creating overtly masculine leading roles and revolutionary choreographies. Audiences eagerly paid to view sexually arousing displays of physicality, the beautiful human form and erotic portrayals of sexuality including the deviant, of which publicly at least, they behaved as if in denial. Once the initial furore subsided, there was comfort in collective attendance and the artistry quickly surmounted criticism. Diaghilev set out unabashedly to mount revolutionary sexual narratives ranging from curious and teasing representations of androgyny to all imaginable and fantastic sexual power plays and homoerotica. This was his great artistic sexual success des scandals, and the public could not get its fill.

The argument of this thesis is that Murphy demonstrates the connection with the original Ballets Russes in *Poppy*. Moreover, *Poppy* is Murphy’s keystone creation. In order to develop my argument, Chapter One illustrates the personality of Diaghilev and the key innovations of the original Ballets Russes. Chapter Two demonstrates how the Ballets Russes influenced the development of dance in Australia and how this led to the thirty-year artistic leadership of Graeme Murphy at the Sydney Dance Company. Chapter Three discusses *Poppy*, its inspiration, the interpretations Murphy identifies, and the performance with specific comparisons to the Ballets Russes.

Chapter One: The Diaghilev Epoch, 1909-1929.

2. Sergei Diaghilev.

The argument of this chapter is that the Diaghilev Ballets Russes was the fundamental influence on ballet and, specifically the Sydney Dance Company, in Australia today. The evidence for this argument is that the majority of contributors to the development of Australian dance theatre can be traced via the revival Ballet Russes companies (1936-1940) and, therefore, to the original Diaghilev epoch (1909-1929). The epoch is conventionally categorized into three periods, Fokine/Nijinsky/the Paris ballets (1909-1914), principal/choreographer Massine (1915-1921), and Regisseur Grigoriev administration/principal Lifar (1922-1929).

Russian Sergei Diaghilev (1872-1929), born to a middle class family, studied law, loved painting, singing and music and aspired to become a composer. He rose to lead an artistic circle of vigorous decadents in St Petersburg known as The Pickwickians, and later the progressive art journal Mir Iskusstva (The World of Art 1899-1904), travelling extensively to galleries throughout Russia.

There was nothing of the clique about [Mir Iskusstva] … the friends’ desisted “ists” and “isms”, considering such things artistic ostentation and vulgarity. They simply strove on
behalf of every manifestation of the original and creative in art, wherever it was to be found, whether amongst advanced “moderns” or in established classics. On the other hand, anything they considered devoid of talent, insincere, lacking in artistic truth, they severely condemned. Their independence and outspokenness simply had no limits … their brief, incisive, sometimes mercilessly frank criticisms produced a sensation in art circles.42

As adviser to the Imperial Theatres in Moscow, Diaghilev produced operas and ballets, and organized the 1905 St Petersburg exhibition of Russian art as well as many foreign exhibitions, including Paris in 1906.43 Diaghilev’s particular skill was sourcing talent and organizing artistic collaboration. Lieven wrote: “He knew how to will a thing, and he knew how to carry his will into practice”.44

After a season of Russian concerts featuring composers Glinka, Borodin, and Mussorgsky, in Paris in 1907, Diaghilev mounted Mussorgsky’s spectacular imperial opera *Boris Godunov* in Paris, in 1908. “I had already presented Russian painting, Russian music, Russian Opera in Paris, and from opera to ballet was but a step. Ballet contained in itself all these other activities”45. Urged on by designer Alexander Benois, he agreed to return next year with a program of ballet.46 Diaghilev’s mission was to reveal Russia to Russia and then, Russia and the exotic Russo-Oriental cultures, to the world. “Diaghilev had become Russia’s cultural ambassador”.47 Diaghilev was a showman entrepreneur, a poseur, and a frustrated artist with impeccable taste and timing, who had an eye for the new and exciting. In ‘European’ St Petersburg, Diaghilev moved in a permissive privileged ruling class and enjoyed financial patronage from the Tsar.

In May 1909, he opened his Saison des Ballets Russes with Mikhail Fokine, choreographer and ballet master from the Imperial Maryinsky Theatre in St Petersburg, at the huge Théâtre du Chatelet. “The Parisians thought so poorly of ballet, they were not allowed to use the normal Opera house”.48 The small

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43 *Ibid* 45. Twelve halls of the Salon D’Automne in Paris were filled with Russian pictures.
44 *Ibid* 32.
46 Haskell, *Diaghilev: His Artistic and Private Life* 205.
48 St Petersburg Russia. DenRus Ltd. Maryinsky Theatre, 1, Teatralnaya Square St Petersburg, 190000. Online: [http://www.denrus.ru/theaters/mussorgsky-theater.html](http://www.denrus.ru/theaters/mussorgsky-theater.html) [Extracted 20/10/06].
company practised in the old upstairs attic in what was “an old barrack of a theatre, used to blood-and-thunder melodrama and orange eating, villain-hissing audiences”. Fokine was a lyrical romanticist who shared Diaghilev’s ambitions to break from the constraints of the traditional Russian School. Diaghilev intended to blast Parisian perceptions of ballet as feminine Rococo chocolate-box tableau through dominant displays of Russian masculinity and vibrant Russian folklore. Aiming at trendsetters in the fashion capital, Diaghilev spared no expense in restoring the auditorium to the highest opulence. Almost bankrupt before opening, the venture was saved by banker Baron de Rothschild. Orchestrating a sensation, Diaghilev invited fifty-two of the top actresses in Paris to opening night. In fact, “Le tout Paris”, including government ministers and foreign ambassadors, high society and couturiers flocked to the triumph: “a revolution had begun in dance theatre and even in aesthetics … after the second ballet, the premiere of Polovstian Dances from the opera Prince Igor, the audience charged backstage”.  

Ballet had declined in the West, without even a ballet school in Paris. Male roles were played by women *en travestie*. “In the shape in which Diaghilev presented it, as an independent, self-contained art, ballet was a striking novelty … a strange resurrection of something long since defunct and forgotten”. Diaghilev sought mentoring from Wilde in exile in his aim to resurrect sensuality and the ancient mystique of dramatic theatre. Lieven believed that:

> The secret has been lost on the Western stage, where everything is technique, everything is consciousness, everything is artificiality, and from which have gradually disappeared the mysterious charm of self-oblivion, the great Dionysiac intoxication, the driving force of art.

Influential backers included Henri de Rothschild and Coco Chanel, supported by author and socialite Misia Sert. Because the Ballets Russes was at first considered outré, funding was precarious and the company was not registered until 1911.

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49 Haskell, *Diaghilev: His Artistic and Private Life* 208-209.
Impresario Diaghilev had a genius for intellectual snobbery that lifted the image of his Company but, “there was not a hint of it in the creation of the ballets themselves”, which won universal appeal.

The first season of the Diaghilev Ballet must be commemorated in letters of gold in the annals of Russian Ballet. To say that it was successful is to say nothing. It was a revelation, a major event in the artistic life of Paris.  

The fifty-five superlatively trained dancers appropriated from the Imperial Ballet at the Maryinsky Theatre in St Petersburg, included Anna Pavlova, Vaslav Nijinsky, Thamar Karsavina, Mathilde Kschessinska, Olga Preobrazhenskaya, Olga Spesivtseva, Ida Rubentstein, Lydia Lopokova, Nikolai and Sergei Legat, and Adolph Bolm. Only Pavlova had previously toured outside Russia. Although strictly conventional, “the Maryinsky Theatre was the possessor of a very prestigious succession of teachers and pupils who perpetrated a cycle of ever-increasing talent”. After much manipulation, Diaghilev enticed almost all of the leading artists of the Maryinsky Ballet to abandon the Company to join him. Lieven wrote: “It was necessary … to sever their connection with Russia and create their art outside its borders”.

As choreographer, Fokine “relaxed the corps, stressed strong male dancing, liberated the girls from their stiff, unwieldy costumes … and dreamed of allying dance with original music and décor”. Fokine prioritised style and romantic artistic expression over narrative and character, because he was, as Potter wrote: “disenchanted with the way ballet had become an excuse for virtuosity and with the fact that music and costumes had begun to bear very little relationship to the subject matter of the performance”.  

54 St Petersburg Russia, DenRus Ltd.
55 The Maryinsky Theatre accentuated the romantic works and brought out individualised dancing style in mime and special divertissements around narratives, as early as the Napoleonic Wars. Its peak (1890-1900) was ruled by the autocratic choreographer Marius Petipa (1822-1910), who produced The Sleeping Beauty, Swan Lake and Raymonda, most notably, from over fifty works created between 1862 and 1903.
56 St Petersburg Russia, DenRus Ltd.
57 Lieven, The Birth of the Ballets Russes 22.
58 St Petersburg Russia, DenRus Ltd.
Preferring to work in the abstract, Fokine invoked a genre of plotless choreography, notably commencing with Les Sylphides (1909), an artistic tableau in the romantic genre. Originally conceived in St Petersburg as Rêverie Romantique: Ballet sur la musique de Chopin, or Chopiniana, it highlighted masculine form within a feminine, ethereal, nocturnal scenario that implied androgy. Setting aside the traditional three-act didactic canon, Fokine aspired to ballet as an art form for the sake of art, fusing a collaboration of drama, music and painting. Andros believes Fokine formularised choreography thus, “Not to make combinations of ready made steps. Dancing serves as an expression of its dramatic action. Dancers can and should be expressive from head to foot. All the arts should have complete equality”.60

As Carroll has put it, Diaghilev believed the perfect ballet was:

A ‘total’ work of art, one in which dance, music, dramaturgy and décor would combine to create a spectacle greater than the sum of its parts. Diaghilev’s artistic vision, which has its origins in the Wagnerian ideal of gesamtkunstwerk, became the hallmark of the company.61

Described by Propert as, “experienced and audacious”,62 autocratic Diaghilev was also counsellor, inspiring an unprecedented degree of artistic freedom, especially innovative musical composition. Inspired by Richard Wagner, especially Tristan und Isolde (1865), he encouraged modern dissonant composition. The initial repertoires were drawn from Russian folklore and myth, however, Diaghilev generally disliked ballets with a categorical theme, not caring whether the story made sense or was understandable. He favoured the inconclusive, the new, the sensational, and especially scandal. Lieven noted:

In painting his preference was for colour … in music he despised form … what mattered to him was the splash of sound … a succession even of disconnected things satisfied him. The theme, that is, the scenic form of a ballet, was of no importance to him63.

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63 Leiven, The Birth of the Ballets Russes 181.
The first season opened with Fokine’s *Le Pavillon d’Armide*, billing principals Vaslav Nijinsky, “famous for his strength, agility and exceptional skill in partnering”,64 and technically brilliant Maryinsky ballerina Tamara Karsarvina. It not only spectacularly demonstrated a diverse artistic collaboration but also Fokine’s innovative choreographic talents.

Although criticised as not representative enough of Russian folklore, “Diaghilev and his Company became the rage of Paris and the whole season was an indisputable triumph”.65 Cocteau, the darling gay multi-talented proselyte of all that was new and confronting in Parisien art, traipsed at Diaghilev’s feet, anxious for inclusion. Soon, he was designing programs and posters for the company in *mouvement nouveau* style. As Cocteau said, “in effect, I was bowed into the theatre with the Ballets Russes of Serge Diaghilev, which turned everything [in Paris] upside down and brought to this cosmopolitan world such spectacles of luxury and violence that I never had imagined existed”.66

But on returning to Russia, the exuberance of the dancers fell somewhat flat. The traditionalists were unhappy at Diaghilev’s choice of repertoire. Incensed, the Tsar instructed embassies not to support Diaghilev’s enterprise. However, Paris was in a frenzy: the Ballets Russes was high fashion. The following 1910 season, at first precariously funded, also proved a huge financial success.

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In Fokine’s *Le Spectre de la Rose*, the unique Nijinsky, “tartar Prince of dance”, 67 performed extraordinary feats in a sensationally androgynous role. In 1916, Van Vechton wrote, “his dancing has the unbroken quality of music, the balance of great painting, the meaning of fine literature, and the emotion inherent in all these arts”68. In Carl Weber’s score, *Invitation to the Dance*, a becalming waltz suddenly alters to “an exceptional whirl of rhythm”, audibly imaging the intended obscuration of gender.69 Writer Henri Gauthier-Villars, (‘Monsieur Willy’), first husband of Colette, recorded:

> When Nijinsky took off so slowly and elegantly, describing a trajectory of four and one half metres and landing noiselessly in the wings, an incredulous “Ah!” burst from the ladies … Since the Romantic period it had been the women, the Muse, the diva, the ballerina who had been worshipped. To admire a man for his grace and beauty was unheard-of.70

At the beginning of just eleven minutes, the androgynous spectre of a rose in the muscular figure of Nijinsky, “bare arms and neck [and] dressed in rose-coloured tights and a cap and tunic of rose petals”, back to the audience, descended with a giant leap to the feet of a young girl asleep in her bedroom chair. Beaumont recalled: “a rose coloured flash … as though a rose petal had been caught up by a night breeze and wafted through” open French doors.71 Clutching a rose carried from the Ball, she fantasizes her desires. Athletic Nijinsky, as the ephemeral *Rose*, who dramatically exits seemingly to fly rather than to leap, is in truth a figure of narcissism and unobtainable. Deliberately rounding the arm positions of *La Rose* to portray a lack of masculinity, Fokine intended that, “in no circumstances, is Nijinsky to be ‘a cavalier” or a typical ‘ballerina’s partner”. 72

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67 Rodin Art, Nijinsky. Online: [http://www.rodin-art.com/show.php?type=a&item=21&title=NIJINSKY+%&plasterheight=34+++%28+13+3%2F8%5C%22%29&bronzeheight=31+++%28+12+1%2F8%5C%22%29](http://www.rodin-art.com/show.php?type=a&item=21&title=NIJINSKY%20+%&plasterheight=34+++%28+13+3%2F8%5C%22%29&bronzeheight=31+++%28+12+1%2F8%5C%22%29) [Extracted 23/9/07].


5. Nijinsky and Karsarvina in *Le Spectre de la Rose*, 1909. Caricatures by Cocteau, and others, of *La Rose* became an icon of homoerotica in albums seemingly identified with the image.\(^{73}\)

6. Nijinsky, sketched to illustrate his extraordinary physique, deliberately developed his prominent quadriceps to perform a sensational suspended ‘ballon’. He could execute an *entrechat-dix*.


*La Rose* was the first modern sexual fantasy, “a complete realisation of [rose coloured dreams] which fill the minds of poetic youth on moonlight nights in summer”.\(^{74}\) Despite Nijinsky’s exhaustion as he collapsed offstage into towels held by his dresser, on occasions so great was the applause that Diaghilev uncompromisingly ordered the entire ballet repeated.

The prevailing western fashion for Orientalism and its “cachet for homosexuals” inspired a genre of explicit psychosexual portrayals around themes of depravity and seduction, with the Russo-Orientalist *Sheherazade* (Fokine/Rimsky-Korsakov) staging achieving the greatest popularity. It depicted the interracial power play between the narcissistic androgynous Golden slave (Nijinsky), and his homosexual encounters, and the amorous concubine Princess Zobeide (Rubenstein). Stonely describes images of Nijinsky as illustrating “a curious mix of elements, in that the body is clearly male [but] with its curving lines – is feminine”.\(^{75}\) Their destiny to be slaughtered by soldiers of the jealous Shah was considered savage: the Princess suicides. Buckle wrote: “*Sheherazade* had the

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\(^{73}\) Ibid 75.


\(^{75}\) Stoneley, *A Queer History of the Ballet* 71.
Russian ballet’s most popular elements: sex, violence, and magnificent design … the effect of its Bakst designs would be felt for the next decade”.  

Six spectacular ballets inspired by the Russian tradition of the Orient were performed in Paris between 1909 and 1912. Russian culture, significantly literature and music, had its own connection with the Orient that emphasized ethnic and sexual stereotypes in settings of opulence and pomp, and this was imagery Bakst and Benois accentuated with lavish gender-undefined costumes and decors of vivid jewel colours. *Cléopatra* and *L'Oiseau de Feu* (1909, Fokine) and *Les Orientales* or *Thais* (1910), *Le Dieu Bleu* (1912, Fokine and Cocteau), *Thamar* (1912, Fokine, inspired by writer Mikhail Lermontov), *Polovstian Dances* (Fokine) from the Opera *Prince Igor*, and *Le Coq D’Or* (1912), all featured Nijinsky. They depicted “a wild and erotic East — passionate, sensuous, and violent. The impact of the Eastern ballets on the Parisian public swept waves of Orientalism throughout the world of fashion and art”77.

*Petrushka* (1911), a stark portrayal of traditional Russian psyche and class archetypes, shocked. It was regarded as an “example of Russian vital


barbarism”.\textsuperscript{78} It was the first choreographic “grotesque”, playing with life, death, fantasy and reality (who is real and who is not) in a fairground setting encasing a stage play around the central play of a maltreated puppet made of straw, who comes to life and evokes a soul.\textsuperscript{79} The parody is that the puppet has the passion and capacity to love but torturously yearns for an unattainable human life. Slaughtered and, thus, denied his desires, \textit{Petrushka} presents a psychic theme re-invented over and over in future creations. In \textit{Poppy}, Murphy makes much use of this concept of layering to illustrate contradiction and paradox.

\textit{Petrushka} (Fokine/Nijinsky) was created as a collaboration with Stravinsky’s jarring score, in which \textit{Petrushka} the puppet dances knees and feet turned in – stylistically typical of Indian and Eastern Oriental dance which was previously discordant to Western constructs.

The disconnected rhythms change “without plausible necessity [which] amounts to thrusting a spoke in the dancer’s wheel”.\textsuperscript{80} Stravinsky aimed to compose a ballet for piano music adapted from Russian folk songs. In 1913, members of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra derided the score, describing it as “brittle, caustic, and at times even, grotesque”, including polytonal devices, as “schmutzige” (dirty)

\textsuperscript{78} “Early Twentieth Century Russian Drama”. Online: http://max.mmlc.northwestern.edu/~mdenner/Drama/plays/petrushka/1petrushka.html [Extracted 13/11/07].

\textsuperscript{79} Leiven, \textit{The Birth of the Ballets Russes} 214.

Musik. Challenged by a critic, “and it was to hear this that you invited us?” A delighted Diaghilev retorted, “Exactly!”81 Criticisms exposed class divisions, which Diaghilev dealt with artistically.

In 1911, Diaghilev had manipulated the termination of Vaslav Nijinsky from the Imperial Ballet by putting him up to appearing before the Royal family without an athletic support, ending his career in Russia forever. Diaghilev openly conducted a homosexual affair with Nijinsky during his Paris seasons.82 Breaking off intimacy with the sculptor Rodin, Diaghilev lured Nijinsky from the companionship of Prince Paul Dimitrievitch. Later, in 1914, after Nijinsky’s resignation as the result of a nervous breakdown and curious marriage to dancer Romola DePulszky, Diaghilev was in sexual relationships with successive principal danseurs Anton Dolin, Serge Lifar and Leonide Massine, as well as his assistant Boris Kochno. These were the few young men “whom he believed to have special talent, [who] he loved and promoted … he wished to create gods, and more than once he nearly succeeded”.83 In his “kingdom of boys”, they were love affairs that were openly known, even flaunted. Diaghilev successfully built his repertoire around talented “golden boys … plucked from oblivion [and] groomed for stardom”, ensuring that they attain their star status by way of “pre-eminent role[s] within its repertory of a new kind of hero”.84

Popular contemporary dancer Isadora Duncan, who had quietly created a revolution in movement, had influenced Diaghilev, Fokine, and Nijinsky, who took classes with her in Paris. There were identifiable similarities with Duncan in Fokine’s free flowing choreographies. As Diaghilev wrote: “Artists flocked around her … Fokine had been madly influenced by Duncan in all his creativity”85 Duncan, perhaps forerunner to Martha Graham, never shocked with her gentle displays of erotic representation, however, but pleased audiences. In fact, in lyrical works, Fokine maintained a gentle flowing unbroken choreography

83 Spencer and Dyer, *The World of Serge Diaghilev* 35.
85 Haskell citing Diaghilev, *Diaghilev His Artistic and Private Life* 190.
that always adhered to classical steps and is especially most pleasantly identifiable in the choreographies of Frederick Ashton for Sadler’s Wells and the Royal Ballet.\textsuperscript{86} This is significant because of Ashton’s influence on Australians in English ballet. In Act Two of Poppy, Murphy draws from Duncan, and therefore, Fokine, with his own hallmark stylisations of flow and gentle fusion techniques. Murphy’s \textit{Daphnis and Chloë} is remarkably reminiscent of both Fokine and Ashton, particularly Ashton’s revised \textit{Sylvia} (Delibes), 1952.

In Paris, in 1912, Diaghilev pushed to “establish Nijinsky as a great choreographer”.\textsuperscript{87} Nijinsky debuted as a choreographer/dancer in the title role of \textit{L’Apres-Midi d’un Faune}. With extraordinary mimicry skills, he performed a primal physicality of overt voyeurism, sexual primitivism, and autoeroticism on figures drawn from ancient concepts of conventional beauty.\textsuperscript{88} These expressive sexual ambiguities were often compared with the work of the Expressionists, like Kandinsky. This is consistent with the work of Duncan, who influenced Nijinsky. Breaking with all precedent, \textit{L’Apres-Midi d’un Faune} (after the poem by Stephane Mallarme and choreographed to the modernist composition by Claude Debussy) caused the notorious success de scandale that Diaghilev anticipated. The performance had brought the police to the theatre. Lydia Sokolova described Nijinsky as thrilling.

Although his movements were absolutely restrained, they were virile and powerful and the manner in which he caressed and carried the nymph’s veil was so animal that one expected to see him run up the side of the hill with it in his mouth. There was an unforgettable moment just before his final amorous descent upon the scarf when he knelt on one leg on top of the hill; with his other leg stretched out behind him. Suddenly he threw back his head, opened his mouth and silently laughed. It was superb acting.\textsuperscript{89}

It made for excellent box-office takings. When Gaston Calmette, editor of \textit{Le Figaro}, wrote: "We have had a faun, incontinent, with vile movements of erotic

\textsuperscript{86} Voice of Dance, Sir Frederick Ashton, “Ashton (1904-1988) is the choreographer who most fully defined British ballet in the twentieth century”. Online: \url{http://www.voiceofdance.com/v1/listing.cfm/17753//Sir-Frederick-Ashton.html} [Extracted 21/2/09].
\textsuperscript{87} Spencer and Dyer, \textit{The World of Serge Diaghilev} 78.
\textsuperscript{88} Nijinsky’s family were circus performers in the tradition of the Italian Harlequinade and the Comedia del Arte, affording indispensable training in acting and mime.
\textsuperscript{89} Stage Agent. Online: \url{http://www.stageagent.com/shows.php?id=1400} [Extracted 21/8/06].
bestiality and gestures of heavy shamelessness", Rodin and all advanced French artistic opinion rallied to Diaghilev’s side. Rodin, who regularly attempted to sculpt the image of Nijinsky performing, declared in reply, “Nothing could be more striking than the impulse with which, at the climax, he lies face down on the secreted veil, kissing it and hugging it to him with passionate abandon”.

Not only did the explicit sexuality create a furore, but also the choreography that rejected classical formalism was revolutionarily geometrical. Feet were “turned in”, in radical opposition to the rule of the classical academy en déhors, a combination of static poses in disjointed two-dimensional effect. Exceptionally difficult to master on exposed heel to toe, it necessitated repeated, painful rehearsals. Haskell detailed the steps intentionally representative of a Grecian landscape bas-relief,

The track consisted of a single straight line bounded by the wings on either side. Faun and nymphs moved backwards in profile on that line, very like an animated frieze formed of figures inspired by the decoration of antique Greek vases. Contrary however … there were no poses or movements in which one leg was raised. The dancers remained “attached” to the ground, never rising in the air and always progressing by a series of half walking, half gliding movements, the heel of the rear foot being gradually raised and the foot passed forward

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90 Buckle, L’Apres-Midi d’un Faune Vaslav Nijinsky – 1912 Thirty-Three Photographs by Baron Adolf de Meyer (New York: Dance Horizons, 1983) 5. To Calmette, whose paper campaigned against the ballet, Nijinsky’s dance was “the too-expressive pantomime of the body of an ill-made beast, hideous, from the front, and even more hideous in profile.”

likewise, and so on; a change of course was achieved by a sudden half-turn of the feet and body to right or left. Jennifer Dunning suggests Duncan’s influence on Nijinsky can be identified here because he instinctively sought “choreographic method rather than style, [subordinating] expressive movement and gesture to pure movement”. Marcel Proust said: “Nijinsky isolated body parts, giving each an expressive function, though nonliterally so, in an expressive whole. It was … a step toward the abstraction that was to characterize twentieth century modernism”. Nijinsky, who had studied notation since the Maryinsky School, recorded the choreography in 1915. Not only was this historically significant, but he also devised specific symbols for body shapes.

Then, at the premiere of Le Sacre du Printemps (subtitled Pictures from Pagan Russia) at the Theatre de Champs-Elysees in Paris, in 1913, the audience howled over the music and rioted before Diaghilev ordered the house lights flashed. Haskell wrote, “The smart crowd behaved like hooligans … Stravinsky, in the wings, hung on to the frantic Nijinsky’s coat collar to prevent him rushing on to the stage”. Stravinsky fled the theatre in fear mid-performance. The police arrived as the audience fought in the auditorium and on the streets at what many termed barbarism. Thomas Kelly wrote: “The pagans on stage made pagans of the audience … [in] the dance of the most primitive men [in] a biological ballet”, outrageous revealing costumes and scandalous sexual rites. Stravinsky’s unpredictable churning and clamorous score was described as “musical primitivism, dissonant (polychord punctuated by French horns), angular, jarring

94 Proust cited in Ibid 33.
95 Guest, Anne Hutchinson, Choreographics: a comparison of dance notation systems from the fifteenth century to the present (London: Routledge, 1989) 117-130.
96 Paul John-Ramos, “Stravinsky’s Le Sacre at 90”, Classical Net. Online: http://www.classical.net/music/comp.lst/works/stravinsky/lesacre90.html [Extracted 21/8/06]. Audiences may have been caught off-guard by Le Sacre's uninhibited passion and violence, but it certainly fitted the mood of its era: Europe was caught up in nationalistic frenzies, driving herself to the brink of World War I; the continent was plagued by widespread depression; and the basic values of western society, amidst such pains, were being heavily questioned by the intelligentsia. When Le Sacre is viewed in the social context from which it was born, there is good reason for the rage and angst that Stravinsky conveys.
97 Haskell, Diaghilev His Artistic and Private Life 243.


Dancer Marie Rambert recalled the shock of the original collaboration:

When Stravinsky first came to one of our rehearsals [he] proceeded to play twice as fast as we had been doing it, and twice as fast as we could possibly dance. He stamped his feet on the floor and banged his fist on the piano and sang and shouted, all to give us the impression of the rhythms of the music and the colour of the orchestra.

To the young Cocteau, who was in the audience, the “hostility shown by the public confirm[ed] his notion that creativity can be non-conformist”. Diaghilev’s famous command to Cocteau: “Étonne-Moi!” (Surprise me!) gave Cocteau’s life “a goal and his work motivation”. After dinner together with Stravinsky, Diaghilev whisked Cocteau back to his hotel for the start of expansive collaborations between them. The first was the experimental modernist Parade (1917), in collaboration with Satie (who described Cocteau as “the idea’s man”), Picasso, Apollinaire, Ansermet, and choreographed by Massine, who was influenced by modernist art from Picasso to Chagall. Described in the programme

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99 Diaghilev cited in Buckle, Diaghilev 255.

100 Rambert cited in Buckle, Diaghilev 243.


notes by Apollinaire as “a kind of surrealism”, the music caused a riot and Satie was jailed. Massine became a prolific modernist choreographer, evincing rich symbioses from the literary and theatrical works of Boccaccio, Goldini, Poe, Baudelaire, Cocteau, Valery and Thomas Mann. In 1933, Massine caused a furore by challenging the musical establishment with his triumphant choreographic variations to canonical symphonies, like *Les Presages* to Tchaikovsky’s Symphony Number Five and *Choréartium* to Brahm’s Symphony Number Four.

In 1911, the Ballets Russes toured London under the banner of The Imperial Russian Ballet, as a showpiece for King George V’s Coronation. King George and Queen Mary approved. Aristocratic devotees, including the influential friend of Diaghilev the Marchioness of Ripon, feted the dancers, affording extensive international publicity and financial support. Modern writers, including T. S. Eliot attended. “The demand for seats has probably exceeded anything ever experienced by any theatrical management anywhere in the world”. The press declared the tour “a sensation”, the *Daily Mail* reporting,

> The sylphs and light-footed fauns have come at last to London … the spectacle which the Russians provide at Covent Garden, where the ballet, delight of our grandfathers, had fallen on degenerate days, is little less than a revelation. [Nijinsky] seems half bird, half boy. [Of *Le Pavillon d’Armide*] the theme and spectacle would have enchanted Aubrey Beardsley.

British ballet seemed inconsequential by comparison. Although the subsequent 1913 London season saw none of the Paris controversy and the 1916 New York tour was somewhat misconceived and overshadowed by personal jealousy, the overwhelming successes of revolutionary ballets and his strategy of scandal convinced Diaghilev he was right. Diaghilev mused at what he envisaged as “the necessity for change … When I am accused of going to the Left it is a great compliment”.

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104 Covent Garden Archives cited in MacDonald, *Diaghilev Observed* 36.
106 Diaghilev cited in Haskell, *Diaghilev His Artistic and Private Life* 287.
And, for the first time in the West, the image of the male dancer dominated and even set trends.

From the androgynies of *Le Spectre de la Rose* (1911) and *L’Apres-Midi d’un Faune* (1912) to the deco gods of *La Chatte* (1927), *Appollon Musagete* (1928), and *Prodigal Son* (1929), Diaghilev’s heroes traced a spectrum of male roles that transcended conventions of gender while presenting the male body in a way that was frankly erotic. Ballet after ballet celebrated its physique, dramatised its athletic prowess, and paraded its sexual availability.\(^\text{107}\)

Diaghilev presented the homosexual male as a sexually powerful physique. As Stoneley wrote:

> Within a few short years, Diaghilev had transformed the ballet from a spectacle that focussed on the female body to one that focussed on the man … a muscular man with an astonishing, explosive energy … an implicit liberation from the idea of the homosexual as a singular sexological type.\(^\text{108}\)

But, now, the emphasis on the femme fatale and the deadly seductress implied an anti-female bias. In this sexually equaniminous way, there is necessarily implied

\(^{107}\) Garafolo, “Reconfiguring the Sexes”, in Garafolo and Van Norman Baer (Eds.), *The Ballets Russes and Its World* 246.

the ambivalent archetype of the androgyne that is neither. Diaghilev’s many androgynes were overt physical and sexual male images, which changed the perceived stereotype of the homosexual from feminine to masculine. Later, “with [Sergei] Lifar, a charismatic, handsome, and excitingly virile athlete who drew huge feminine appeal, he revealed the homosexual as an openly gay man”, who might co-exist unthreateningly with either gender. In *Poppy*, the transsexual gymnast Babette, drawn from real-life Paris of the era, a man who pantomimes women, is exactly this. Androgynes, after the mythical Hermes, and by extension, transsexuals, mischievously played the role of trickster with success. As Garafola wrote,

Diaghilev’s sexual heroes of the 1930’s wore their sexual plumage like peacocks. The body was not only bared but its erogenous zones were explicitly sexualised. Although the display might be regarded as “feminine”, the body itself – hard, muscular, athletic was that of a sexually active, “virile” male.

Diaghilev exploited this imagery by gender non-specific costuming in his erotic Russo-Oriental productions, as well as modern (pre-metrosexual) role-plays in *Le Train Bleu* and *Les Biches*. The London Chelsea and Bloomsbury sets, Frederick Ashton, Cecil Beaton and Constant Lambert flocked after the Ballets Russes. The sexual frisson arising from the frenzy brought Beaton to exclaim that Diaghilev had turned the city of Paris into “a seraglio”, an inspiring term since no producer had so boldly revolutionised theatrical production since Mozart.

Choreographer Bronislava Nijinska, sister of Vaslav, was the female exception to the male show. Her collaboration with Cocteau and Coco Chanel, *Le Train Blue* (1924), was described as “the most modern of Diaghilev’s productions”. Her choreography mapped independent women who established their sexuality alongside the sexually ambiguous masculine idol Anton Dolin. Establishing a sporting theme that was to become popular for modern ballet, muscular

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(homosexual) Dolin was a briefly clad athletic male performing gymnastics at the beach. Neither gender was necessarily portrayed as heterosexual, so both might portray narcissism. *Le Train Bleu* parodies the gigolos and flappers of the 1920s with the accent on somewhat genderless chic couture. *Le Train Bleu* pokes fun at superficiality (the implication of narcissism) through manipulative portrayals of fashion, deceptive stereotypes that are difficult to categorize and trickster plays on sexuality. Famously, it is remembered for the iconic tight fitting woollen bathing suits thereafter immediately recognized as designed by Chanel.

Initially, Diaghilev had feminised the male body (for Nijinsky the feminine was partly associated with sexual passivity) but from the reproduction of *L’apres-midi d’un Faun* in 1922 when he cast Bronislava in the role originally created by her brother, he set about masculinizing the feminine body. The imbalance of gender representation was not corrected until the neoclassical era of the 1930s, which demanded female dancers of high technical accomplishment. Nijinska’s sexually ambiguous *Les Biches* (1924), a technically exacting neo-classical mounting, was designed around a theme of sophisticated lesbian sociability.

As Strauss put it, “Narcissus attracts the plastic artist: he is all line, outline, reflection, tactility ... the task before us is to examine this relationship, Orpheus – Narcissus, in the instance of Jean Cocteau’s work and to see its implications”.113 This is Murphy’s objective in *Poppy*. Like the Diaghilev epoch, themes of sexuality and androgyny dominate Murphy’s repertoire: “If the [Sydney Dance] Company has one distinguishing feature, it could, conceivably, be typified as sexuality”.114 In this mix, narratives of boy/girl attraction sit freely alongside expressions of androgyny and homosexuality and the unending erotic complexities that Murphy cherishes. *Daphnis and Chloé*, originally staged in 1912, and reproduced by Murphy in 1980 in modern idiom, including representations of sado-masochism and overt narcissism, typifies this early in his career.

Diaghilev deliberately devised his revolutionary agenda of confrontation for commercial success, not simply for ego. Decadent representations were framed in Oriental motifs to accentuate the mystique and, in the later modern period, confusing cubist and surrealist motifs shocked by their design alone. Conductor Nikolai Tcherepnin wrote: “It became clear that Diaghilev's Ballets Russes was offering the most profoundly important avant-garde theatre to be seen anywhere in the world”.

Immediately following the giddy boom of the Belle Époque, Diaghilev came to Paris just when free expression of sexuality in art was emerging, reflecting a rejection of strict nineteenth-century morality. Sexual experimentation was in vogue, and romantic pretexts were somewhat discarded for what Garafola describes as the “French appetite for exoticism [and] themes of voluptuous sadism”. Diaghilev’s timing had been right.

He created immense new audiences in a collaborative environment, the mouvement nouveau, which was truly a coup de theatre. It brought Russian art, and especially music, to Europe, revived the long decline of ballet in the West, drew intellectuals to the theatre, and even influenced the future of Russian theatre. Karmeny Theatre director Alexander Tairov attributed to the Ballets Russes responsibility for “grafting choreographic expression into the dramatic theatre [and] the balletic method of organizing space”. As Richard Dorment wrote: “Diaghilev’s genius for recognizing talent made him the greatest impresario the world had ever known … the productions he mounted between 1909 and his death in 1929 might almost be said to have defined European culture in the early 20th century”.

Spencer and Dyer argued a similar view of Diaghilev’s importance:

Diaghilev was the creator of an exceptional period of European art. Not only did he introduce Russian painting, music and dance to Western Europe early in the twentieth century, he

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116 Garafolo, “Reconfiguring the Sexes” Garafolo and Van Norman Baer (Eds.), The Ballets Russes and Its World 250.
continued, through the turbulent years of World War One, the Russian Revolution and the hectic twenties, to provide scintillating displays of the highest artistic talent in the West.\textsuperscript{120}

On the occasion of his last triumphant season in London in July 1929, \textit{Queen} magazine asked why there was no English ballet, describing the Ballets Russes as “the artistic expression of the age … [and that] a Diaghilev first night was a European event”\textsuperscript{121}. The \textit{Observer} even argued for the Ballets Russes to be based in London: “The prestige of London as a capital where art is cherished could not but be increased by the permanent presence of the Russian Ballet”.\textsuperscript{122}

Diaghilev died a pauper in Venice, in 1929, his property seized to pay bankruptcy debts. At his deathbed, looked on by Coco Chanel, Misia Sert, and Baronness Catherine d’Erlanger, lovers Kochno and Lifar fought jealously. \textit{The Times} obituary read: “It has been given to so few patrons of the arts … to be so much an artist … the most uncompromising art in his hands seemed to serve the end of yet another art, and thus could be accepted the more readily”\textsuperscript{123}. Although the Ballets Russes never danced in Russia, by 1935 its dancers performed and taught in Chicago (Bolm), New York (Balanchine, who founded \textit{The American Ballet}, and Fokine), London (Markova and De Valois: Vic-Wells Ballet, and Marie Rambert: \textit{Ballet Rambert}), Paris (Lifar: Paris Opera), Monte Carlo (the \textit{Ballets du Marquis de Cuevas} and the \textit{Colonel W. de basil} Company, Massine, Tchernicheva, Nijinska, Danilova and Grigorieff), and Lithuania\textsuperscript{124}. In 1932, the Colonel W. de Basil (and Rene Blum) Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo resurrected the remnants, with succeeding companies criss-crossing the world to Australia, North and South America, until 1952.\textsuperscript{125}

In 1937, lamenting the dearth of choreographers, Haskell highlighted the significance of Diaghilev’s rich harvest,

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\textsuperscript{120}Spencer and Dyer, \textit{The World of Serge Diaghilev} 9.
\textsuperscript{121}\textit{Queen}, 28/8/29, cited in MacDonald 381.
\textsuperscript{122}\textit{Queen}, 31/7/29, and the \textit{Observer}, 28/7/29, cited in Macdonald 379-380.
\textsuperscript{123}\textit{The Times}, 20/8/29, cited in MacDonald 381.
\textsuperscript{124}Haskell, \textit{Diaghilev: His Artistic and Private Life} Appendix II 370.
\end{flushright}
The concrete position is that all ballet dancers today are living on the work of Fokine, Massine, Balanchine, Nijinska, Ashton, de Valois in London, and Lifar in Paris, in varying proportions, and that to develop a new choreographer in the commercial world would involve a considerable fortune.\textsuperscript{126}

Diaghilev, the egotistical opportunist, robbed Russia of some of its greatest artists to create a furore in the decaying Western theatre. He enabled candid sexual expression, classless representations, uninhibited artistic innovation and unbounded free collaboration. By promoting new talent, he ended restrictive outdated hierarchies. By jolting audiences, he broke the nexus of control and shattered performative taboos, evolved classicism and grew ballet into a contemporary art form in the emerging modern era. Above all, Diaghilev ensured the loyalty of his audiences because he entertained. His legacy is the increasing faithful worldwide resurrection of the entire Ballets Russes repertoire, led with notable significance, in Australia, by the trajectory of Borovansky, the Australian Ballet and the Sydney Dance Company.

The visits to Australia between 1936 and 1940 were the most influential theatrical and cultural event in Australia’s history. Chapter Two describes the thirty-year experience of the Sydney Dance Company, which this thesis asserts most reflects contemporary innovation attributable to the influence of the original Diaghilev Ballets Russes.

\textsuperscript{126} Haskell, \textit{Diaghilev: His Artistic and Private Life} 134.
Chapter Two

The influence of the Ballets Russes on Australian dance:

The argument of this chapter is that the discernible connection with the Ballets Russes, which first began with the Adeline Genée tour in 1913, constitutes a key element in the development of Australian dance. The three reconstructed Ballets Russes companies that toured Australia between 1936 and 1940 were essentially remnants of the original Diaghilev Ballets Russes. The first was hastily assembled in London in the shadow of the European political diasporas in the 1930s, which prevented safe travel for dancers, especially Jewish artists who feared the Third Reich. The deal to bring the Ballets Russes to Australia was a clever arrangement between the cunning E.J. Tait of Australian theatrical entrepreneurs J.C. Williamson’s and Colonel de Basil (co-director with Rene Blum of the 1932 Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo). After brief seasons in Monte Carlo and at Covent Garden London, with no alternative prospects and even having to pay their own passage, the penniless dancers were nervous about travelling to the unknown. Many were just young teenagers, including émigré Irina Baronova (1919-2008) famed since 1932/33 as one of three ‘baby ballerinas’. Baranova recorded her Australian experience in her memoirs: “the audiences were absolutely mad about us, we had enormous success and the people were so hospitable and friendly”.127 Over five spectacular years the Ballets Russes delivered an exotic and diverse repertoire that was “a magic of a kind never before seen” in Australia and New Zealand.128

Other than the image of the glamorous Russian icon Anna Pavlova, Australians knew almost nothing of the Ballets Russes. After Diaghilev died in 1929, even the few devoted Australian balletomanes had given up hope of a tour, but from the opening in October 1936 in unsuspecting Adelaide, the repackaged entourage captured Australian hearts across all classes. In turn, the otherwise disaffected dancers warmed wholeheartedly to their newfound audiences.

127 Irina Baronova cited in Nathan Kaye “Irina Baranova in Byron Bay”. Online: http://www.byronbay.org/?p=54 [Extracted 31/7/08].
128 Cargher, Opera and Ballet in Australia 218.
In 1977, when Cargher was researching the first comprehensive history of opera and ballet in Australia, he remarked of “trying to establish the lack of values which exists in a country which has no heritage in either [ballet or opera] art”. Paradoxically, Australians, who had traditionally been dominated by paradigms of sport constructed almost exclusively around male homosociability, were stimulated to participate in the newly presented Ballets Russes cultural experience. Neville Cardus, in *Pioneering Ballet in Australia*, said there was “enough evidence of a natural predisposition in the Australian temperament for ballet”. Ballets Russes dancers, on outings, enjoyed the Australian displays of competitive beach gymnastics in defiance of public ordinances by the briefly clad Beachababies at Bondi. Max Dupain, who frequently photographed Ballets Russes artists in traditional stage costume and revealing semi-nudity at rustic and beach settings, consciously conveyed both the ballet’s sensuality and sexuality to Australian magazine readers. Dupain’s sports-like images portrayed ballet’s masculine virility and gymnastic prowess, helping dispel preconceptions of the male dancer. This all assisted to fuel an unprecedented interest and a rush of new students, importantly including many males with artistic sensibilities. Previously isolated Australians of repressed fringe sexualities flocked from rural and interstate regions along with enthusiastic families. In what became Australia’s major cultural breakthrough, a new universal artistic genre was born.

129 Cargher, *Opera and Ballet in Australia* 215-342.
130 Cardus cited in Peter Bellews (Ed.) *Pioneering Ballet in Australia* (Sydney: Craftsman Bookshop, 1945) 14.
In a spirit of rebirth that offered inclusion to all aspiring artists, the tours recreated the Ballets Russes’ history of collaboration in costume, set and poster design, musical composition, concert recitals, fused performance genres and, the grandest most complex of all, the opera, in Australia. In 2005, Australian Ballet Artistic Director, David McAllister, reflected: “Australia had never seen anything like it…the Ballets Russes changed the course of Australian art”.132

The single most significant event in the Australian trajectory that continued the influence of the Ballets Russes was the Borovansky School and Ballet between 1940 and 1960. In a tricky partnership with entrepreneurs J.C. Williamson’s, Borovansky proved ballet was commercially viable in Australia. The visiting tours of London’s Ballet Rambert (1947-1949) and Britain’s Royal Ballet (1958-1959) owed their momentous successes to the artistic and commercial momentum created by that partnership. Many renowned expatriate Australian dancers returned with those companies. Encouraged by growing audiences, Ballet Rambert’s Gertrude Johnson and Joyce Graeme taught, employed dancers and developed Australian choreography at their National Theatre Ballet in St Kilda, Melbourne, between 1949 and 1955.133 The crowning achievement is the Australian Ballet (1962-), which owed its inception and momentum principally to the Borovansky legacy. World success ensures continuing corporate and government funding. The


Australian Ballet exchanges artistically with the prestigious Royal Ballet that, too, owed its origins to the legacy of the Ballets Russes. The Australian Ballet then gave birth to the Sydney Dance Company.

**Before the Ballets Russes:**

In 1913 in Melbourne and Sydney, J.C. Williamson’s presented Danish-born prima ballerina Adeline Genée (1878-1970), billing her as the world’s greatest dancer direct from the London Alhambra Theatre. Russian Alexander Volonine partnered her in a company cheekily marketed as The Imperial Russian Ballet.134 Most dancers were in fact English and enlisted in London. Opening night at His Majesty’s Theatre in Melbourne was attended by the Governor-General Lord Denman and Melbourne’s high society, securing important social approval.

Genée’s “gaiety and brilliance”,135 (she was described by Cargher as a “saucy wench”),136 gave Australian audiences their first taste of the revolutionary choreographies of Mikhail Fokine from the Imperial Russian Ballet and the Diaghilev Ballets Russes. Significantly, Genée influenced the tastes of Australian audiences away from vaudeville and operetta toward classical ballet. As Cargher argued, “it is from 1913 that we can trace some kind of continuous ballet tradition in Australia … Genée gave Australians the taste for ballet”.137

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134 Pask,* Enter the Colonies Dancing: A History of Australia Dancing 1835-1940* 103-110.
135 Beaumont,* The Diaghilev Ballet in London* 303.
136 Cargher,* Opera and Ballet in Australia* 212.
After Genée, however, little changed except that Australian audiences had witnessed something new and culturally authentic. Like their sophisticated London equivalents, Australians now also savoured more than the traditional British menu of pantomime. After a thirsty gap of sixteen years, E.J. Tait sought prima ballerina Anna Pavlova (1881-1931) from the Imperial Russian Ballet and Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes and her new company. Tait urged Pavlova to assemble in London an impressive cast of authentic Diaghilev and other notable Russians, together with some relatively unknown English dancers whose names she slavonised for effect.138 Opening at Her Majesty’s Theatre Melbourne on 13 March 1926, The Melbourne Age devoted lengthy columns to announce: “Genius of Pavlova … hers is not an art of display, but of restraint”.139 The work was groundbreaking and sexually evocative. “Pavlova’s costume” for Le Cygne, “and [her] overt abandon for the piece, were considered risqué”.140

J.C. Williamson’s had scooped the incomparable Pavlova and forty-five dancers on the first tour, and forty-two promising Australian extras including sixteen year-old supernumerary Bobbie Helpman on the second.141 Australians saw seventeen full-length ballets plus short divertissements, including Pavlova’s own choreographies. Homoerotic works, especially Sheherzade, quickly became favourites. John Cargher reflects that, in Australia, the remarkable forty-five year old Pavlova was more successful and publicized at this time in her career than anywhere else in the world where, by contrast, her fame was already in decline. In Australia, “because of the complete lack of any ballet at all for twelve years … there was a total lack of standards by which she could be judged”.142

Young Helpman, who often watched his idol Pavlova perform the role of The Dying Swan, later recalled: “When Pavlova danced the Dying Swan, she was the

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139 The Melbourne Age cited in Pask, Enter the Colonies Dancing 114-118.
140 Ibid 118.
141 In Melbourne, Bobbie Helpman auditioned for Pavlova, took lessons from ballet master Ivan Clustine, and appeared as supernumerary in Don Quixote. At Pavlova’s suggestion, he later changed his name to Helpmann. Pask, Ibid 120.
142 Cargher, Opera and Ballet in Australia 212.
swan … I sat and watched her every night for fifteen months, and to me she was just unbelievable”.143


Over two tours, J.C. Williamson’s built a profitable additional audience for “The Firm”, as they became known. In 1926, Pavlova toured Melbourne, Brisbane, Sydney and Adelaide and, in 1929, Rockhampton, Bundaberg, Mackay, Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth, and New Zealand. Few Australians were unaware of Pavlova, who became an icon.144 *Table Talk* magazine reported that Pavlova: “had gone on a picnic to the hills … to a meal of grilled chops and Australian bush-style ‘billy tea’.145 J.C. Williamson’s directors promoted her at prestigious society functions and garden parties in their Toorak homes. Pavlova was the darling of department stores, newsreels, magazines and all classes and generations. Fashion houses copied her haute couture European wardrobe, and advertisers fiercely competed for her endorsements, promoting “lustre hosiery” stockings on fashion catwalks in Sydney: “the lady kept up with haute couture”.146 Films, some fortunately still archived, were made of Pavlova dancing at His Majesty’s theatres in both Melbourne and Perth.147

144 Pask, *Enter the Colonies Dancing 1835-1940* 118-119.
146 Cargher, *Opera and Ballet in Australia* 212.
147 Pask, *Enter the Colonies Dancing* 120-123.
But Australian audiences had previously only identified with the feminine in ballet. Her principal danseurs and partners, Laurent Novikoff, Alexandre Volinine and Pierre Vladimirov, impressed audiences with a masculine image in the rigorous Russian tradition. However, it was largely young girls in the image of Pavlova and her hallmark role *The Dying Swan*, who flocked to the local ballet schools that sprouted up in cities and country regions. Cargher observed that “the teaching boom was now underway”.\(^{148}\) Mothers and grandmothers would dote on the memory of Pavlova for decades to come. The Australian legacy was, with the exception of the uniquely talented Bobbie Helpman, almost totally a feminine phenomenon. Reflecting on both the doll-like idolatry of Australian women for ballerinas and the effeminate image of male dancers in the eyes of most Australian men, Cargher describes Pavlova as a “fairy queen … who left the impression [in Australia] that ballet was something pretty for both sexes”.\(^{149}\)

Five years later, in 1934, E.J.Tait presented the *Dandré-Levitoff Russian Ballet*, led by Olga Spessivtseva and Anatole Vilzak of the *Ballets Russes*. Leon Kellaway, who had also toured with Pavlova as Jan Kowsky, stayed on to make substantial contributions to Australian dance theatre, including his own privately-sponsored company Ballet Nationale, which performed sporadically in Sydney between 1937 and 1940. Significantly, as Ballet Master and character dancer for

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\(^{148}\) Cargher, *Opera and Ballet in Australia*. 214.

Borovansky, and inaugural Associate Ballet Master of the Australian Ballet, Kellaway taught Graeme Murphy at the Australian Ballet School in 1966.

_The Ballet Russes tours, 1936-1940:_

On arrival in 1936, deBasil and his _Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo_ were reminded by E.J. Tait of Pavlova’s success a decade before in Australia. After much frenetic cabling, Tait had astutely contracted the first tour in a bargain deal. Tait was acutely aware of the genuine disappointment that the original Diaghilev Company had never visited Australia. De Basil offered his artists a tour to North America and Australia but, initially, none of the dancers wanted to tour Australia when others were off to America. Many were young teenagers and most had to pay their own fares, leaving them penniless. Along the way, they collected other Diaghilev members on tour in the USA, including Ballet Master and choreographer Fokine and dancer and choreographer Massine. Original costumes and set designs came too. The influential English critic and author Arnold Haskell met them in Australia as reporter and liaison officer. World-famed conductor Antal Dorati joined the 1938-40 tours. Not even the cunning Tait anticipated the golden era that was about to unfold.

Three separate _Ballets Russes_ tours ensued between 1936 and 1940: in 1936, Colonel W. deBasil’s Monte Carlo Russian Ballet; 1938/39, Colonel W. deBasil’s Covent Garden Russian Ballet presented by Educational Ballets Ltd; and 1939/40, Colonel W. deBasil’s Covent Garden Ballet, and Ballet Company. Altogether, the contingents consisted of sixty-two artists, including the famous “Baby Ballerinas”; the most desirable cast of artistic ballet collaborators possible to assemble anywhere in the world. The third season performed to sell-out houses for an unprecedented eleven months. Because they were virtually unknown on arrival in Adelaide in 1936, Tait enticed the Premier Richard Butler and Lord Mayor Jonathon Cain to promote the season as part of South Australia’s centenary by offering five hundred complimentary

151 Irina Baronova, Tournara Toumanova, and Tatiana Riabouchinska.
tickets. After opening, the season sold-out. The *Adelaide Advertiser* announced: “We are seeing in Adelaide not copies, but the original backgrounds … stage properties and costumes over which Europe enthused when the Russian Ballet blazed its way to fame in a glory of colour and characterisation”. Cargher characterised the five-year phenomenon of a staggering forty-four works, including many premieres, in unsuspecting Australia as “the KangaRussky Ballets”.

Again, J.C. Williamson’s publicity billboards and press releases improvised Slavic names for English-born dancers, even falsely claiming the company as “direct from Covent Garden”, blatant untruths that caused serious arguments between Tait and Haskell. Audiences, however, could not get their fill; after the long Depression and, with theatres in a state of neglect, houses sold out in advance! “Newspapers reported on the dancers’ every whim … people queued overnight to get tickets over and again [and] waited at the stage door for the dancers like they were Hollywood stars”.

Haskell reported glowingly of Australians, their athletic physiques and energy. In the style of a travelogue, he extolled Australia as a wide young country of opportunity that was open, underpopulated and welcoming. Noting the emphasis on sports, Haskell urged young people to devote more attention to the arts, and for governments to assist. Potter records that:

While on tour with the company, he wrote articles and reviews for Australian newspapers and journals, recorded radio interviews, and sent reports home to England for magazines such as the *Dancing Times*. Because of these activities, he is often credited with popularising ballet in Australia and with opening the way for the establishment of a national company.

Detecting the restrictive phenomena of cultural cringe, Haskell lamented that:

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154 Cargher, *Opera and Ballet in Australia* 217.
156 Potter, “Arnold Haskell in Australia: Did Connoisseurship or Politics Determine his Rôle?” Dance Research 24/1/2006 37-53. Online: [http://muse.jhu.edu/demo/dance_research/v024/24.1potter.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/demo/dance_research/v024/24.1potter.html) [Extracted 21/8/06].
At present the Australians run down their own actors … unfortunately the very Australians who can help are impatient … (they) talk so well of the lack of theatrical activity in their country, and of the keen theatregoer’s constant hardship in living away from Europe. We are so out of touch with everything here. We rely on an occasional scratch touring company and our amateurs.157

Praising serious efforts made in Melbourne, but not Sydney, which he thought was starved for theatre, Haskell proposed that: “if Australians put the same effort into theatre as they did into sheep, cricket, and business, they had the talent to develop to world class”. Valentin Zeglovsky, who stayed on to teach and produce infant concerts in Melbourne, Ballarat and Sydney, “found Australian children to be healthy, energetic youngsters, musical almost without exception, and moreover teachable and willing”. On the prevailing sissy attitude by Australians to male students, Zeglovsky aspired, “if [this] bugaboo could be overcome, there might be a chance of producing another Nijinsky in this country or a whole bevy of them”.158

Pointing to the absence of an Australian ballet company that he and all Ballets Russes members believed was needed, Haskell explained the dilemma students faced:

There is a glut of good highly competent dancers whom an intensive training and much personal attention might turn into something finer … There is every reason to believe that the schools are full of such talent, much of which must find its way into the chorus of revues and musical shows … In the studios I visited in Australia, at their very best well-equipped to give a good basic training, I saw very many girls who would in every way be suited for a ballet career, though at present, since there is no opening, the whole slant of their training is towards musical comedy, and those who cannot adapt themselves to the lighter forms of dancing must dream of ballet and remain without a job unless they can afford the expensive trip [to Britain] to finish their education and then wait for work.159

157 Haskell, Dancing Round the World 184.
159 Haskell, Ibid 131-133.
A foremost impact of the Ballets Russes was that so many collaborative Australian artists were eagerly engaged on the tours. For example, Principal Serge Lifar “contracted twenty-three year old Sidney Nolan as designer for his creation *Icare*, which was world-premiered in a re-staging at the Theatre Royal Sydney, in 1940. Norman Lindsay also designed programme covers. As Mark Carroll wrote, “the impact upon Australian culture of these works was profound, and served as a creative impetus for a number of significant artists, including Margaret Sutherland, Thea Proctor, Sidney Nolan, Loudon Sainthill, Max Dupain and Donald Friend”.  

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160 Cargher, *Opera and Ballet in Australia* 220.
Production after production ensued. In 1938, Anton Dolin restaged the traditional Diaghilev favourite, *Aurora’s Wedding* and, in 1940, David Lichine premiered his *Graduation Ball* as the highlight of the third season, each now enduring favourites. After watching rehearsals, critic Geoffrey Hutton reported: “Fokine is a despot working with the intense energy of a sculptor in quick-drying clay ... This concentration gives to his ballets a precision and sparkle which they often lack in other hands” .


In 1940, deBasil engaged fourteen-year-old Australian dancer Valrene Tweedie (1925-2008) who, billed as Irina Larinova, went on to tour with Ballets Russes companies in both North and South America. Many dancers made life-long friends, stayed on, or returned on their own at the outbreak of World War Two, foremost being Czechoslovakian soloist Edouard Borovansky, Danish prima ballerina Helene Kirsova, Monte-Carlo born Russian Kira Bousloff, and Russian Tamara Tchinarova. Ballets Russes members imparted a permanent influence on Australian dance performance, teaching, artistic collaboration, and inspiration to establish new schools and performing companies across the country. Maura Edmond wrote: “The Ballets Russes opened Australians eyes to a world of possibilities”\[^{165}\]. Kira Bousloff danced with Laurel Martyn’s Ballet Guild in Melbourne before establishing the West Australian Ballet (1952) and, later, protégées of Borovansky, Poul Gnatt the New Zealand Ballet (1952) and Artistic Director of Ballet Guild (1967), Kenneth Gillespie the Tasmanian Ballet (1961) and Charles Lisner the Brisbane Ballet Academy (1953), forerunner to the Queensland Ballet (1962). The Ballets Russes had indeed instilled the legacy of Diaghilev and the mouvement nouveau into enthusiastic young Australians and their very own Australian theatre.

**The Hélène Kirsova Company, Sydney, 1941-1944 and The Borovansky School and Ballets, 1941-1959:**

Paris-trained Hélène Kirsova (1910-1962), who came as a soloist with The Monte Carlo Russian Ballet in 1936, founded Australia’s first professional permanent ballet company, the Australian National Ballet, later the *Kirsova Ballet*, at rundown Circular Quay Sydney in 1941.\[^{166}\] Kirsova, who was ambitious and intent on establishing a truly Australian ballet, gave demanding classes and staged eight of


\[^{164}\] Cargher, *Opera and Ballet in Australia* 220


her own works as well as reviving the Russian repertoire at regular seasons every few months including popular tours to Melbourne, Adelaide and Brisbane.

This development was significant because, at a time when so much Australian talent was going to waste, the uncompromising Kirsova boldly laid long-term plans around remaining Russian artists as well as emerging Australians. Kirsova’s inaugural program notes stated:

> It seems anomalous that Australia, which, through the visits of Adelina Genee, Pavlova, Spessiva, the Ballet Russes de Monte Carlo, and Colonel de Basil’s two most recent companies, has proved itself to be the most truly ballet-conscious country in the world today, has never had its own permanent company.\(^{167}\)

Peggy Sager recalled Kirsova’s technically exacting teaching: “She gave tremendous classes … on speed, footwork, and brain … People came. All the artists came and sat and drew” .\(^{168}\) Dancer and ballet historian Paul Hammond added, “she encouraged this whole artistic milieu … her ballet company was tied into the contemporary arts scene and even the contemporary musical scene. There seemed for once, I think, a great cross relationship between all the arts”.\(^{169}\) The Ballets Russes companies were the first to demonstrate the value of artistic collaboration in a nation where there was no formal artistic infrastructure whatsoever. Kirsova, “an important patron of Australian artists, composers and set

designers”, built on the meagre base. Her spectacular program collection records names like Loudon Sainthill, Amie Kingston, Alice Danciger, Wolfgang Cardamatis, and Henri Krips. Dupain, who had featured her in a favourite role as the ballerina in *Petrouchka*, adored Kirsova. Later, when Kirsova argued with J.C. Williamson’s and lost her commercial viability, Borovansky capitalised from her endeavours. Robin Grove records that, by arguing with management who could afford to promote bigger, ongoing ventures, Kirsova’s company had, “died of its own uncompromisingness despite an Australia-wide following”.

The immense contribution of Edouard ‘Boro’ Borovansky would prove more enduring. An outstanding character dancer from the original Pavlova troupe and De Basil’s Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo, Boro, and his dancer and teacher wife, Xenia, remained in Australia after the third Ballets Russes tour in 1940. He wrote home to a friend: “It was a little strange for my wife and I to stay behind when the Russian Ballet left after being associated with them for so many years, and the beginning of our life here was very hard, as all beginnings are”. At his modest, shared, upstairs studios in Roma House, Elizabeth Street Melbourne, Boro and Xenia’s Academy of Russian Ballet taught, produced, promoted and performed classical and character dancing, mime, design and make up. As enthusiasm grew, Boro became the larger-than-life figure of a publicity-seeking entrepreneur noted around town as a colourful character.


Xenia concentrated on teaching to ensure a continuity of freshly trained dancers. On a makeshift studio stage built by amateurs, their growing company consisting mostly of eager students gave regular performances in an intimate club atmosphere. Mountings included the classics as well as original creations by Xenia Borovansky, Dorothy Stevenson, and Laurel Martyn, including Martyn’s *Sigrid* (over six hundred performances) and *En Saga*, and Stevenson’s *Sea Legend*. Potter records: “Boro’s first foray into public presentation was probably the 'First Season of Ballet', staged by the National Theatre Movement in 1939” under the banner of National Health Week. Then, in 1940, the company participated in the Spectacular Historical Pageant Representing the Growth of the British Empire, and in December 1940, the Borovansky Australian Ballet Company led by Laurel Martyn filled the decaying Comedy Theatre to capacity.

J. C. Williamson’s liked Boro’s bold colourful theatrical, and overtly masculine, productions and, in 1942, backed his ambitious five-night mixed season at the Princess Theatre. Full houses at last proved that Australian ballet was potentially profitable and a commercial union was struck giving access to theatres throughout Australia and New Zealand. Always insisting his Company should be as truly Australian as possible, Boro eagerly employed many collaborators including prolific set designer William Constable. Artists flocked to sketch at classes and

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rehearsals and a public ballet club was formed to enabled artists and audiences to work together and mix freely at moderate cost and without regard to hierarchy. Patronage skyrocketed.

After Kirsova folded in 1944, the Ballet Club became the (Victorian) Ballet Guild, located in Bourke Street up from Elizabeth Street. Led by indefatigable Borovansky principal Laurel Martyn, who taught the entire Ballets Russes repertoire, ‘The Guild’ was a small experimental venture that continued the lively regular intimate performance and cultural exchange program initiated by Boro. Martyn’s Guild filled the vacuum in between big Borovansky seasons, importantly maintaining classes, providing performing opportunities for both professionals and students, and encouraging collaboration in a relaxed semi-professional atmosphere. In 1951, Melbourne Sun critic Tom Breen likened this formative atmosphere to the British experience that Martyn had enjoyed in London under De Valois with Markova, Dolin, Ashton, Fonteyn and Helpmann,

There is an intriguing parallel between the birth and growth of Ballet in England and Australia. In the ‘twenties’, Ninette de Valois and Marie Rambert founded in London a school of English Ballet, which drew its inspiration from the Russian tradition. This school also had a club as its background support.174

The result was that Melbourne, which also boasted the best theatres and was home to J.C.Williamson’s, quickly earned national recognition as the legitimate dance capital.

After packed houses over three weeks at the Comedy Theatre in 1944, J.C. Williamson’s contracted Borovansky’s troupe of forty dancers and backed them to tour Australia and New Zealand, the first of many exhaustive tours. The commercially driven company was now enhanced by the listing on billboards of numerous internationally accomplished Australians, some, like Martyn, having danced principal roles with the Sadler’s Wells Ballet. Remaining Ballet Russes dancers, including Serge Bousloff and Tamara Tchinarova, joined too. Martyn recalled:

We were one of the happiest groups of dancers that I think were ever together—I think because we had a very definite purpose in our lives. We wanted to establish an Australian company. We wanted to show that not just the Russians, who of course at that stage were the only other companies that had been for a long time, that not only the Russians could dance, but Australians could dance.\textsuperscript{175}

There were three spirited Borovansky Companies in succession, with much chequered financial manoeuvring when management frequently clashed. Unable to be continuously employed between seasons, however, Boro’s dancers joined ‘The Firm’s’ operettas and musicals, Tivoli vaudeville, the circus, and hotel floorshows. These experiences enhanced their capabilities and broadened their identity with wider audiences, growing ballet theatre overall. Robin Grove reflected:

\begin{quote}
It was dismayingly unlike the conditions under which the great European companies grew. Part of the trouble was the timidity and greed of the entrepreneurs; part, the audience expectation that ballet should be exotic and on the biggest scale. Even had Boro wished to diversify his enterprise, he would have had to create a new, more specialized public of the kind that the Victorian Ballet Guild was establishing for itself.\textsuperscript{176}
\end{quote}

Boro persistently campaigned to enlist public opinion for government assistance for the arts, writing to The \textit{Melbourne Herald} in 1947:

\begin{quote}
A State-owned theatre is established because the presentation of opera, drama, and ballet is considered essential for the community’s cultural welfare – for no other reason. The State should not seek large profits. A State theatre would also provide security for the artists.\textsuperscript{177}
\end{quote}

Cargher records that, “after the war, as popularity for musical comedy grew, Boro’s dancers mounted light musicals such as \textit{Gay Rosalinda} and \textit{The Dancing Years}, the ballets making the greatest impact”\textsuperscript{178}


\textsuperscript{177} Borovansky cited in Salter, \textit{Borovansky} 161.

\textsuperscript{178} Cargher, \textit{Opera and Ballet in Australia} 229.
There was a gap from 1948, during which the visiting British Ballet Rambert tour of Australia and New Zealand (1947-49) had recruited some of Boro’s disbanded dancers. Capitalising on newly-won audiences, Ballet Rambert gave five hundred performances of Russian classical revivals and the premiere of an Australian work, *Winter Night*, the first ballet designed by Kenneth Rowell.

Then, in 1951, Boro cleverly enticed J.C. Williamson’s with the possibility of gaining exemption from entertainment tax. They partnered together again under the guise of the Education in Music and Dramatic Arts Society, and re-opened in Sydney at the Empire Theatre as the Borovansky Jubilee Ballet. On what was their most ambitious season yet, a stunning repertoire including *Petrushka*, *Giselle*, Massine’s *La Boutique Fantasque*, Lichine’s *Nutcracker*, *Pineapple Poll*, and a full-length *Sleeping Beauty*. Tom Breen, in the *Melbourne Sun*, praised Boro:

> He brought to that task a wide choreographic knowledge gleaned from the eminent Russian Masters. That knowledge is reflected in his own compositions. In these Borovansky eschews any of the modern tricks, preferring to draw upon the rich bounty of classicism. Borovansky has made his policy an instructive one for Australian audiences, believing, rightly so, that the European repertoire should be revealed in all its glory and magnificence in a country that is very young in ballet experience and knowledge. He has always maintained that this approach is essential for the bringing into existence of an informed ballet public … Borovansky has charged himself with the Heavenly purpose of making Ballet in Australia, making it from the best qualities of the Russian tradition.  

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179Breen cited in Programme, 1951 Jubilee Borovansky Ballet season.
Even though Boro frustratingly had to disassemble then reassemble his company, momentum grew as successive grand seasons made profits and his artists demonstrated consistent prowess and versatility to mount any of the classics at international standard. For enthusiastic Australian audiences, ‘Borovansky’ and ‘ballet’ became inextricably linked”.

In 1954, American principal Royes Fernandez partnered prima ballerinas Kathleen Gorham and Peggy Sager. In 1957, guest artists from the Royal Ballet, Margot Fonteyn, Michael Sommes, Rowena Jackson and Bryan Ashbridge added prestige in a somewhat fractious season nicknamed the “Fonteyn Follies”.

Boro deliberately nurtured young Australian talent, notably Martin Rubenstein (1924-), Peggy Sager (1924-2002), Marilyn Jones (1940-), Garth Welch (1936-), and Kathleen Gorham (1932-83). Rubenstein, famous as the slave in Scheherazade, is considered one of Australia’s greatest male dancers. Boro encouraged original Australian choreography to supplement his solid Ballets Russes-inspired repertoire, himself choreographing Black Swan, Terra Australis (perhaps the first all-Australian choreographic work), and Outlaw. He encouraged David Lichine’s Corrida, Laurel Martyn’s Sigrid and En Saga, Dorothy Stevenson’s Sea Legend and Chiaroscuro, and Paris Opera guest artist Robert

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Pomie’s *The Surfers*. Irascible Pomie, trained by Lifar at the Paris Opera, stayed on and married ballerina Kathleen Gorham.

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Just as plans were advanced for further seasons, in 1959 Boro suffered a fatal heart attack. Despite his huge contribution to ‘The Firm’s’ success, J.C. Williamson’s favoured fashionable commercial American musical comedy and ruthlessly folded the company in 1960. Angry Cargher scorned this turn as: “crassly commercial …if ever an example were needed of the selfishness of capitalism in the arts, this was it”.182 Leading Borovansky dancers, including principals Jones and Welch, immediately fled to overseas companies and others joined the musical comedies, the Tivoli circuit, television, taught, or reluctantly changed careers altogether. A real danger existed of losing all that had been painstakingly created. On the final night in November 1960, Ballet Mistress Peggy Van Praagh, who had been seconded by Borovansky from the Royal Ballet, appealed on stage for public support for a national company. Keen ballet lovers Prime Minister Sir Harold Holt and Dame Zara and Governor of the Reserve Bank Dr ‘Nugget’ H. C. Coombs were in the audience.

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182 Cargher, *Opera and Ballet in Australia* 234.
The Victorian Ballet Guild and Ballet Victoria, 1946-1976:

One important and significant development out of the Borovansky era was the establishment by Laurel Martyn of the (Victorian) Ballet Guild. ‘The Guild’ was a competent, lively and experimental collaboration, which importantly encouraged new works. Robin Grove wrote,

Queensland-born Martyn had shone in small roles with the Vic-Wells Ballet, London, before returning to Australia. A dramatic dancer of unusual range, she was also one of the most intelligent women Borovansky ever employed; it was a sign of his own intelligence that he provided opportunities for Martyn’s creativity to flourish.183

The Guild’s first season, which included four original works by Martyn with two Australian compositions by Dorian LeGallienne (Contes Heraldisques) and Margaret Sutherland (Dithyramb), was danced at The Repertory Theatre, Middle Park Melbourne, in 1946. The Guild toured to Tasmania in 1947. Ongoing productions included Martyn’s En Saga (1947), The Sentimental Bloke (1952), and Voyageur (1956), as well as impressively strong classical productions providing continuity, especially Martyn’s favourites Giselle, Les Sylphides, Le Carnaval, Coppélia, Nutcracker and in 1963, Sylvia danced by Patricia Cox and Robert Pomie. Altogether, Martyn choreographed over twenty-five of her own works. The friendly and welcoming Guild continued the Borovansky Ballet Club’s tradition of regular informal studio performances and enthusiastic artistic collaboration. Martyn aimed to establish a creative environment in which new dance could flourish. She championed Australian composers John Tallis, John Antill, Esther Rofe, Dorian Le Gallienne and Margaret Sutherland; and commissioned designs from Australians including William Constable, Leonard French, Barry Kay, Alan McCulloch, Kenneth Rowell and John Truscott.184

34. Stewart, Jean: Janet Karin as Priscilla, and Ray Trickett in the title role of the Guild’s production of Laurel Martyn’s *Voyageur*, 1957. NLA. An24850028.


Along with Martyn, who formulated lasting teaching standards in Australia, Max Collis, Heather MacCrae, and Janet Karin (all ex-Borovansky), Dianne Parrington and Valerie Grieg were notable dancers and teachers, as well as dancer/choreographer Ian Spink, of the popular Guild. Grieg authored anatomical technical instruction. Musical, variety and television dancers all trained there, providing broad theatrical experience. The Guild toured to regional Victoria, Tasmania, New South Wales, and Queensland and took workshops to schools. In 1975, international guest artists included Mikhail Baryshnikov and Natalia Makarova. In 1963, The Guild became the Victorian Ballet Company and, in 1967, Ballet Victoria. In 1974, Garth Welch joined Martyn as co-Artistic Director. Political and financial stresses forced closure in 1976. Martyn was a consistent contributor to press columns in the spirit of Borovansky, appealing for government support and the establishment of a truly Australian dance theatre. The Guild provided dancers and choreographers across the broadest spectrum, and as Cargher wrote “over thirty years … Ballet Victoria produced more original works than any company in Australia”.

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186 Sir Rupert Hamer (Victorian Premier 1972-81) helped fund *Ballet Victoria* and, in 1978, recommended the instigation of a dance faculty at the Victorian College of the Arts.
187 Cargher, *Opera and ballet in Australia* 294.
After the closure of the Borovansky Ballet, overwhelming public support prompted government intervention. Spurred by Prime Minister Holt and Dr Coombs, representing the Elizabethan Theatre Trust, the Federal government at last enabled the founding of a truly national company. The Australian Ballet Foundation was formed in 1961, which established the Australian Ballet Company in 1962, the biggest and most far reaching permanent development in the Australian trajectory.

Initial Artistic Director (1962-74 and 1978), Peggy Van Praagh (1910-1990), enticed Australian dancers home and cleverly hired promising new European talent under the Australian Government Immigration scheme. Van Praagh was a skilled administrator and an outstanding teacher with a formidable background in the international affairs of Britain’s Royal Ballet. She firmly institutionalised the Royal Ballet’s proven tradition, placing uppermost importance on the establishment of the Australian Ballet School, under principal Margaret Scott. Cargher noted: “It was not simply a matter of aping the Royal Ballet, but of following the pattern that had led to the successful creation of that company”\textsuperscript{188}. Van Praagh initiated subsidiary educational dance programs throughout Australia, including the Dance Company (NSW), and collaborated with the University of New England in summer dance schools (1967-1976), attended by many leading dancers including Graeme Murphy.\textsuperscript{189} Importantly, this marked the beginning of scholastic focus.

\textsuperscript{188} Cargher, \textit{Opera and Ballet in Australia} 260.
\textsuperscript{189} Potter, “Australia Dancing. Armidale Summer Schools”. Graeme Murphy participated in the 1976 workshop. Online: \url{http://www.australiadancing.org/subjects/3501.html} [Extracted 21/8/06].
After just eight week’s preparation, the Australian Ballet’s opening season, led by principals Marilyn Jones, Garth Welch, and Kathleen Gorham, opened on November 2, 1962, at Her Majesty’s Theatre Sydney. Soloist Ray Powell took leave from the Royal Ballet to act as Ballet Master, staying on as character dancer, teacher and Associate Director (1972-), performing until retirement in 2002. The initial repertoire, which included Rex Reid’s Australian choreography *Melbourne Cup*, was so successful it surpassed even the revered Borovansky legacy.

In 1963, Box office expectations were exceeded by two overwhelmingly successful national tours billing international principals Sonia Arova (Royal Ballet, London’s Festival Ballet and Ballets Russes) and Erik Bruhn (Royal Danish Ballet). Next came the unprecedented success of the 1964 season led by
principals Margot Fonteyn and Kirov defector Rudolph Nureyev, enticed to Australia by Sir Robert Helpmann. English impresario James Laurie immediately manoeuvred to engage the Australian Ballet in Britain the next year.¹⁹⁰

In 1965, Helpmann teamed with Van Praagh as Co-Artistic Director. In 1974, after Van Praagh retired from illness, Helpmann continued solely until his ignominious dismissal by a disaffected Board, in 1976. Helpmann had created thirty-five of the seventy-five roles he danced, and partnered Fonteyn for twenty-seven years.¹⁹¹ An all-rounder, Helpmann was foremost an entertainer. A staunch patriot wherever he travelled, Helpmann insisted on complete Australian collaboration. In Adelaide in 1964, his creative contributions began spectacularly with an entirely Australian psychodrama, *The Display*, a collaboration that earned unprecedented acclaim under Royal patronage at Covent Garden, in 1965.¹⁹² Helpmann’s elite connections, together with his brilliant public relations skills, rapidly catapulted the company to world prominence.

Helpmann, who claimed always to be singularly unaffected by the concept of cultural cringe, was nevertheless astutely aware of its damaging effects. He used his connections; firstly, to gamble on world-renowned imports that he believed would attract both new audiences and international attention. In 1965, he gambled against advice by taking the fledgling company to the International Festival Baalbeck, Covent Garden London, and the Commonwealth Festival of the Arts, Edinburgh. Cargher, pointing also to the enthusiastic support of the Australian government, says this was “the turning point”.¹⁹³ International audiences applauded and Australians at home, just as Helpmann had predicted, instantly claimed ownership. So began a true era of showcasing Australian artistic collaboration to the world.

¹⁹⁰ Cargher, *Opera and Ballet in Australia* 266.
¹⁹² Cargher, *Opera and Ballet in Australia* 266. *The Display* “is the most notable of all ballets ever produced entirely by Australians”.
¹⁹³ *Ibid* 265.


41. McMurdo, Don: Ray Powell (left) with Sir Robert Helpmann as the other Ugly Sister, *Cinderella*, *AB*, 1972.


The Australian Ballet loyally upheld Boro’s tradition of restaging the Ballets Russes repertoire, added to by Helpmann’s astute drive to create ballets around cultures in Australia’s region. *Yugen* (1965) and *Sun Music* (1968) won influential political and commercial support, commended by *The Bulletin’s* 1969 cover feature: “Australian Ballet Export”\(^{194}\). Cargher concluded: “what Van Praagh

estimated would take twenty years, was achieved in four – so strong was the legacy of the Borovansky era! Borovansky, Van Praagh, and Helpmann, like Diaghilev, were all benevolent autocrats, who knew their craft and maintained independent direction. Van Praagh had instilled traditional disciplines, thus faithfully ensuring the legacy of Boro and the Ballets Russes. Helpmann imprinted broader contemporary sophistication and essential entertainment flair. Together, they delivered the Australian Ballet with full artistic credentials. In 1975, hypothesising that Australian dance theatre had singly defeated the cultural cringe, Helpmann announced cryptically: “the Australian Ballet is about the only exportable product in the Australian art world”. In 1980, the company mounted an historic gala tribute to Borovansky at the Sydney Opera House, inviting many ex-dancers to appear.

Despite mammoth political disruptions, including a dancer’s strike and the ill-advised dismissal of Sir Robert by an alienated and largely academic Board in 1976, the company has returned to artistic direction enabling it to maintain paramount international standing.

44. Weinberger, Josef: Marilyn Rowe and John Meehan in The Merry Widow, created and produced by Helpmann in 1974, as a tribute to Dame Margot Fonteyn. In 1975, Fonteyn danced the title role with the AB at the London Palladium.

195 Cargher, Opera and Ballet in Australia 252.
196 Helpmann cited in the West Australian, 1/9/1975.
The Sydney Dance Company, 1965-:

At the invitation of Van Praagh, Australian Ballet soloist Suzanne Musitz (Davidson) established the Dance Company (NSW) in 1965. Intended as a dance-in-education group, it initially performed as Ballet-in-a-Nutshell, later combining athletes with dancers. By the 1970’s the company performed full time. The Company’s inaugural season as the Dance Company (NSW) was in 1971, when it premiered its first commissioned work by resident choreographer and co-director Keith Little, at the Australian National University in Canberra. In 1973 The Dance Company (NSW) presented its first major Sydney season at the Elizabethan Theatre Newtown, including works by Australian choreographers and Frans Ververne from Nederlands Dance Theater, and a season in the Concert Hall of The Sydney Opera House.

Dutch dancer and choreographer Jaap Flier, who was originally brought to Australia by Adelaide-based Australian Dance Theatre, directed the company in 1975 and 1976, when twenty-six year old Graeme Murphy was appointed Artistic Director. A student of Borovansky’s Kenneth Gillespie in Launceston, Murphy was a graduate of the Australian Ballet School and junior soloist in the Australian Ballet Company. His first choreography, Ecco Le Diavole premiered by Shirley McKechnie at her Beaumaris studio in 1967, was professionally staged at Melbourne’s Princess Theatre in 1971. After touring North America with the Australian Ballet, Murphy recognised his creative need to step outside traditional constructs. Abroad for three years, he danced with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company New York, and Ballets Felix Blaska France until he was inspired to return home by the election of the Whitlam Government (1975-1976). In 1979, Murphy changed the company’s name to the Sydney Dance Company, with enthusiastic Margaret Whitlam as a board member.

At this time, Murphy decided he “had more to offer as a choreographer”. Like Diaghilev, he envisaged that his mission was to explore innovative collaborative contemporary performance that would express contemporary life. Keen that his

“diversity of dancers become an ensemble”, so that he might best distinguish his own creativity, Murphy rightly insisted his company be known as “contemporary”. He consciously searched outside classical kinetic constructs for multi-talented dancers, whose body shapes and sizes might visually emphasize points of difference that afforded scope for innovative choreography. Although contemporary dance was enjoying a growing popularity and other contemporary companies were sprouting, Murphy offered the strongest link to the classical trajectory and distinctly identified with the Ballets Russes.

Together with Co-Artistic Director Janet Vernon, fellow graduate from the Australian Ballet School and dancer with Ballets Felix Blaska, Murphy has taken Australian artistic collaboration to unprecedented achievements. Murphy stresses Vernon’s valuable collaborative discipline of “drill[ing] a perfection of performance that is classically based” as “incredible input”. Their partnership has been a profound professional marriage, symbol of Murphy’s flair for collaboration and sound classical foundations. Vernon, therefore, is synonymous with the company’s success.

Turning to his Ballets Blaska experience, in 1978 Murphy mounted *Poppy*, the commencement of over fifty explicitly stylised, and compellingly psychological

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199 Murphy, audiotape interview, 16/2/2007.
and sexual choreographies. Murphy studied the life and works of Cocteau, whom he considered:

The first multi-media artist in theatre and a surrealist at that … [who] had been deeply involved with Diaghilev and his young company, which between 1909 and [Diaghilev’s] death in 1929 completely revolutionized the whole concept of dance.\textsuperscript{200}

Murphy demonstrates the collaborative breadth of Massine, extending innovation through to the post-modern. His creativity compares with the \textit{Maurice Bejart Dance Company (1987-)} of Lausanne, Switzerland, and its root \textit{Ballets du XXe Siécle, Brussels (1960-)}. Prolific Frenchman Béjart (1927-2007) approached the roots of Russian classicism with innovative contemporary choreography, including dramatic spectacles of fantasy in erotic re-workings from the Ballets Russes repertoire, as well as inspirations from myth, diverse sexual psychodrama, and contemporary spectacle\textsuperscript{201}. Described as the pre-eminent descendant of Diaghilev and his protégée Lifar, Bejart, as does Murphy, creates “homoerotic dances that celebrate male beauty” reflecting contemporary sexuality.\textsuperscript{202} The \textit{London Gay News} described \textit{Poppy} as: “a Béjart-like work with more male nudity”\textsuperscript{203}.

Additionally, Murphy’s adventurous stylisations rank with the magic, athleticism and sexual diversity of Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo and the wit and satire of Matthew’s Bourne’s creativity. Murphy’s dancers truly could do anything.

With twenty-six international tours in over one hundred cities in twenty countries, and altogether over one hundred and forty original works, the Sydney Dance Company enjoys remarkable success. Principally showcasing Murphy’s own creations, the company also performs other Australian choreographies and mentors many emerging Australians artists. Composer Carl Vine and designer Kristen Fredriksen were significant consistent collaborators, which Murphy

\textsuperscript{200} Murphy cited in Brian Hoad, Program note for “Body of Work – A Retrospective”, on the occasion of The Sydney Dance Company’s 25\textsuperscript{th} anniversary in 2000.

\textsuperscript{201} Bejart (1927-) reworked \textit{The Rite of Spring}, \textit{Bolero}, \textit{Messe pour le temps present}, \textit{The Firebird}, and devised a work on Hiv-Aids (as did Murphy on the topic of contemporary narcissism in \textit{The Picture of Dorian Gray}) around his friend Freddie Mercury. Bejart Ballet Lausanne. Biography. Online: \url{http://bejart.ch/en/bejart/bio.php} [Extracted 1/8/07].

\textsuperscript{202} John McFarland, Bejart, Maurice (1927-), Encyclopaedia of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual and queer culture. Online: \url{http://www.glbtiq.com/arts/bejart_m.html} [Extracted 10/8/07].

describes as: “a poetic communication of what you want and not a dictatorship … you actually have to very early in the process give over to them”. Declaring himself: “a control freak”, Murphy supervises tightly and, when faced with difficulties: “I move pretty quickly by choreographic standards … so I can sometimes avert disasters … I want what was in my head to come, to arrive on stage as close as possible”.  

There has been substantial exchange with the Australian Ballet (re-interpretations in Australian genres of the classics Nutcracker and Swan Lake including cherished appearances of ex-Borovansky dancers); the Australian Opera (Turandot, The Trojans and Salome); the Australian Bicentennial Authority; the Sydney Olympics International Arts Festival (Mythologia); and prominent international companies including the Metropolitan Opera New York and the Nederlands Dans Theater. Speaking on the occasion of the fiftieth birthday of The Australian Opera (2006), Murphy proudly noted: “The Australian Opera are so world class because its artists, its singers, its designers, its directors, are all Australian”.  

Murphy has danced and created in China since 1982, including choreographing dance excerpts for the film Mao’s Last Dancer. In 2005, Murphy and Vine’s collaboration The Silver Rose, after Richard Strauss’ Der Rosenkavalier, premiered for the Bavarian State Ballet. In the same year, Murphy produced

47. Lynkushka, Angela: Graeme Murphy, choreographing the SDC in rehearsal at Walsh Bay. Part of Portraits of Australian choreographers, and the backdrop to the ballet 'Two Feet' [picture] NLA. An-110332057-6.

204 Murphy, audiotape interview, 16/2/2007.
Mulan for the Sydney Dance Company and the Shanghai Song and Dance Ensemble further cementing his Chinese connections.

The Sydney Dance Company, “the premier dance company in Australia, a nation with one of the liveliest dance cultures in the world”, was recognized and reported as such by The New York Post in 2006. There now existed twenty-eight performing dance companies in Australia.

Like Diaghilev, Murphy has been inspired to parody everyday life by catching the complexities of contemporary times, often choosing to confront or disturb audiences. Always abreast of contemporary themes, even by adapting the classical canon to contemporary modes with new insight, Murphy insists on being “in touch with the absolute time you are living in”. He emphasises the necessity “to express who we are”, and always “to bring humanity to creativity”. Murphy’s unique handwriting and flair is considered truly avant-garde, compared even with that of Jerome Robins. Referring to their extraordinary universal appeal, George Negus commented to both Murphy and Vernon, “I think it has to be said, if anybody has reduced the exclusivity of dance, you two have done it”.

Financial arrangements were often difficult. Hoad reflects that more than once, “they were indeed on the very edge of bankruptcy”. Facing potential closure in 1983, Murphy reluctantly sacked dancers who resorted to cabaret work at Kinsella’s Hotel Taylor Square, which, exactly as occurred in the Borovansky era, effectively created new audiences. Citing ongoing funding combined with tiresome political wrangling, as well as intense anxieties for what he terms “modern hedonistic pleasures”, Murphy and Vernon resigned in October 2007. Reflecting on “inevitable ageing” and perhaps as much, weariness caused by administrative stresses, Murphy recalled the:

207 Murphy, audiotape interview, 16/2/2007.
Cocteau quote about … you look at yourself in a mirror and you see death at work, like bees in a glass hive and here we are surrounded all our lives by mirrors to remind us of how fallible and how fleeting our careers are.²¹¹

Murphy laments, “I don’t think we, as a nation, are looking in the right places for our future … great art … is the one thing in history that tends to survive”.²¹²

Making clear their political stance, Murphy and Vernon told *Australian Dance Magazine*:

> Australia’s dance world has entered a less dynamic phase [and the] potential for new adventures is diminished in these cash-strapped times … [we] are disappointed with the government’s indifference to a force that could bring so much to the troubled culture of Australia’s identity.²¹³

In the past decade, Australia has lost many important artists to overseas companies because of the lack of government support and diminished funding. Whilst freelancing widely around the world, especially in a China he considers to be the most exciting potential creative artistic sphere,²¹⁴ To much acclaim, in 2008, Murphy has reproduced an Australian-themed *Swan Lake*, which the Australian Ballet commissioned to tour to Paris as part of the centenary Diaghilev Ballets Russes celebrations. In 2009, in an exciting reconnection with the Australian Ballet, which has turned over total artistic direction to him for the event, Murphy has led a massive new collaboration in redesigning Fokine’s *Firebird* to the original Stravinsky score. On the significance of retaining and re-invigourating the spirit of Ballets Russes with *Firebird* (premiered in Australia by de Basil in Melbourne in 1936), he commented: “I wanted people to feel like they were at the premiere of the original and I wanted to take them back to the excitement of the turn of the century.”²¹⁵ And, as a continuing demonstration of his broad

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²¹⁵ Murphy cited in Alex Lalak, “Graeme Murphy’s Firebird, with the Australian Ballet”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 16/4/2009.
collaborative capability, Murphy will reproduce *Aida* for the Australian Opera in 2009.

Murphy and Vernon’s last offering, as a denouement to the Sydney Dance Company as well as their parting gift for Melbourne audiences, *Ever After Ever* (July, 2007), was a fitting collaboration with Carl Vine.²¹⁶ Farewelled on stage by Murphy’s political hero Paul Keating as Master of Ceremonies, Murphy and Vernon gave a final farewell duet with the cast of the Sydney Dance Company at the Theatre Royal, Sydney, on October 27, 2007.

*Berlin* (1995) was revived in Brisbane and Sydney, in November 2007, as the company’s final performance under the artistic direction of Murphy and Vernon. Valerie Lawson reported Murphy’s closing oration for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, citing: “Murphy’s recalling how his hit *Poppy* was created in the Theatre Royal in 1978 … [I] thanked my lucky star that, that work worked”.²¹⁷

This chapter has demonstrated the remarkable growth of dance in Australia to a significant extent attributable to the impact of the Ballets Russes. Throughout the trajectory, larger-than-life personalities have contributed to perpetuate the tradition, foremost nurturing Australian talent. They include teachers, composers, designers,

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costume makers, stage management, technicians, filmmakers, choreographic notaters and curators, many of who stayed on from the visiting companies. Scholars are emerging. Alongside the Australian Ballet, the Sydney Dance Company is indisputably ranked internationally as equal premier Australian company. The two exchange creatively because they are complementary: compatible classical and contemporary schools and theatres, each perpetuating the Diaghilev collaborative artistic tradition and each authentically directly traceable to the revolutionary Diaghilev Ballets Russes.
Chapter Three: Poppy.

Twenty-eight year old Murphy premiered *Poppy... Impressions of the Life and Art of Jean Cocteau*\(^{218}\) at the Theatre Royal in Sydney on April 12, 1978.

This chapter describes the company’s revised performance recorded for SBS television by producer and director Philippe Charluet, at Sadler’s Wells, London, in 1981.\(^{219}\) It argues that *Poppy* is the key creative expression of the link between the Sydney Dance Company and the original Diaghilev Ballets Russes. *Poppy* demonstrates the prime characteristics of the Diaghilev epoch: the importance of classical dance techniques to contemporary choreographic innovation, diverse artistic collaboration, athletic physicality and especially virile masculinity, cross-cultural representations, and uninhibited expressions of sexuality, androgyny and narcissism. In combination, of course, all performance must entertain to be successful.

Diaghilev, Cocteau, and the *Ballets Russes* were the vanguard of the broader artistic *mouvement nouveau*, a polymorphous agent of sexuality as art. Murphy relished creating the title role because he identified with Cocteau and the entire

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\(^{218}\) *Poppy* boasted the first score for a full-length work to be commissioned from an Australian composer – Carl Vine. It was the product of a team of collaborators. Georges Gittoes, Gabrielle Dalton and Ross Barnett (scenic design and visual concept of the production), with Gittoes (projection and special lighting effects), and Joe Gladwin (puppets). John Gruen. “Creating Poppy Graeme Murphy dances the life of Jean Cocteau”. *After Dark*, July 1981.

\(^{219}\) *Poppy*, revised, SDC, SBS Television Australia, 1981.
movement; this was his chance to expand uninhibited. Poppy’s success confirmed the artistic independence of his young company and its future direction.

Poppy lifted the curtain on an era for dance theatre in Australia. It set a theatrical precedent by drawing together a creative team involving choreographer, dancers, composer, designers, puppets and film. It opened up the major international touring circuits to the company.220

As Murphy said himself:

“Poppy” was - the innovation - that triggered all the other innovations. It gave me the courage … to say I can do what I want. I don’t have to do what is expected of contemporary dance, I don’t have to do what is expected of polite theatre, I can do whatever I want. And it paid off in spades … in terms of the company’s reputation, in terms of my own courage.221

Poppy is a benchmark in Australian dance history: “a work that will one day be regarded as a milestone in Australian artistic endeavour”, wrote Kirby.222

Mindful to entertainment first, Murphy prefers that “Poppy be watched as a theatre piece rather than as a dance work”, but his intention was also to educate by illustrating the roots of the Ballets Russes.223 This is told by the over-laying portrayal of the initial Saisons des Paris (Act One, Scene Four) at the Théâtre du Chatelet. And, as a biography of Cocteau’s youth (Act One, Scenes One to Three), Poppy demonstrates the deep influence of sexuality in the creativity that typified the Diaghilev epoch.

Murphy was inspired to tell the story of Cocteau, France’s artistic enfant terrible, on a creative rebound.224 Originally intending to mount a full-length ballet biography of Sir Robert Helpmann, Murphy was hurt when Helpmann declined his support. Murphy recalled his disappointment that Helpmann lacked confidence in him:

221 Murphy, audiotape interview, 16/2/2007.
222 John Kirby, “Theatre with John Kirby. Poppy is a deep trip into the soul”, Brisbane Sunday Mail, 22/7/1979 143.
224 Enfant Terrible. The term (singular) became synonymous with Cocteau.
An emerging choreographer with no credentials ... with only three ballets to his name ... I think he also got the smell that it would have been a warts and all ballet, I wasn’t going to do the nice side of Bobby, you know, there would have been dunking at Bondi Beach\(^\text{225}\).

Paradoxically, after seeing *Poppy* in 1981, *New York Times* critic and historian Clive Barnes compared the two artists: “Murphy has a compelling dance fluency, but also these flamboyant dramatics, which he shares with another, rather less significant, Australian choreographer, Sir Robert Helpmann”\(^\text{226}\).

Colleagues encouraged Murphy to draw from his own inspiration while in New York of exhibitions and film screenings of Cocteau. Murphy and Vernon both were impressed with the legacy of Cocteau from their formative experiences with Ballets Felix Blaska in France. Murphy read Cocteau’s “descriptive biographical essays and writings … his films … and drawing”\(^\text{227}\). In prefacing *Body of Work* (2000), which reflected on twenty-two years of Murphy’s creativity, Hoad revealed: “Murphy realised that the young Cocteau had been deeply involved with Diaghilev and his *Ballets Russes*, the company that … revolutionised the whole concept of dance”\(^\text{228}\).

*Poppy* emerged just as Australia needed to develop culturally and artistically. The Australian Ballet and School had established international reputation, producing more competent dancers than ever before. This represented a significant coming-of-age. Products of the social and sexual revolution of the 1960’s and 70’s, confident young Australians were eager to showcase themselves by taking on international concepts and, in turn, exporting Australian innovation to the world. The young had unshackled the infamous cringe.

*Poppy*, “a presentation in which dance has equal billing with theatrical effects of sound and film”\(^\text{229}\), was the first Australian multi-media ballet and the “first full-length all-Australian ‘ballet’ – at last”\(^\text{230}\). A two-act choreography, *Poppy* is

\(^{225}\) Murphy, audiotape interview, 16/2/2007.
\(^{227}\) Janine Kyle, “*Poppy* keeps popping up”, *SDC* Archives.
\(^{228}\) Hoad, Programme notes *SDC* Retrospective *Body of Work*, May 2000.
played out by separate narratives: “the first [act] centring on Cocteau’s personal
development, the second on reveries upon his work”.\textsuperscript{231} \textit{Poppy} is a biographical
story of what Cocteau himself called his “painful youth”, his meeting with
Diaghilev and collaboration with the Ballets Russes, his love affair with Radiguet,
psychic pain during rehabilitation from drug dependency and his recurrent
recidivism with addiction.\textsuperscript{232} Cocteau’s creativity brought him to achieve
acceptance of his own sexual identity. Identifying with Cocteau’s experiences at
school, Murphy reflects on \textit{Poppy} as “autobiographical”: “I lived the role …
Cocteau’s life was both a ballet and a poem, and that’s what I want it to be”.\textsuperscript{233}

\textit{Poppy} is an architectural ballet built on the components of a study of Cocteau
designed to explain his integral connection with the Ballets Russes collaboration.
Murphy’s choreographic methodology is to fuse innovations on diverse body
shapes, unique visual demonstrations of immense hybrid vigour that he and
technical disciplinarian Vernon consciously groomed into his company. Diaghilev
pioneered the technique in opposition to the strict uniformity and hierarchy of the
Imperial School, which he believed retarded new talent. Murphy adds advanced
choreographic skills competently performed by all his highly disciplined dancers,
whom he proudly insists, “can turn their style to anything”.\textsuperscript{234} The cast of fifteen
dancers exhaustingly perform two and three roles each throughout the two acts. So
diverse were Cocteau’s media and collaborations that Murphy contends: “If
Cocteau were alive today he would be a multi-media artist”\textsuperscript{235}. Photographer
Phillipe Halsman had appropriately composed the trick image (1949) of Cocteau
as “a six-armed prodigy – one arm holding a book, one a pen, a cigarette, a
paintbrush and scissors, the sixth gesturing” to parody his diversity.\textsuperscript{236}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotenote{231} John Gruen, \textit{After Dark}, July 1981.
\footnotenote{232} Cocteau, \textit{The Difficulty of Being} 75-76.
\footnotenote{233} Murphy, audiotape interview, 16/2/07.
\footnotenote{234} Ibid.
\footnotenote{235} Murphy cited in Emily Gibson, “Poppy The Sydney Dance Company”, \textit{3D World Magazine},
5/11/91.
\footnotenote{236} “Jean Cocteau On the Edge of the Century”, Exhibition at the Pompidou Centre, Paris, October
2003, RAHA. Online: \url{http://kabulpress.org/RAHA_news_cocteau.htm} [Extracted 3/10/2006].
\end{footnotes}
Poppy is a distinct revitalization of the structure of previous ballet genres, which traditionally required that specific roles were to be danced by a specific stereotype, identified predominantly by physical shape but also by technical genre. Kirby points to Murphy’s brilliant fusions of shapes and styles, “Cocteau’s cartographer has been found in Murphy, whose dance theatre experience is like a set of Japanese haiku poems – each one illuminating either a seminal happening or a resultant image from the oeuvre”.237

Poppy has so many significant and unconventional facets from dance to lighting, stagecraft, and textiles that this brief study can in no way be definitive. “In Poppy, I wanted to use painters who had never done set design and a musician who didn’t compose for dance”238. Melbourne Age Critic Leonard Radic enthused:

All the resources of the theatre are called ingeniously into play: masks, puppets, grotesques, film clips, back projection lighting, laser beams and recorded speech [and] Carl Vine’s highly effective pastiche score … for once, here is a choreographer with too much to say.239.

Morrison reported in The Australian Jewish News: “Poppy is a work of towering creativity, rich to the eyes and ears and, yes, to the intellect”.240

237 Kirby, “Poppy is a deep trip into the soul”, Brisbane Sunday Mail, 22/7/79 143.
238 Graeme Murphy cited in Emily Gibson, “Poppy. The Sydney Dance Company”[SDC Archives].
239 Leonard Radic, “Poppy – the tragic dancing downfall of Jean Cocteau”, Melbourne Age [SDC Archives, day and month unretained], 1978.
Cocteau was a Narcissus-like figure, which Murphy represents by an examination of the tragic relationship between Orpheus and Narcissus. Cocteau, forever the existential aesthete who pushed artistic and social boundaries to shake off cultural taboos, sought to identify his sole existence through whatever suffering was necessary. Walter Strauss wrote about Cocteau’s own literary work, *The Mask of Orpheus and Narcissus*:

> The Orphic Eros transforms being: he masters cruelty and death through liberation. His language is song, and his work is play. Narcissus’ life is that of beauty, and his existence is contemplation. These images refer to the aesthetic dimension as the one in which their reality principle must be sought and validated.242

Like Diaghilev and Nijinsky, who had painfully pioneered analytical insight into contemporary human behaviour via the medium of dance, Cocteau’s artistic suffering never abated. This dimension of unresolved expression, out of the classical to modern and even undefined post-modern, by constantly evolving methodologies, is also evidenced in Murphy’s creativity. *Poppy* transits from the fundamental ballet theatre to the existential, its distinct methodology being diverse uninhibited sexual expression. Stoneley identifies the idea of discovering authentic sexuality with reference to Genet’s experiences of the sea, “the natural symbol of

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241 Margaret Crosland and Sinclair Road cited in Introduction by the Translators. Cocteau, *Opium* 12.
“liberty”, and this has a direct connection with Cocteau and the bathhouse scene in *Poppy*.243

Diaghilev, Norton wrote, was “branded the Russian Oscar Wilde … a figure of Wildean flamboyance by wilful association”,244 while Stoneley argues he was “tolerated [by English society, at least] as a way of making amends for the treatment of Wilde a decade or so earlier”.245 Similarly, Cocteau aspired to be a figure of Wildean intellectual influence under Diaghilev’s tutelage. Cocteau’s massive production across all media consumed his entire existence. W. H. Auden once wrote: “to enclose the collected works of Cocteau one would need not a bookshelf, but a warehouse”246, and Edmund White concluded, “Jean Cocteau, like Oscar Wilde, whom he admired … put his talent into his works, his genius into his life”.247

In his fascination with unresolved opposites, Cocteau was at once modern and neoclassical, revolutionary and reactionary … With Cocteau we see another side of the art of the twentieth century, that epoch marked by avant-garde minimalism and a tendency to abstraction, by doubts as much as by a paradoxical fascination with images, by theoretical manifestos claiming to regulate the production of forms, and by a certain Puritanism spurred by ideological commitment.248

Cocteau, wrote Brenson of *The New York Times*, was: “what the French call a *fabulateur* … his imagination might be triggered by something in the world around him, but there was no telling where it would wind up”.249 Frequently unpredictable and controversial, Cocteau was an international figure who enjoyed a cult following fed substantially by his association with Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes. Gay and camp before their time, always challenging social mores with

cryptic wit that aped Wilde, Cocteau mocked: “I am a liar who always tells the truth”. He felt no need to hide. Historically mindful of France’s homosexual lawyer Cambaceres, author of the Code Napoleon (1804), and its historical omission of homosexuality as a crime, Cocteau declared: “but I will not agree to be tolerated. This damages my love of love and liberty”. Along with Gide and Sartre, he defended the petty criminal Jean Genet, and promoted his homosexual writing because he recognized its libertarian and artistic merit.

Cocteau wrote some of his best works whilst recovering from his addiction to opium, including the stage play Orphée (1926), a modernization of the ancient Orpheus myth that is integral to Poppy. Stravinsky observed that for the stricken Cocteau: “the chief purpose of the drug-taking came to be book-making”. In his diarised account of his recovery, Cocteau argued: “under the meeting place of opium, one becomes the meeting place for the phenomena which art sends to us from outside”. He became a constant recidivist simply because he felt he had not found the cures for his troubled mind, so that when he again felt an unbalanced state of mind, he “preferred an artificial state of equilibrium to no equilibrium at all”. Compelled by his will to creativity, Cocteau defiantly reiterated his deduction: “I will take it if my work wants me to. And if opium wants me to”.


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252 Cocteau, Orphée (Orpheus, the Stageplay, Paris, 1927).
254 Ibid 20.
255 Ibid 146.
Cocteau”, and urged New Yorkers: “Don’t miss ‘Poppy … an engrossing evening in the theatre … a coup de theatre is the illusion of seeing the young Cocteau standing in the wings of a Diaghilev performance”. This representation was the key link. Kisselgloff remarked that Murphy’s “physical resemblance [to Cocteau] is uncanny”.257

International opinion, however mixed, focussed favourably on Murphy and his company at a time when only the classical Australian Ballet had drawn attention abroad. For the first time, an Australian experimental contemporary dance company was recognized in its own right. Pre-eminent author and critic Clement Crisp of The London Financial Times wrote:

[Murphy’s] own performance as the poet, prisoner in his hospital bed at first, surrounded by figures directly inspired by the nightmare drawings in Opium The Diary of a Cure, has the authentic Cocteau-feeling of poetry drawn from the inversion of everyday events.

Not entirely won-over, however, indisputable classicist Crisp quipped that, whilst Murphy had importantly demonstrated there was “probably a ballet to be made from [Cocteau’s] art … I do not think it is Poppy”, perhaps missing entirely the significance of the title “The Life …” and the enmeshed nature of life and art for Cocteau the artist, which Murphy had drawn. 258 Noel Goodwin of The International Herald Tribune, praised Murphy’s choreography in the risqué tango and matelot scenes but was scathing about the choice of Cocteau: “I have long thought that Cocteau was one of the more tiresome figures in the French art and literature of his time, and particularly in the Diaghilev entourage, and there is nothing in Poppy to change my mind”. 259 This, however, is a challenging critique of Cocteau and not necessarily an objective criticism of the ballet itself. London author and critic, John Percival, however, wrote encouragingly in The Times of Murphy’s “gift” for:

organizing his material into an eloquent, coherent whole, concise and well shaped. Poppy … is as good a piece of dance theatre as I have seen anywhere in a long time; and the Sydney

company, working as a team, put it over with a precision that Cocteau would have
admired.260

Poppy quickly became one of the Sydney Dance Company’s most popular works, notably received well by alternative reviewers including the international gay press. Significantly, Hoad reflected:

It was the key work of all that was to come: Cocteau as master of the Muses; Nijinsky the wild young dancer and choreographer; Diaghilev the daring entrepreneur with the infallible flair for young and rising talent; a singular gift for integrating all aspects of art into his productions; immaculate taste and a knack for always keeping his company just on the right side of bankruptcy261.

Poppy is to Murphy what Petrushka was to Diaghilev: groundbreaking, they are disturbing meta-theatrical psychological insights, which mirror complex interpolated stories that cannot end conclusively and, therefore, must leave an attentive audience puzzled. Each represents an intrinsic cultural theme, with twists level on level but, symbolically, the transfiguring of the modern out of the traditional. Petrushka parodied the emerging Russian psyche after the revolution; Poppy unravels the surreal and modes of modernism to reveal the concept of existentialism, which succeeded entrenched traditionalism. Poppy served as the forerunner to many psychodramas devised by Murphy.

Performing the Ballets Russes repertoire as backdrop to the figure of Cocteau scurrying in the wings demonstrates the very roots of Australian dance extending back to Diaghilev’s original company. Diaghilev delighted in confronting unsuspecting audiences with sex, whatever other mechanisms of meta-textualism and multi-faceted artistic experimentations were also in place. Unquestionably, the resulting shock value succeeded as exciting entertainment because of its mysteriousness, but also because it was framed in the intriguing new concept of unexplained endings. The public wanted more. It invoked inquiry, required explanation, and led to an educative process. Specific characters in Poppy, such as the Can-Can dancers and burlesque parody Babette (after the famous

261 Hoad, Programme notes, Body of Work, SDC, 2000.
American/Parisian transvestite), are deliberate mischievous symbols redrawn from familiar life that Murphy intended to be bizarre and unsettling. They play-out as entertainment, cruelly evolving to perversion, in a clear representation of Cocteau’s own torturous journey toward acceptance by confrontation and misrepresentation.262

Obsessed with plays on mirrors, Cocteau believed that mirrors “should reflect a little before throwing back images”, because they are symbolic portals through which we transit life to death. “Death emerges from the mirror and disappears into it”.263 Mirrors could produce trick imagery of the narcissist to heighten his sense of existence, but, simultaneously, contain one’s passage in life in the same context of death.

These themes are realized most strongly in his films, where Cocteau used images of mirrors and self-portraits to explore the trap of narcissism, employed duplicated rooms and reverse projection to symbolize the separate "cameras" of the mind, and cast devastatingly beautiful actors to embody the yearning for the flesh that underlies much of his animus towards social convention.264

In Poppy, Murphy frequently used spectacular mirror props together with trick stagecraft to create the effect of exchanging actual mirrors with their own images, as well as theatrical scrims to create reflections and revelations, sometimes also significant obfuscation. In the closing scene, film clips provide mirror reflections from Cocteau’s life. From Cocteau’s writing, Strauss observes the parallel:

Then comes the specific Orphic moment: the descent into the depth of the self through a mirror, the movement into a downward beyond. Yet the most striking aspect of this Orphic gesture is the fact that it goes through a reflecting surface, namely the image par excellence that is traditionally associated with Narcissus.265

262 Cocteau played the same ménage-a-trios in his relationships with women; hiding his homosexuality from his mother, failing to consummate two marriages, and accepting financial assistance for rehabilitation from Chanel. Diaghilev notoriously built a coterie of women admirers for influence and financial backing.


264 “Art and Culture Film Jean Cocteau”. Online: http://www.artandculture.com/cgi-bin/WebObjects/ACLive.woa/wa/artist?id=83 [Extracted 6/5/07].

265 Strauss, Jean Cocteau: The Mask of Orpheus and Narcissus 2.
*Poppy* is an unhappy story, which exposes Cocteau’s angst, pain and anger as defiant self-promoted anti-hero, anguish that is ameliorated only by his intense artistic creativity. This is how Diaghilev exploited Cocteau. Notwithstanding his later diagnosis of schizophrenia, Nijinsky’s relationship with Diaghilev might be compared here. Otherwise driven by sexual confusion, Cocteau at last fully accepted his sexuality at the premiere of the scandalous *Le Sacre du Printemps*, when he realised Diaghilev’s desire to shock was “a real and profound” aspect of the whole venture.”\(^\text{266}\) This revelation made him free to work. “How admirable the attitude of one who has made good of the time granted him and did not interfere by trying to be his own judge”\(^\text{267}\). Drawn from the existential rationality of Nietzsche, which inspired Wagner, Wilde, Gide, Diaghilev and Cocteau,\(^\text{268}\) all that seemed to matter was art – art for art’s sake and, for Cocteau not least, the power it bestowed. He wrote: “the privileges of beauty are enormous. Its powers are felt even by those who seem to care the least about it”\(^\text{269}\). Just as T. S. Elliot wrote “no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone”\(^\text{270}\), the emerging modernists sought to find their own self-definition by demonstrations of the philosophies that motivated them. For Cocteau art, sexuality, and love were one and paramount. “Narcissus grew into a beautiful youth, desired by boys and girls, but adamant in his refusal to be touched by either”\(^\text{271}\). Cocteau theorized the relationship of sexual activity and art, thus:

Art is born of coitus between the male and female elements of which we are all composed, and they are more balanced in the case of artists than of other men. It results from a kind of incest, of love of self for self, of parthenogenesis. It is this that makes marriage so dangerous among artists, for whom it represents a pleonasm, a monstrous effort towards the norm … the creative instinct is satisfied elsewhere and leaves sexual pleasure free to exert itself in the pure domain of aesthetics, inclining it also towards unfruitful forms of expression … the spirit free to profit from it as it wishes.\(^\text{272}\)


\(^{267}\) Cocteau, *The Difficulty of Being* 84.


\(^{269}\) Cocteau cited in Geudras, *Jean Cocteau Erotic Drawings* 83.


\(^{272}\) Cocteau, *Opium* 80-81.
Denied the artistic collaboration he sought with his father, a man of frustrated sensibilities whose suicide utterly dismayed Jean, Jean found no outlet at boarding school either. Instead, his schoolmates, led by the handsome bisexual Pierre Dargelos, taunted him with sexual debauchery and brutality, perversely teasing out the artist in him. “[Dargelos] boasted – and rightly – that he loved men”273. Jean obsessively drew overstated sexual characterisations of Dargelos, “drawings of poetry”; even likening mythological figures to his own anti role model. “Through his work, Cocteau resuscitated his hero Dargelos … his form would vanish on one page, only to reappear on the next”.274 To Cocteau, concepts of love always clashed with his desire for his imagery of the fiercely masculine Dargelos. Just as Diaghilev had manipulatively constructed the repertoire of the Ballets Russes around his young lovers, Cocteau was “attracted to a series of beautiful young men in whom he saw qualities of genius and with whom he could merge in creative collaboration”.275 Cocteau’s lovers became a constant showcase in all his artistic collaborations. Iconic Ballets Russes conductor Igor Markevitch concluded: “I would say that the greatest works of the Ballets Russes were a direct result of [homosexual] love affairs”.276

*Poppy* is packed with sexual stereotypes, which Murphy identified for the purpose of exaggeration. Judith Butler wrote: “to emphasize gender roles is to ‘play up’ – a reiterative or rearctictulatory practice – a resourcing of the kinaesthetic styles of gendered performance”277. Employing theatrical license, Murphy dramatically overstates in order to parody the very act of stereotyping, itself an established camp inversion: to highlight by accenting the ridiculous out of plain constructs of normality. The giant diffident schoolteacher, who is oblivious to the underworld of Dargelos, and huge omnipresent Diaghilev, who oversees all, both represented in Act One, are obvious characterisations. Just as Nijinsky pioneered in *Le Faun* and

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274 Ibid 19.
275 Douglas Blair Tumbough, Diaghilev, Sergei (1872-1929), Encyclopaedia of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer culture. Online: [http://www.glbtc.com/arts/diaghilev_s.html](http://www.glbtc.com/arts/diaghilev_s.html) [Extracted 23/10/07].
276 Markevitch cited in Ibid.
Printemps, Murphy has constantly deliberately placed diversity and fringe sociability at the forefront.

Diaghilev deliberately orchestrated scandals primarily for commercial success. To audiences, some displays that they identify with can be momentarily painful, especially for those who suffer fear of rejection and may be in a state of denial, and who recognize as their own, stereotypical behaviours. As a conscious methodology in Poppy, Murphy boldly uses archetypes that are all too familiar to closeted homosexual men in order to demonstrate the inevitability of recognition. There is little nuance. Performance demonstrates that desire can become reality. In a collective sense, the proposition of social acceptance is tabled; in effect no matter the initial public reaction, audiences ratify acceptance just by remaining to see the performance evolve. This is how the theatrical experience can be collectively cathartic, a common understanding can lead to acceptance and pain can diminish. Diaghilev’s audiences erupted violently at first, then, because audiences enjoyed the entertainment, intellectual debate could ensue and the important effect was that discourse could lead to learning. Therefore, we can say the repertoire was, in fact, educative. Murphy has achieved the same effect.

**Act One** of Poppy reveals a purple hue lit sky behind a poppy field, symbol of the dominant control over Jean’s life. The flowers sway to their own timing. Jean’s Mother figure is self-absorbed and does not connect with him, so, in a foretelling; he connects with the poppies by innocently setting them into motion. As heroin, poppies will one day absorb and control him. Jean will never be free in a dependency that will constantly remind him of his disconnected childhood. Inconspicuously, father appears and spontaneously wraps Jean in his arms in a spiritual connection. This confluence of imagery led by Carl Vine’s discordant score is a technique of Théâtre du Complicite, which Murphy deliberately uses after Stravinsky (dissonance), Matisse (clash of colours), Picasso (modernist symbolisms), and Cocteau (obtuse set improvisation, in Parade).278

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Scene Two is Jean’s classroom, his private world drawing at his easel. In contrast to the boyish symbols around him, Jean’s easel displays the symbol of a pipe, his future comforter and daemon. Dargelos and his pack bully him relentlessly. Jean is inextricably attracted to Dargelos’ masculinity: “Dargelos was handsome, he had the beauty of an animal”. The to-and-fro jostling and hurt; the symbolism of Cocteau desiring Dargelos, and Dargelos, in turn, substituting the vulnerable Cocteau in role-play of homosexual to heterosexual as farce; and Cocteau’s resultant will to power resulting from rejection is a psychic triangulation.

Imagine the deeply troubling impact a boy like Dargelos could have on the lives of unformed youths who were greedy for love, knew nothing of the enigma of the senses, and had nothing to protect them from the terrible blows the sensitive soul inevitably receives from the supernatural sex of beauty.

In the unspoken sexual discourse: “here too is the mirror once more – the mirror that separates the two boys and is their sole means of communication”. In Poppy, Jean continues to draw erotic representations of Dargelos. The giant puppet figure of a teacher, accompanied by female monitors, strides ambivalently through the melee, a representation of impotence accompanied by neutrality. Murphy superimposes projections of proscenium high images of Cocteau’s erotic drawings to emphasize the disturbing lesson.

Scene Three is a continuous cabaret, which opens starkly with a discordant Can-Can paced adagio, instead of the usual allegro, thus debasing the original concept. This is “dance representing sex and sexuality and sexual acts by performing the reality of it – bodies communicate to bodies”. As the contradiction plays out, Cocteau’s sexuality will be defined. Two dancers in confronting, transparent layered plastic ruffle, gyrate their pelvises grotesquely. Femininity expressed as overt stiffness signifies the incoherence of bisexuality for Cocteau. Emotionless, like touting prostitutes, they move as if cocked mechanically. Alternately turning

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280 Cocteau cited from Le Livre Blanc, in Annie Guedras, Jean Cocteau Erotic Drawings 11.
281 Sprigge and Kihm, Jean Cocteau: The Man and the Mirror 110.
in and out on their own space, the dancers extend their limbs like octopi to entrap
bare-chested Cocteau who is supporting them, and then abruptly they repel him.
Pairs of elegant, immaculately attired dancers enter in an imagery of Parisian
society. Gender and status are defined in stereotypical role-play. Unaffected
Cocteau, who simply wants to dance, interlocks, menancingly suggestive of
ménage-a-trois. This incites the males to form in a pack with the females, dancing
them backwards in submission.

51. Graeme Murphy as Cocteau enhanced by projected Cocteau drawing in the burlesque scene,
Act One. SDC Archives.

The females are replaced by expressionless marionettes to represent
depersonalised gender roles. The males act out rape on the puppets in competitive
disjointed movements symbolic of distorted ethics. Discordant clashing rhythms
signify the separation of movement and sound. Cocteau leads his lady,
symbolising it is time for him to take charge of his life. Confidently, he signals:
“What the public criticizes in you, cultivate. It is you”. 283 Spent, three emasculated
males conclude their dance of rape and fall disheveled, but Cocteau has moved on.

In this scene, Murphy is suggesting that homophobia, by definition, not only
excludes homosexuality but also, objectifies and devalues females as sexual
objects. Homosexuals do not choose to behave as the puppets do, because that
feeds homophobia. At the crash of a cymbal, we revisit the burlesque where
Cocteau and a male partner conjoin to the approval of the off-stage audience.

283 Cocteau, Brainy Quote Jean Cocteau Quotes. Online:
http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/j/jean_cocteau.html [Extracted 25/11/06].
When the three puppet figures enter in front of the formal figures and proceed to dance together, man and woman, watched by a second man, the sympathetic female onlooker enjoying not being objectified. She accepts unconditionally, happy to see men dancing together just because they enjoy dancing. Burt notes that: “gay male dancing bodies … can dissolve in pleasure within the boundaries … not of women … but of other men”. The performance that demonstrates unconditional acceptance is a stylised display of how women, who reject being objectified and who seek equality and compatibility with males by connecting with homosexual men for their intrinsic value not just the sexual, can achieve what otherwise insensitive heterosexual men deny them. The use of metamorphic puppet figures mirrors the tormenting realization of Cocteau’s own sexual identity from androgyny to homosexuality.

Acrobat/dancer Barbette, the transvestite surrealist, enters by dancing in the freestyle of sexual icon Isadora Duncan, who subjugated clear definition of gender to broader images of beauty and erotic displays of androgyny. The coldness is thawed as a fanfare announces the entertainment. As Strauss cites in symbolic recognition of openness in performance without fear of derision, “no more trapezes without safety nets”. Cocteau introduces her, a curious figure in gay ballet circus costume. We recognize her as a transvestite performer because she turns her gaze to us in confirmation. As Barbette turns, trapezoid muscles contradict the pretty pink tutu and swaying hips, a deliberate challenge of dichotomous display in sexual roles. It is a tease. The supporting characters, notably the males, may not have detected any difference. Barbette represents a figure of sexual deception immediately we sight her, but we suspect the players are unaware, which invokes mystique and intrigue.

Barbette symbolises the modern against classicism, a direct visual connection with the mission of Diaghilev that Cocteau chanelled into his creations for Ballets Russes. A backdrop of Art Deco décor, expressive of sexuality in the style of Erte,
enhances this. Evoking sensational reaction, the invincible Barbette swings both ways to denote the emerging transsexualism of the era. She is a powerful androgyne. Her dismount from the swing innocently mimics a sexual mount, symbolizing both the cryptic and fun inherent in the gender categorizations of the onlookers.

Central ballets of the late Diaghilev period included Nijinska’s elegant *Les Biches* (1924), which portrayed lesbian identity, and the representation of diverse sexualities was made the more entertaining by modern subliminal cross-gender role-plays in her *Le Train Bleu*, later in the same year. *Poppy* exudes all the sophistication of these stylish, modern-period, benchmark ballets. In *Poppy*, the use of the fluid dance genre made famous by Fred Astaire conveys formality to mask deception; it is in the genre of Ashton directly attributable to Fokine. Murphy constantly demonstrates his own stylish connection with the influence of the Ballets Russes.

Murphy stages life-size puppets to emphasize objectivity. Like *Petrushka*, *Poppy* is a pantomime play within a play, which entertains whilst subliminally instructing the damaging effects of division. The same comparison is made of sexual diversity. Unsuspecting heterosexual partners demean themselves when they imitate sexual abuse of the puppets that eventually fold inanimate, incapable of response. The symbolism is the futility of superior gender role-play, implying
masturbation that farcically signifies narcissism unconnected with reality, a self-fulfilling fantasy.

Once, a Narcissus who was pleasuring himself, brought his mouth up to the mirror, glued it to the glass and completed the adventure with himself”. Invisible as a Greek god, I pressed my lips against his and imitated his gestures. He never knew that the mirror, instead of reflecting, was participating, that it was alive and loved him.287

In the “blurring of masculine subjects and objects”288, the harmonious balance is one.

Freud links fatigue and sleep to Narcissus, in the sense that mind and body have a periodic need to withdraw and … to regress, in order to store up new mental and physical energies for the tasks of waking life. This suggests two polarities within narcissism: withdrawal and reintegration. They are intended to compliment each other.289

Diaghilev cast androgynous roles for his beautiful athletic males, especially his lovers, so that dreamlike figures in the image of Narcissus could perform sexual temptations. It was a tease. His first major casting, the Russo-Oriental Scheherazade (1910), mounted a passionate frenzy of dionysian sexuality pivoted on a plot about a powerful figure of androgyny, the beautiful slave, and a stark class inversion. Bakst’ and Benois’ fabulous staging of stunning jewel colours and mysterious oriental costumes defied sexual definition. The narrative was revolutionary, anti-didactic and anti-climactic. In 1911, Le Spectre de la Rose epitomised Diaghilev’s genre of androgyny; the fleeting masculine beauty, the beau monde du jour, was an image that in reality did not exist. This was Cocteau’s genre.

In Scene Four of Poppy, we are treated to an historical re-enactment of the Saison des Ballets Russes, at the Theatre du Chatelet, in 1909. Of all the connections Murphy evokes from the Ballet Russes in Poppy, this popular scene best links the two. It is a splendid theatrical entertainment bordering on pantomime: “Under the theatre’s lights nature has no value. The short are made tall and the tall can

287 Cocteau, Le Livre Blanc 53.
288 Burt cited in Desmond (Ed.), Dancing Desires 211.
In a brilliant stage effect of creating an illusory image of three spheres of activity enacted simultaneously, the prompt wings/the stage itself/the auditorium, Murphy, as Cocteau the observer, hurriedly beckons us to the opening. Dainty prima ballerina Karsarvina, the doll-like fairy princess in Fokine’s choreography and Tcherepnin’s score of the ballet pantomime *Le Pavillon d’Armide*, circles the stage. The princess represents the transitional, a fantasy connection between the structured era of Petipa and Diaghilev, and the ideal sugar sweet enticement. In contrast, an ominous giant puppet representing Diaghilev, arms folded, encroaches backstage from behind, gesturing forward as a stage manager does when calling for openers. Diaghilev supervised all performances like this. Cocteau darts around furiously, sketching, drafting front-of-house posters, programme librettos and prose; he is the voyeur enamoured with the sexual figure of Nijinsky after his life-locked image of Dargelos.

Off-stage, three competitive figures of Nijinsky as *Le Spectre de la Rose* appear in unison: androgyny and masculinity, spirituality and sexuality, and ballet master. Identical in shape but not costume, each performs his own separate role as a trio overseen by Diaghilev. On-stage, pretty Karsavina, home from the ball, is seated demurely. *La Rose* dances in surreal double image: two masculine figures alternate the musical count in turn, executing *entrechats*, *pirouettes*, and *attitudes*.

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*Cocteau cited in Act One, *Poppy*, SDC.*
in systematic order. In awe, Cocteau sketches Nijinsky as he leaps offstage collapsing onto wet towels held by his dresser. Cruelly, Diaghilev instantly ushers him up and back onto stage to give an encore.

Each of the double images repeats split scissor-image *double cabriolet en arrière* and *pas de chat en avant*, accentuating the feat of forced encores demanded hysterically by the audience. Finally, offering up a crescendo that quells the mania, *La Rose* completes a final leap offstage into Diaghilev’s arms. Spent, Nijinsky curls into foetal position, symbolising the perverted control Diaghilev exerted over his protégée.

Next, as choreographer, Nijinsky anxiously prompts his *corps de ballet* on stage for the premiere of *Le Sacre du Printemps*. Subjected to the sound of unceasing thumping, we sense discomfort and confusion as the *corps* struggles to maintain consistency with the awkward choreography. The sheer mayhem from the auditorium prompts the order to drop the curtain and light the house. Cocteau relishes this spectacle that he knows Diaghilev intended. Impresario, dancer, and composer assemble together around Cocteau in symbolic confirmation of his inclusion. As Murphy put it: “Choreography is a collaboration between dancers and creators, but if you add into that the commissioned score, a set design, the lighting design and the costume design … then it’s a team”.291 The impact of these direct representations in *Poppy* of iconic Ballets Russes performances demonstrates how crucial the tradition is to Murphy.

Like Diaghilev, Murphy enjoys expressly painting images of sexuality, saying “dance is sexual … I find it very difficult to see a body in motion without feeling a great sensuality”.292 Both Diaghilev and Murphy have implicitly understood sexual representation and desired to demonstrate their shared ethos by expressing images of youthful androgyny; an accomplished handwriting on the part of Murphy that may reflect his personal idiom and can be an important, separate topic for study. Themes of androgyny are Murphy’s preferred tool for exploring contemporary modes of social diversity (*Shades of Gray*, 2004, on the nefarious

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291 Murphy, audiotape interview, 16/2/07.
character of Wilde’s *Dorian Gray* represented as a contemporary dancer in the self-absorbed sex and youth culture of modern homosexuality, after the darker aspects of Rudolph Nureyev, is the exemplar). Murphy argues passionately that:

Youth is androgynous. There is a stage when one is neither … neither, nor and that’s a very interesting stage because if you see youth on stage on that level that teen - *between* age, you watch it with a new intensity because that androgyny you’re going, “How will that, what will happen, where will that blossom, where will that go?” It’s the curiosity factor that is, that is *so, so* fascinating, but dance will often, you know the uni-type, boys dress the same as women, men wearing tutus, that whole thing of, of sometimes choreographers definitely want people not to be people but to be units of movement.

The final scene of Act One, introduces Cocteau’s young lover, poet Raymond Radiguet. “He was waiting for his moment. Death took him first” is projected above the illusion of a giant mirror, which by use of a scrim reveals the symbolic mask of death. Death plays with Radiguet in front of the mirror, as the lighting alters to highlight the appearance of Cocteau, who faces the mask of death by dancing before the mirror: “mirrors are the doors by which death comes and goes”. Lieberman reminds us that Cocteau wrote: “Just watch yourself all your life in a mirror and you will see death at work like bees in a glass hive”. In death’s “dominant, seductive presence”, Cocteau confronts Death, which pushes him back because it is not his time. Mirrors, curved, distorted and revealing a sudden transparency, achieve effects heretofore reserved for cinema. Arms extended and fingers outspread signing victory, Death succeeds over Radiguet’s last struggle. A funeral procession all dressed in white, including a white coffin as signifier of Greek mythology and white as heroin, purity and oblivion, plays out. Cocteau endures his last embrace of Radiguet’s corpse.

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293 *Shades of Gray*, SDC 2004. Online: 

294 Ibid.


The ancient symbolisms, including dancers as characters and props, are bizarre in shape, colour, and strategic placements. In successive order and contrasting tempi, each figure distracts audience attention from the other. This is a complex Dada-like surrealism that evokes Cocteau’s love of ancient myth. Act One has been largely biographical, taking us through periods of Cocteau’s life.

**Act Two**, by contrast, is a graphic emotive surreal Grotesque. Murphy’s emergent choreography consists of contemporary variations on strict classical steps that only a classically trained company could perform. The fluidity is reminiscent of Massine’s graceful, symphonic works from the third *Ballets Russes* period. The genius is that movement becomes unbroken prose that induces a catharsis from the sense of growth it traces out of Cocteau’s rehabilitation. Surreal stylisations dominate throughout. Act Two overpowers the sadness of the effect of opium and the death of Radguet in Act One.

Act Two is hectic, unpredictably switching from staccato to legato in surreal “dream-like sequences”. There are no pauses between surreal manic representations. Cocteau painfully climbs toward self-realisation to express himself artistically as his reason for existence. “I am neither cheerful nor sad. But I can be completely the one or the other to excess”. It opens with the fore-

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298 Joseph Lieberman, “Poppy’ Flaunts Stage Convention”.
299 Cocteau, *The Difficulty of Being* 15.
boding gobo-projection: “Everything one does in life, even love, occurs in an express train, racing toward death. To smoke opium is to get out of that train while it is still moving”.\textsuperscript{300} Here is the essence of Cocteau.

\textit{[I]t could be reasonably argued that Cocteau's entire poetic philosophy, his life-style, and his very approach to his art were radically and permanently altered during his years of opium addiction from 1924 to 1929. It was during this time, and that immediately following, that the author came to find his personalized mythology of mirrors, angels, truthful lies, invisibility, and inevitably, his preoccupation with the literal and figurative aspects of death.}\textsuperscript{301}

Cocteau awakens in drug rehabilitation, naked. Murphy’s representation of eight nurses buzzing around, accentuated by Vine’s composition, suggests Cocteau’s disorientation. The buzzing heightens. Simultaneously executing maximum limb extensions, the nurses bend their covered knees to represent the \textit{Poppy} theme. Draped flag shapes include multiple ‘wave’ configurations. There are distinct oriental stylisations from the nurses, too, a link with the oriental representations of the Ballets Russes. As the nurses pull the fabric up over their heads, and over arms held straight up, preparing to display the shape of a triangle, the identical image of poppies used to open Act One reappears. Symbolic images of straight jackets are contrived in the flow. Clutching the bed sheets, Cocteau sits up in amazement. The nurses push him down. A line drawing of Cocteau is projected across the bed and Cocteau’s bare chest. Giant tubes/pipes, symbols of cocaine snorting, fan the bed. A single long straw extends, temptingly, as a demonstration of his habit, which Cocteau faintly attempts to sniff.

\textsuperscript{300} Cocteau, cited from \textit{Opium, Poppy}, SDC.

Straws will always be attainable, but, for now, he dismisses them. His bed slowly tilts up forty-five degrees so that he can survey his environment with a first measure of confidence. Gingerly stepping off and cautiously peering around, Cocteau traces an elegant trajectory in lyrical adagio of controlled attitudes and arabesques to demonstrate he has regained his identity. This is a distinct blending of strong classical technique with free contemporary style. With firmly placed steps, Murphy’s distorted facial expressions signal Cocteau’s blind questioning. This portrayal is an outstanding demonstration of what dance can evoke that words might not.

The figure of Dargelos replays Cocteau’s schooldays, re-evoking raw emotion. A giant rococo mirror appears upstage: “The secret of secrets. Mirrors are the doors by which death comes and goes”, is again projected onto the set. Cocteau recalls the fascination of the perverse trick mirrors of the steam baths in Toulon, whereby voyeurs observed young men bathing and masturbating. Reinvigorated Cocteau transits back in memory in Scene Two to a Genet-esque hedonistic pleasure zone, the bathhouse, where homosexual under-culture exists exclusively for its own pleasure. In *Le Livre Blanc*, Cocteau mused: “Men in love with masculine beauty come from all corners of the globe to admire the sailors who walk about idly,

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302 Cocteau cited from *Opium* in *Poppy, SDC.*
alone or in groups, respond to glances with a smile and never refuse an offer of love”.303

Recollecting, tongue-in-cheek, that at first to some audiences, “the bath-house scene was a little puzzling”, Murphy was satisfied when “we took it to New York and it hit, hit like a brick, there!”.304 The orgiastic all-male bath-house nude scene is integral to the overt homosexuality of Diaghilev, Nijinsky, Cocteau, and the demi-monde sub-culture of imagery that influenced the mouvement nouveau and hence twentieth century ballet theatre. Genet’s earthy experiences, together with Cocteau’s own fantasy boys from Le Livre Blanc, provided the inspirations for Cocteau’s illustrations of Genet’s Querelle de Brest (1947).305 Murphy delights in the fact that “my dancers are in this world … they have affairs, they sleep, they eat, they do what they want”.

On stage, ever-diminishing circles appear. The coloured circles turn one way, and then speed back. Out of control, order alters to images of surreal mayhem in manic necessity. A full-stage scrim drops. Mercury, as guardian and interpolator to Cocteau, heralds the entry behind the scrim of eight Adonis figures, naked save for uniform matelot caps, all of whom dance an orgiastic Bacchanal. The imagery is drawn from Genet’s iconic fictional character.

A twenty-five year old sailor, punk, and murderer, in Brest, France, in the 1920’s. Already, at the age of fifteen, Querelle had smiled the smile that was to be peculiarly his for the rest of his life. He had chosen a life among thieves and spoke their argot. [His] mental makeup and very feelings depend upon, and assume the form of, a certain syntax, a particular murky orthography.307

Murphy demonstrates the importance to him of this pivotal iconic work in an historical moment, which is both an expression of the sexual and theatrical interdependently, even extending to camp. Consequently, although not all audiences empathised initially, the scene cannot be interpreted as confrontational.

303 Cocteau, Le Livre Blanc 43.
304 Murphy, audiotape interview, 16/2/07.
305 Genet, Querelle de Brest, including twenty-nine full-page illustrations by Cocteau.
306 Murphy, audiotape interview, 16/2/07.
*Querelle* is synonymous with homosexual subculture, desire, and enactment. Murphy engages this imagery as a link between the Ballets Russes and his own creativity. Whilst acknowledging that, “sex is a fabulous tool in theatre”, Murphy is aware that shock tactics become harder to effect. Expressing his belief that younger generations are prudish, Murphy reflects:

> This company has always dealt with reality … nothing is taboo; nothing is out of the realm of possibility of depicting on stage … and that includes sexuality. Nothing of the sexual act of the human body can remotely shock me.308

The bathhouse scene is drawn from the real-life steam baths of Toulon and Ville-Franche, where Cocteau and Genet played with matelots and the American Marines of World War Two. For them, and civilian men and boys who were attracted from all classes, “love was an exercise which could make use of anyone and anything”.309 Murphy characterises Cocteau’s fascination with the Genet matelot theme by promenading eight full-frontal nude male dancers sporting only white sailors’ caps, behind a full width, full height, stage scrim. The scrim itself is a metaphor for the hidden, which is revealed only by back lighting and side lighting, to suggest a deliberate naivety. When the scrim is lit from the front, that which is behind the scrim is not visible, a technique that highlights the visualisation. The fabric is called ‘shark’s tooth’, another suggestion of the predatory. Although the representation of masculinity is at times systematically aggressive, a deliberate methodology that underscores the representation of male gender exclusively, some critics wrongly perceived the scene as a representation of rape.

Mimicking the trick mirror, costumed Cocteau wanders alongside the naked figures as if unnoticed. It would be surreal, possibly offensive to heterosexuals, were it simply same-sex fantasy and not the exclusive, real, visceral competitive world of homosexual subculture. Cocteau transfigures through the mirror into the play, which confirms this is real. Engulfed, he has now mastered the artistry of the baths. Throughout a substantial continuous choreography, Murphy repeatedly applies his hallmark ‘wave’ technique to demonstrate the rhythmic physicality of

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308 Murphy, audiotape interview, 16/2/07.
seemingly interminable coupling. This is a beautiful, surreal, dream-like fantasy, but also serves to convey the naval port location and the shapes of ocean waves. Kisselglof of The New York Times, concluded approvingly, noting a link to Rodin:

Cocteau's orgy with the sailors of Marseilles is presented with taste and impact - an ensemble of eight nude men wearing pompon-sailor hats project the muscular grace of Rodin's statues behind a scrim bathed in a golden glow.\textsuperscript{310}

The bathhouse scene was the forerunner of Murphy’s penchant for expressing all sexualities. By demonstrating the homosexual subculture as historically integral to Cocteau and his link with the Ballets Russes, therefore its realm of creativity, Murphy successfully drew additional audiences while educating existing ones.

Scene three depicts Cocteau’s redemption. The white figure of Mercury, Greek messenger of the gods, god of physicians, thieves and inventors, enters off prompt. Mercury is the messenger of Cocteau’s past and pointer to his future, physician and healer, detractor and contributor to Cocteau, as well as guardian. The figure of Mother follows in white chiffon, her scarlet red scarf signaling menstrual flow, which symbolises the mythical Oedipus complex. Cocteau is reborn. Mercury carries Mother off stage as signal of evolution. Mercury will introduce a revisitation to each stage of Cocteau’s life as the pastiche rapidly unfolds.

Twin images of Radiguet present: the lover and the condemned man, figures of fantasy and reality. The mask of Death partners Radiguet to entreat death out of young life. By a scrim, the mirror reflects the mask of death confronting Radiguet as Cocteau stands to one side, then, next, Cocteau and Radiguet dance life together before Radiguet revisits the mask and, consequently, death. Cocteau’s hallmark pain is audible: “Le sang d’amour, le sang d’amour, le sang d’amour …”,\textsuperscript{311} as the sky reddens behind lightning strikes.

\textsuperscript{311} “Le sang d’amour”: The blood of love. Cocteau’s described his 1930 film as “a realistic documentary of unreal happenings”, Glbtq, European Film. Online: http://www.glbtq.com/arts/eur_film.html [Extracted 12/3/09].
A statuesque male figure of Apollonian order appears in white Greek motif. Life and death, Cocteau’s Angel of Death, transfigure across stage in a representation of the passage of time: death as an integer, a point of potential break within the current of time – another classical allusion to the cutting of time, and the struggle to find authenticity therein. A large horse’s head, symbolizing mythical concepts of bestiary, denoting half man and half horse (animal, and, therefore, capable of eccentricities and extremes of behaviour), dominates the imagery.

In a climactic conclusion, Mercury re-enters to unite with Cocteau. We watch a rapid dance replay of Cocteau’s life performed beneath a giant stark Oedipus eye placed atop a column, dominating the stage. The patterns of figures and props as symbols at last spell some measured balance. For now, Cocteau has arrived at recovery. The horse reappears upstage centre, signifying confluence.

This is really the summit of the entire work as characters such as Galahad and Guinevere, Orpheus, Eurydice, Oedipus and Jocasta and the ever present Angel of Death perform some of the most expressive and electrifying choreography that Murphy has ever crafted, perfecting intermingling with excerpts from Cocteau’s films.312

As the light diminishes, a rapid collage of cinema clips from Cocteau’s repertoire ends the story inconclusively, to darkness.

Chapter Four: Conclusion.

The significance of Poppy to dance in Australia is that an Australian dancer substantially trained in the tradition of the Ballets Russes, attempted a full-length work about the role of one of the foremost collaborators from the original epoch. The radical Diaghilev handed over to aspiring free collaborators, who shared his spirit, the task to create new expressions of modern topics without boundaries. The challenge from Diaghilev, “Étonne-moi!” inspired the restless Cocteau, who was already running fast with the Parisien avant-garde but who had not found a vehicle. When Cocteau immersed himself in the originality the Ballets Russes demanded, immensely significant collaborations ensued. Diaghilev entrusted him to steer the enterprise into its second and most innovative and turbulent period, modernism. Their pivotal relationship ensued more than continuity; it led to the evolution of the mouvement nouveau that influenced society at large.

As an unabashed homosexual, Diaghilev promoted the male dancer as an omnipotent athlete and an androgynous icon of beauty. His dancers lived and performed all sexualities. The Ballets Russes succeeded in dismantling taboos. Ebullient Paris, placed at the fulcrum of everything artistic, was the ideal stage for Diaghilev’s revolutionary artistic adventures. From the first precarious season in 1909, Diaghilev and Cocteau both sensed that dance held the capacity to evoke the artistic expositions possible from the massive collaborations of the mouvement nouveau. In a world previously strictly categorised, free expression of sexuality was integral to free expression in art. Regarded by many as a twentieth-century renaissance man, Cocteau lived in sexual freedom and enjoyed the company of sympathetic collaborators. After the initial furores, there remained few barriers to creativity. Cocteau continued as a major artistic figure of Parisian cultural life for over thirty years until his death in 1963, well beyond Diaghilev’s death in 1929.

Ballets Russes style quickly became popular fashion: couture, furnishings, textiles, furniture and homewares modelled on exotic Russo-Oriental and Eastern themes, music and choreographies, all impacted modern life. The commercialism of fashionable Middle-Eastern idiom partly sprung from a craze for everything
Ballets Russes. Cinema genres grew out of Ballets Russes themes. Musical influence emanating from the primitivism of revolutionary Ballets Russes creations also extended to the newly evolving tactile modes of blues and jazz. Dance classes and dance competitions boomed, frequently engaging popular Ballets Russes themes as motifs.

Reviewing *Poppy*, in 1979, Cargher glowed with satisfaction: “Murphy and his colleagues have returned to the showmanship of Diaghilev’s time”.313 Murphy’s choice for *Poppy* proved both entertaining and educational; Murphy got it right. Francis Steegmuller, perhaps Cocteau’s most perceptive biographer, who saw *Poppy* in New York, commented: “All the characters seemed to step right out of my book”. Clive Barnes declared: “Decoratively, the work is a joy … it looks like a mixture of Diaghilev and Hollywood”.314 In 1981, Rosenwald wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* about the New York season of *Poppy, Daphnis and Chloé, and Scheherazade*: “Mr Murphy’s choreographic vision is spectacular … Graeme Murphy is one of the rarest of species in the dance world, a natural choreographic talent who has a lot to say, but also succeeds in entertaining his audience”315. Extolling Murphy’s choreography as: “pungently impressive”, Barnes praised his inventive reproductions of *Daphnis and Chloé* and *Scheherazade* for their “freewheeling sense of theatricality”.316 From one of the world’s most respected critics, this was praise and recognition that Murphy had indeed added to a special lexicon.

Murphy aims firstly to “connect with individuals” in his audiences, saying: “I train the dancers to invite people on stage with them … I want their spirit to dance with the dancers”317. He insists that: “like the Ballets Russes”, he is: “actually in touch with the absolute time [that he] lives in … I’ve always fought against the sometimes sense in dance that … you are allowed to peep as a voyeur through the keyhole”.318 By insisting on relevance to contemporary society, Murphy believes

317 Murphy, audiotape interview, 16/2/07.
the Sydney Dance Company has “encapsulated a cross section of society which is the real palette, not the fake” and “created its own audiences, and succeeded in taking dance to everybody” \(^319\) thus breaking down remaining divisions of cultural elitism that inhibit growth.

Reflecting his Ballets Russes influence, Murphy has re-worked selected Diaghilev works into contemporary idioms: *Scheherazade* (1979), *Daphnis and Chloé* (1980), *Late Afternoon of a Faun* (1987), and *Salomé* (1998). He emphasizes “they were works that directly came out of my obsession and love of what was happening in the Ballets Russes in that period”\(^320\). There are distinct contemporary dimensions and even identifiable Australian themes in some, each deserving of separate study as a contribution to the development of Australian theatre.

In *Daphnis and Chloé* (1980), after the original Fokine choreography, Longus’ book and Ravel’s romantic, impressionist score *Poème Choreographique*, Murphy melds Fokine’s lyricism with Ashton’s hallmark poeticism (Ashton recreated it for Sadler’s Wells in 1951).\(^321\) Choreographic classicism fuses into calm modernism, uninterrupted and without delineation. This work is an exemplary indicator of the trajectory from the Ballets Russes. A favourite of Murphy’s, *Daphnis and Chloe* is a boy-girl story with universal appeal. Set on the Isle of Lesbos, its simplicity extends to inferences of androgyny. To amplify this, Murphy substitutes Longus’ pirates for gangland sado-masochistic leather-clad rapists inhabiting the noise-shattering New York subway. Their evil leader is a giant blond Aryan figure of Narcissus, the entire gang typed with Nazi symbolism. This painted the contrast of understated, innocent, androgynous and overtly dangerous narcissism, which is overstated. The balance of mythical integrity: the Greek gods and natural ethics, romantic prose, innocence and physical pleasure; and extreme power play, decadent sexuality, brutality and rape is constructed very carefully. Moving very fast, *Daphnis and Chloé* is explicit including male nudity and convoluted sexuality, but never affected or offensive. Murphy faithfully restored the original

\(^{319}\) Ibid.

\(^{320}\) Ibid.

scene where Daphnis bathed naked. A failure for Diaghilev even though originally danced by Nijinsky; it was never a ‘success de scandale’ perhaps because it lacked the element of confrontation. Entertaining and gently instructional as an ancient story of sexual awakening it is comfortable for audiences of all ages (especially the explicit sex instruction that is acted out innocently), an uncommon example of the sheer element of beauty that overcomes any hint of criticism. Barnes described the production as: “wonderfully theatrical”, it “showing Murphy’s bewitching choreographic inventiveness”.322

Diaghilev successfully employed elements of confrontation and contradiction. As opportunity for an inverse study, Daphnis and Chloé ends predictably, satisfactorily as opposed to unsatisfactorily or unresolved. With innovative stage designs, sound effects, lighting, and superb costume innovations even to roller skates, Murphy expertly demonstrated and expanded the wide collaborative inventiveness of the Ballets Russes early in his career.

In Afternoon of the Faun (1987), Murphy transposes the plot to Central Park, New York, where the figure of Diaghilev devours the real Nijinsky, who is the Faun that finds release in death. To Murphy, the Faun “has always represented that spirit which is unbound by conventional morals, disciplines or social and political conditionings”.323 As a demonstration of a core Ballets Russes plot, it is a visceral display of uninhibited sexual expression. Not to presume connection with

323 Murphy cited in Programme notes, SDC Archives.
Nijinsky, for whom this role that he created is broadly agreed to be his most important, some say this short work was Murphy’s paramount creation.

Murphy’s second full-length work, *After Venice* (1984), was adapted from Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*. As a psychodrama, it is more complex than *Poppy*. Murphy identifies strong commonalities between them: “Those two works are very related … they are both works about men of literature”. *After Venice* is an opportunity for study of Wilde, Diaghilev, Gide, and Proust, and their artistic contemporaries in direct connection with the era. Murphy extends the plot by introducing physical contact and sexual relations, which were explicitly avoided by Mann. As a performative innovation this made good sense to Barnes, who gave high praise: “the homoerotic and sado-masochistic element, strongly hinted at in Mann’s story, and even more accentuated in Visconti’s film, now becomes totally explicit in the ballet”324. Having got the point of the importance to Ballets Russes collaboration of deviant sexuality accentuated by the bathhouse scenes in *Poppy*, Kisselgoff wrote of Murphy’s homoerotic interpretations consisting of: “Tadzio sleeping with his mother, cavourting with the boys on the beach, [and] leading an all-male steam-bath ensemble”, as, “de rigueur nowadays”. Kisselgoff did not interpret the male nudity as controversial, choosing instead to prioritise Murphy’s “approach to the conflicts within the larger themes” that she believed reached “an intellectual level”. This, she wrote, was demonstrated by Murphy’s creative tease

of “reversal of values” in the character roles. Of the overall collaboration, Kisselgoff wrote:

Murphy’s real coup-de-theatre is the use of Oliver Messiaen’s “Turangalila Symphony”, framed by two brief excerpts from Mahler’s Fifth Symphony … It is marvellous, enveloping all in a texture of sound just as Kristian’s symbolic décor.325

Murphy is a leader of artistic collaboration, who inspires creativity in others. The repertoire is rich with contributions from guest choreographers, some getting their start at the Sydney Dance Company. Noting that his most important collaboration is with composers, around whose work he must choreograph, he says: “you have to actually, very early in the piece, give over to them”. The acclaimed long collaboration between Murphy and designer Kristian Frederickson (including Poppy, Scheherazade, After Venice, Afternoon of a Faun, Nutcracker, Tivoli and Swan Lake) inspired Frederickson to remark: “I can feel where Graeme's leaning. He doesn't have to say it. And that's the art of true collaboration, of course, that you can sense what they are about, their thinking...”326 Emphasizing the all important factor of “teamwork”, however, Murphy describes how a long period of assembling all the “elements of creativity, say, a year and a half”, must, without failure, culminate in being ready for the “run-in” period of just six weeks. Sometimes, he laughs, “it becomes a cleanup operation”, and (bemused) because “I am very quick as a choreographer” some works have come out fabulously from that mess”.327

Always insisting on sound classical training on the part of his dancers, and consistently instilling the disciplines of the Russian tradition inherent in Diaghilev’s dancers, Murphy has added new dimensions of fusion dance and definitive choreographic innovation to mould a unique contemporary capability. He has developed distinct choreographic handwriting, for example, the ‘wave’. There are no stereotype anatomical shapes in his corps. Murphy consciously seeks diversity, especially if his selection yields muscular strength and capacity for

327 Murphy, audiotape interview, 16/2/07.
unusual physicality including extreme contortions, just what classicism rejects because it “always wanted you to believe the corps de ballet was one body”. In technical terms, he believes the legacy of the Sydney Dance Company has been: “thirty years of making dancers who can do anything”.328 Notably, even all the females regularly perform unusually demanding feats of strength. As Murphy explains:

I look for quite different qualities in dancers, not just technique … the women are strong, the men graceful. Some look like Rambo, others like Peter Pan … there is an elusive aspect to contemporary dance; it is a transient thing. I don’t have to please the people of tomorrow.329

Speaking of “the charm” of his company, Murphy illustrates:

The bodies are a palette … the more variety you can have, the less cloning you have. It’s a great thing for an audience to look and go, “That very tall boy can dance very fast”, and to feel like they too could dance very fast if they had to if they are tall, or they are short, or they are different, or if their personality is allowed to come through.330

In turn, he likes to think he is signalling to his audiences:

You’re with me, in every sense, you know I want you there, and I need you there … It’s always been a spectator sport, you know, and it’s beautiful and I try to make an audience not feel so much a spectator as a partaker. I want their spirit to dance with the dancers. And I think that’s what I train the dancers to do, to invite people onstage with them.331

Determined to maintain the unique traditions of the Sydney Dance Company, Murphy reflected that, often, he reminded himself:

I see a connection between a dancer who joined the company thirty years ago and one of the new kids, and I know that some thing that person brought in is still alive and being carried on by our newest dancers.332

328 Ibid.
330 Murphy, audiotape interview, 16/2/07.
331 Ibid.
332 Ibid.
In summary, it was Poppy that gave Murphy the courage to lead the Sydney Dance Company for thirty years. As he said of Poppy:

To say I can do what I want. I don’t have to do what is expected of contemporary dance. I don’t have to do what is expected of polite theatre, I can do whatever I want, and it paid off in spades … in terms of the company’s reputation, in terms of my own courage.333

Historically, Poppy was the innovation that triggered all his other innovations. Many of Murphy’s own creations demonstrate strong stylisation identifiable from the Ballets Russes including historical statement, ranging from the mythological (Salome after Wilde, 1988, The Trojans for the Australian Opera, 1994, Mythologia, 2000 for the Sydney Olympics); classical fantasy (Beauty and the Beast, 1993, The Selfish Giant, 1983); modernism and post-modernism (Some Rooms, 1983, Shining, 1986, Air and Other Invisible Forces, 1999, Shades of Gray, 2004 and Ellipse, 2002); symphonic (Grand, 2005); to burlesque (Berlin, 1995 and Tivoli, 2001). Guest choreographers have contributed hugely, including works by dancers Don Asker, Barry Moreland, Gideon Obarzanek founder of Chunky Move,334 Kim Walker, Graeme Watson, Stephen Page founder of the Bangarra Dance Theatre,335 and Ian Spink. There has been much adventure and bold innovation, Murphy proudly declaring: “This is a company that loves to take risks”.336 He insists that “like the Ballets Russes”, he is “actually in touch with the absolute time [that he] lives in … I’ve always fought against the sometimes sense in dance that … you are allowed to peep as a voyeur through the keyhole”.337

Since Adeline Genée in 1913, the influence of the many Ballets Russes representations in Australia has resulted in a rich heritage of talent and artistic collaboration. The Diaghilev Ballets Russes was the first to fuse classical and contemporary disciplines. Remarkably, Australia has produced two world-class dance companies from this tradition, without professional division. Because each

333 Ibid.
337 Murphy, audiotape interview, 16/2/07.
is dependent on the same core disciplines, the modes are easily interchangeable. Fortunately for our richer entertainment and cultural experience, this frequently occurs. With more than twenty dance companies in Australia today, including notable contemporary ventures Chunky Move, Australian Dance Theatre, Buzz Dance Theatre, Expressions, Tracks, Paige Gordon, and the indigenous Bangarra Dance Theatre and Dance North, the Sydney Dance Company led by Graeme Murphy evolved as the distinguishable contemporary exemplar of the Ballets Russes genre. There now exists a huge new, informed, audience base, including substantial followings of younger generations. The future for continuing artistic collaboration in performance and, especially all dance theatre, in Australia is bright.
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Audio Interview with Graeme Murphy, Artistic Director Sydney Dance Company

Peter Stell, Australian Centre, University of Melbourne.
Masters of Arts by Research.
Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. John Murphy.

That your experience is a demonstration of the continuing trajectory back to the visits
of the Ballets Russes Companies to Australia between 1936 and 1940, and the
original Diaghilev Ballets Russes - through five works: “Poppy” [1978, Music: Carl
Vine], “Daphnis and Chloe” [1980, Music: Maurice Ravel], “After Venice” [1984,
Music: Olivier Messiaen’s “Turangalila Symphony” and Gustav Mahler’s Adagietto
from his Fifth Symphony], “Afternoon of the Faun” [1987, Music: Claude Debussy],
and “Shades of Gray” [2004, Music: Arranged by Paul Healy] ... and aspects of
sexuality.

Wonderful.

As well ... to participate and incorporate in the National Ballets Russes project in
conjunction with the ANL and the Australian Ballet, chaired by Dr.Mark Carroll of
the University of Adelaide, culminating in 2009.

Wow!

**Question 1**

Artistic collaboration is obviously important. What elements do you deliberately look
for when selecting collaborators? What determines your practical application of
your vision?

All right, well keep me on track because I am a meander-er ... and remind me of
which section of the question. But I’ll just ...I’ll talk generally about collaboration.
Ummh, it is a way of taking the loneliness out of creation. It’s really important from
that point of view. And it shares the responsibility, which I really love. I mean, I
always, I always say that for me choreography is a collaboration anyway between
dancers and creators, but if you add into that the commissioned score ... umm, a set,
design – the lighting design and the costume design, plus Janet Vernon’s incredible
input - then it’s a team, it’s an incredible team which you put together. And getting
that right, getting all those key elements right, is absolutely vital. Also not getting
lapdog ... umm ... conspirators, people who do whatever you want, people who
actually add to what you want: enhance what you want, and the key to it always is a
poetic communication of what you want and not a dictatorship of what you want.
Umm ... you actually have to give people imagery that sets off their imaginations,
because its ridiculous because sometimes you know I mean, you know, the Petipa’s
[Marius Petipa, 1818-1910, choreographer, Imperial Russian Ballet, Saint Petersburg]
of this world would prescribe bars and lengths of pieces and how many – and rhythms
- to composers and the poor composers are actually just sort of putting a nice melodic
frame around a structure that was already there. And of course with composition
particularly, I mean - it’s a big risk that sort of level of collaboration. Because you are
actually playing – I am talking about commission and collaboration because I see
them very linked. You actually have to very early in the process give over to them
because, and that’s the scary part, because you won’t see them for a year and a half.
There will be phone calls and there will be talks about where they are at and if I
change concept or have an idea I’ll ring the composer and say this. But at the end of
the day when you hear that work, sometimes it’s a slim 6 weeks before the première
and you haven’t started choreographing at that point and so, if the music says nothing
to you, if the music takes you no where, if the music doesn’t have a real connection to
what you are wanting to say, then you have a disaster. I mean you have a disaster 6
weeks out before the curtain goes up and a full-length work will occur. I am lucky
because I am; I am very quick as a choreographer. I really, I move, I move pretty
quickly by most choreographic standards …so you know I can sometimes avert
disaster. And I mean I’ve had scores that I’ve found really difficult. And sometimes
you have people who when I said I don’t want that passage there, I’d like to move it, I
like to make it. So at that point you know it becomes a cleanup operation. And some
works have come out fabulously (laughs) from that sort of mess … umm.

But general collaboration – you know, I love lighting as much as I love, umm …
choreographing. And that again is one of those things that usually happen in three
days in the bump in period. And it is so tight. So it’s so scary, but it’s also so akin to
choreography, because it’s painting with light and I paint with bodies, and the light
paints the bodies, so you have this fabulous finishing thing. I often see lighting in the
initial rehearsal period. I’m actually, I’m creating a work and I’m imagining that is a
single backlit area and I therefore am not worried about the front features of a dancer,
I’m worried about the sculptural shape, the backlight play on muscles. So that has to
come into it very early on and not as the last thing you know, because – I’m, I’m a
little control freakish in that … I want what was in my head to come, to arrive on
stage as close as possible. It doesn’t always.

*Lighting is very important to movement. Light moves.*

Yes, exactly, I’m described … I’m a control freak.

**Question 2**

*What similarities do you share with or deliberately use artistically from the Diaghilev
Ballet Russes?*
What similarities do I share with or deliberately use? I think the one that I like best is the discovering of diverse talents and bringing them into the dance camp. I like very much the fact that you can take people that have never worked in dance like this before. Like this man Gerard Manion [Murphy had just previously spoken of Manion who frequently sketches the dancers in rehearsal] … he’s a line drawer, a painter, an artist. Umm … he’s become one of my favourite theatre designers. He’s never done anything for any one else, but that is going to change I suspect.

So, that discovering that sort of talent and bringing it into the world and introducing it into that world, and watching how they respond is so fascinating. Here is another example of a fashion designer turned theatre designer. He is a designer. I mean no problem whatsoever in the transition. The other thing that I actually do is - the other conscious contact with that sort of world of Ballet Russes is really I think sort of finding relevance to now being in touch with the absolute time that you are living in. And I have always felt that, that is my responsibility in some ways. You know of course you can look back with nostalgia and you can, you can … umm … borrow and enhance the past to serve your own purpose and of course, I see the thread of all dancers, I see that sort of great … umm, ah … the hereditary thread. Even in my thirty years with the company I see a connection between a dancer who joined the company thirty years ago and one of the new kids, and I know that some thing that that person brought in is still alive and being carried on through the newest dancers, so I think that that sense of, really that hereditary thread is connected to the first, to the first primal dance and I think it’s touched everybody and I don’t think. I mean the DNA is in there, right from cavemen dancing.

We are really talking living in collective memory, aren’t we?

Yeah.

Question 3

John Cargher remarked in 1978: “Murphy and his colleagues have returned to the showmanship of Diaghilev’s time”. What do you say?

Ummh, I actually, I actually would like to agree with him. I think that Ummh, you know I’ve always fought against the, the sometimes sense in dance that … umm, you are allowed to peep as a voyeur through the keyhole at my great work – I’ll let you peep through the keyhole. I’ve flung the doors open and say, you know, “You’re with me”, in every sense, you know I want you there, and I need you there, ummh an audience. It’s always been a spectator sport, you know, and it’s beautiful and I try to make an audience not feel so much a spectator as a partaker. I want their spirit to dance with the dancers. And I think that’s what I train the dancers to do, to invite people onstage with them.
**Question 4**

You make remarkable use of differing body shapes. How important is this to you as a tool?

The bodies are a palette. Basically at the end of the day they are your pigment, they are your colour, they’re your hue, they’re your texture, they are your absolute direct means of communication. The more variety you can have, the less cloning you have. You know classical ballet frequently wanted you to believe the corps de ballets was one body, one amorphous body. Umm … and I love this company because although it is the assorted chocolate box of bodies and types, they can become a fabulous unit and they don’t have to be cloned to become that unit, they are a unit of individuals, who can move as one, and I think that is part of the charm of it of this company and I also think it’s a great thing for an audience to look at people and go “That very tall boy can dance very fast”, and to feel like they too could dance very fast if they had to if they are tall, or they are short, or they are different, or, you know, their personality is allowed to come through and I think that is one of the embracing things this company does, one of the welcoming things. And one of the things that when you go to other countries where they are used to that sense of, you know, that strange sort of other world quality about the dancers. Well, you know, my dancers are in this world. They, you know, they have affairs, they sleep, they eat, they do what they want.

**Question 5**

To what extent might you agree that “Daphnis and Chloe” is a dancer’s work?

Umm … I’m having trouble trying to think of that. I think of all my work as dancers’ works. Daphnis and Chloe I think was one of the very early attempts to update a classic. I think that’s what its place in history is. Umm … with “Scheherazade” [1979, Music: Maurice Ravel], I wanted to repeat, with the Ravel score, albeit not the original “Scheherazade” score, not the other “Scheherazade” – there are so many “Scheherazade” scores, umm … but I wanted to capture the exoticism and the perfume of that whole eastern experience. But with Daphnis and Chloe, I wanted to take the magic of young love and blossoming love and move it through times and style and bring it to an audience. And really, at that point in time people weren’t updating the classics to that extent at all. You know there weren’t Matthew Bournes [Matthew Bourne’s Swan Lake Dance Company, London] and Graeme Murphies doing different Swan Lakes, you know, so from that point of view I thought it was a really important step, to say, “ok, an old classic with a master score can be refreshed and revised.”

“Daphnis and Chloe” is lovely because it has such an innocence. I love it.
I love it, I like that work too. It was a great work.

**Question 6**

*How important is a sound classical training in selecting your dancers?*

Umm … see, there’s, there’s a … Janet Vernon would, would absolutely sort of and does, every day in rehearsals, drill a perfection of performance that is classically based. If a movement requires line, she will not let up. If a movement requires line, she will not let up. If on the other hand, there is softness, or there is a use of parallel, much more use of contraction, which is such a part of my work though not classical. You know dancers like to arch backwards; they don’t like to contract forwards. If you look at classical trained dancers, they don’t feel comfortable. I think what I want most of all in dancers because I’ve had so many different types, and I’ve had raw kids like Stephen Page who’ve had neither a classical training but had such a contribution through his own indigenous style and also through his theatricality. But he was an irresistible member to have in the company and that is one of the things, that if you prescribe there is only one type of incredibly level of classical dance and once you go below it it’s not going to work, that’s not true. Umm … having said that, the dancers when they are in the company all aspire to be the best in the stylistic approach. They could do Narelle Benjamin’s work, which was all yoga based, which was all heads down, which was all ridiculously over stretched, body flow supp-ilty … they can all do it. And that’s what I have achieved with the company. And that’s what worries me more than anything because moving on from this company, I go ‘what if that absolute rounded dancer who can turn their, turn their style to anything is lost’, because they’re … that’s what is the legacy, 30 years of making dancers who can do anything. And it’s interesting because people from the, you know, the post-modern and more contemporary, umm … streams of dance - go: “well, my dancers, umm … are extraordinary, they are absolute specialists in this particular style of modern, contemporary – (I hate this terminology, I don’t get into it), umm … dance”. Umm … but you know if you put them in a classical class, they wouldn’t look very good, and I go, “Well my dancers look very good in a classical class and they can do whatever style you do”. So I like the fact that there is that two-way stream within this company.

**Question 7**

*What aspects of sexuality do you believe you have best represented and how?*

I think, I think that this company has always dealt with reality and I think that’s what is so fabulous, that you know nothing is taboo; nothing is out of the realm of possibility of depicting on stage. But I have always believed that dance can tackle any subject, you know, and I don’t think, you know; if, there are certain literary works that is so much about the word. You know, things like James Joyce (laughs) that
wouldn’t necessarily. But I reckon you could just capture the feeling, the spirit, of a work like that, so I don’t think that anything is out of bounds and that includes sexuality. And I think that dancers, you know, everyone sort of thinks … If you are dealing with 18 - you know we have had sixteen and seventeen year olds, eighteen year olds to forty-two year olds. They are all in the various stages of their own sexual development, and, as I said, that is your palette, and that has to come through. And to deny it, to take it away, to do work that, of course, not every work has to be about the individual and about the human aspect, but when you are it’s better than those people who experience a million different emotions in their reality. And that’s the trouble I think so much damage, so sort of tortuously, sort of isolated from life and dancers are so much sort of denied the right to grow up. And this company is not like that, this company is a company of absolute, absolute people who live to the hilt and, and you know … you know, because you imagine that, you know, you have all the tragedies of life, all of that becomes a part of this company … it has encapsulated a cross section of society which is the real palette, not the fake …

*What I would like to know is how you bring that palette? And how you use the theatricality of it to make the here and now so important. That’s what gives it its energy and drive for me.*

Exactly, but you know I don’t take credit for that really because, as I say, I am just harnessing. I am just harnessing this powerhouse of energy that is you know … oozing.

**Question 8**

*How did you intend to differ from the original Diaghilev “L’apres Midi d’un Faun”?* I wanted to put Diaghilev in the work and I mean I wanted, you know, the man who virtually fought with the commissioner of music and the choreographer Nijinsky and etc, etc. Umm … but I wanted to see, I wanted to see his presence in the work and so you had a very strange … umm, amalgamation of Diaghilev, his relationship with Nijinsky, and then Nijinsky’s own conflict of sexuality and then I had a street faun played by Stephen Page and I set the whole thing in what is probably the biggest, umm … in the last *Arcadia* of New York - Central Park, umm. (Laughs).

I know about Central Park.

(Laughs) So there you have everything that is in a shrinking world of nature in the middle of the most throbbing, cosmopolitan city in the world, you have the shrinking area of nature and it represents, represented the world and the shrinking arcadia and the path and, of course, this whole thing of, you had the original Faun and you had the street Faun and you had the Diaghilev, the puppeteer, the manipulator, the man who wanted to use you for beauty for his own ends and it was, it was fabulous. The nymphs were, they were shop dummies, they came to life out of a window, draped in a haberdashery from a haberdashery place and it was such an interesting work and
one that I think people didn’t quite get because it required a little bit of knowledge but it was still intriguing, and I must say, it was … sometimes on stage I felt the presence of Nijinsky. Sometimes I felt that surge when one sort of you know made love to a scarf. (Laughs).

That’s great.

**Question 9**

*What was your essential intention in “After Venice”?*

Umm … It was the first AIDS ballet basically and *again* it was a bit ahead of its time because people, the epidemic was really in its very early, early stages but I likened the plague of Venice to the, to this encroaching disease that was occurring at that time. And I remember on opening night saying to Alfred who played Death, you know, with his fabulous karate moves because he was a Black Belt, and I always used whatever my dancers had and so death had that Ninja feel about it and I said, “We are either going to have massive scandal, or it will go over the head like a hair net and they will ever know what we are actually doing”. And … umm … of course, I think here it was a little, you know even the bathhouse scene and all of that was a little ... puzzling to people. And, of course, then we took it to New York and it hit, hit like a brick, I think, there.

**Question 10**

*When you conceptualised “Shades of Grey”, how important was your personal perception of contemporary Sydney gay life?*

It was really a universal gay life, and it was really about Nureyev’s journey into darkness and death. Umm … and you know there were … umm … I mean it was full of characters that possibly had never met each other but had met each other in this particular work. But many of them had – I mean you know Fonteyn makes an appearance throughout you know as a person who, who … initially uplifted the Dorian/Nureyev character into stardom through her own stardom but fell by the wayside as his star continued to rise; and it was … deep and dark and … really one of the most misunderstood works I have ever done, but I think one of the better works I’ve ever done. Simply because it was … it took on so many levels and it took Dorian into the world of … well, Dorian was always a gay character. In the Oscar Wilde there was always an undertone of that, part of the debauchery was that, but this was more based on Will Self’s book. A fabulous book, very worth reading, umm … called “Dorian”, just called “Dorian”. And … giving, it just gave resonance to all the dancers knowing it was Rudy, because the dancer who played it, Josh Consodine … knew … who played Rudy probably had seen Rudy dance etc, etc as Janet and I had endlessly on tour with the *Australian Ballet*. And so it was really a strange
tribute, a *strange dark* tribute to an extraordinary man. I could talk about that work *forever*, because it is one of the works that Janet and I just invested so much research and love and ourselves into. And we were deeply hurt when, you know, silly Deborah Jones [The Australian, 2004] sort of found “nothing in it”, when there … it was, you know, when you had to dig a little but it was just festering with, with concepts and ideas and, and absolute philosophy.

*It’s a ballet very like “Poppy” for me. The more I see it, the more I find and the more I want to look.*

And that’s the problem isn’t it, you know, you get dismissed in one review because they have to be on television the next day blowing their own trumpet and so they don’t come back and they’ve made a decision …..and, and I … to me it’s like music, you know. I love music but I never would claim to know a piece of music on one sitting, you know. And then I mean, dance, you know, I always find it amazing because people don’t understand that you can close your eyes and hear a symphony, you can close your eyes and hear a symphony and you don’t have to stare at the orchestra, but, you know, when I see people sort of writing notes during a performance, I say, “Dance is a thread that constantly goes and if you look away or if you, you just have to - you don’t have to see everything, but you have to absorb that work to understand it”, you know, and if someone is so stupid to think that, you know, *everything* on the stage isn’t so important to every dancer and every choreographer. The ultimate insult of course is people thinking they can just sort of pick it up like telly, you know like a soap you can miss 3 of the series and still know what the story is …

*We probably live in a 6 second grab.*

*Oh, we do. Definitely we do.*

**Question 11**

*How does the concept of androgyny fit into your creativity?*

Umm … you know, youth … and dance, again. Youth is androgynous. There is a stage when one is neither, neither, neither, nor and that’s a very interesting stage because if you see youth on stage on that level that teen - *between* age, you watch it with a new intensity because that androgyny you’re going, “How will that, what will happen, where will that blossom, where will that go?” It’s the curiosity factor that is, that is so, so fascinating, but dance will often, you know the uni-type, boys dress the same as women, men wearing tutus, that whole thing of, of sometimes choreographers definitely want people not to be people but to be *units of movement*. And the leotards, the all over tights …

And the ‘Balanchine’ aspect. Many of the choreographers who didn’t differentiate through costume and movement and that whole move when women did as many lifts as men and we have been through so many of those permeations, and it was all very interesting and fascinating and it all was very valid. I’ve always felt that, umm … for instance women … women in my company have a very equivalent strength to men. They have their femininity, they have their softness, but they have this steely strength, and that’s based on the fact that to do a Murphy lift a woman needs to be as strong as a man. (Laughs).

Question 12

Where might you identify comparisons between “Poppy” and “After Venice”?

They belong to the same family. They … those two works are very related. Umm … they are both works about men of literature, you know. And that was, well, a big adventure. That was a new discovery that you could do a work about … a homosexual poet … with a drug problem … (laughs) … and I thought, and back in you know, the seventies, that was sort of something, and not only that, to do a work, but to do a full length work, a full evening work, when you know the realm of contemporary dance was simply all about, “Put as many works on the program as you can because someone is going to like one of them”. (Laughs) … and so we decided we would pioneer a full-length contemporary work, and … I think we are very hated now because the audience almost demand full-length contemporary works. (Laughs).

Question 13

How might you connect personally with your representation of Cocteau in “Poppy”?

Umm … I lived the role, I have to say, but I live, I live every role that I dance. And I live every role that I choreograph, and, you know … being quoted, I don’t know how accurately, that if you know if you look at all my work, the sum total is an autobiography. And I think that is the same with any artist; I don’t think that is particularly unique. I think the same could be said of Mozart, or the same could be said of any artist that’s given their life to, to one cause and I think the more interesting the fact that I’ve given it to one company means that I have had this logical progression. I haven’t freelanced, so I haven’t actually had to go “Oh, I’ve got to do a ballet for, for the Houston ballet and they are all quite, and, you know, they want … “ I haven’t had that restriction. I have had the chance to evolve completely organically within my own company and so I think the company reflects my own growth. And my departure from the company probably reflects also my readiness to, sort of, to go elsewhere.
Question 14

*Overall, are you conscious that your creations lead by particular gender or sexuality representations?*

Say that again.

[Repeat]

I can’t … no! Look, as I said, sex is a fabulous tool in theatre, it always has been. It’s almost, it’s *innate* in theatre because you only have to see a person on stage and there is already a voyeurism. *One* person walks on stage, the audience is instantly a *voyeur*; *two* people walk on stage and it doesn’t matter what they are doing, there is already a chemistry with people going, “What is the relationship between these two people?” – *they haven’t done anything*. They’ve just walked on stage – ummh. They touch each other - in any way - non-sexually or other - the audience is going, their tension, their interest increases *immediately* there’s a contact. That’s why poor, a lot of the postmodern creators have a real hard time trying to deny the audience this sexual connection because just the act of human. You can’t look at people anywhere without, without this – we are programmed, we are programmed to find the sexuality, within the, I mean you know, within the “table” [figuratively] … you know humans are just like … helpless.

*We are representations of things.*

Absolutely.

Question 15

*Do you perceive any particular boundaries to your creativity?*

Yes - financial - umm … the boring world that we are living in - the political constraints of this country at this point in time, the indifference to the arts, umm … the obsession with terrorism and war … umm, these are all things and the obsession with sport, these are all things that are having a really dire effect on the arts of today. The art itself is *infinitely* capable of surviving and will survive, no matter what the external mediocrity is. Umm … so, will survive, but because dancing is not something you add to your life, dancing has survived because dancing is part of life, dancing is part of everyone’s personal being. So you, you know, you can kill it by starving it financially but you can’t quell it and you can’t get rid of it.
Question 16

Please tell me about your talents with textiles?

Umm … textiles as in - umm … I don’t know what talents I have.

I think you have extraordinary talents; I’d like to prompt you by saying that ... I am so impressed with the representations of draping, and your handling of cloth and shapes and movement that you combine as a collaborative thing. What I like too is the way you take a symbol, such as in “Poppy” ... innocence ... and it has that ... the tones of malevolence right from the beginning. ... and such as with the nurses in “Poppy” where you have inverted the skirts and all the lovely symbolism that you pick up all the way through and I think it’s a great talent.

I think, I think its just called theatricality. I also think the frugality of my art form has meant that you take something and you exploit it to the maximum, as opposed to Walt Disney where you just pay a billion dollars and you get a special effect that lasts 2 seconds on stage. But you know, then you get the next special effect that lasts another 2 seconds on stage. Where I love that sense of development, and that is choreography too. I never go “this is a series of steps”; it’s a step that starts and evolves through the entire ballet. The thing about that possibly is an inherent thing from my parents: their frugality, you know, who could turn a kangaroo tail into a meal for six, six days or something, and could make a school concert out of, you know, out of to turn silk into hessian and vice versa. (Laughs). And the whole thing was that, I love that type of invention. I love … I’m very good with -I’m very good with props - an object will find its way in and suddenly that object becomes all important to a work.

That’s Cocteau too, very much so.

Yes, it was.

I’d like to ask you; too, you have a very special personality and sexual personality?

But you know everything can be imbued with sexuality depending on the viewer and depending on the sly and careful manipulation of the choreography. I mean you can, but then you look at Nijinsky with the scarf in “L’après Midi” you know, so you have enormous scope there, but also an audience is seeing beautiful bodies being touched by fabric and the fabric weaving a magic spell around them and movement you know creates the air and creates, and – absolutely, and you know… and it’s a strange thing when you know. But the sexuality is there too, its there in classical ballet, I mean it’s there in “Swan Lake” you know and I mean that line that I used with the trussing of the circular saw of a tutu which is spinning dangerously close to the man’s nether parts - like some sort of, “What tension does that create?” I mean you have this circular saw and you have this trussed man in dangerous proximity as she spins
towards. I go, “Wow! What do people see?” They see a lovely ballerina spinning in a nice _pirouette controlled_ at the waist by a man. But that’s what I _love_ about dance, the _level_ of interpretation is - _billion fold_ - and that’s _so_ important.

**Question 17**

_Cocteau adored Nijinsky_. “For homosexuals like Cocteau, male dancing represented acceptable voyeurism in a society that had to remain discrete in post-Wildean days”. _How might this thought fit in your own creations?_

Well, I think that basically shock tactics are getting harder. I mean we did most of our brave nudity and … you know, and part of it was economic, you know it was cheaper than making, buying costumes. Umm … but also it was at a time when shock value could work. You know, maybe the new prudish generation, you know, the ‘X’ [generation], can get vicarious thrill by seeing you know sexual events happen on stage but I feel like we have worked through it and I am very happy to have come out the other end and find that, you know, I mean, what is most shocking to me nowadays is, is cruelty, human cruelty. You know nothing, nothing of the sexual act of the human body can remotely shock me, but people being vile to each other is as shocking as you can get, and I don’t _really_ particularly relish doing that on stage.

**Question 18**

_Where in these five works do you distinguish the ‘charming’ over the ‘innovative’?_

“Poppy” was - the innovation - that _triggered all the other innovations_. _It gave me the courage_ … to say I can do what I want. I don’t have to do what is expected of contemporary dance, I don’t have to do what is expected of polite theatre, I can do whatever I want. And it paid off in spades … in terms of the company’s reputation, in terms of my own courage. Umm … there are various works, not all listed there, that I feel were trigger works in terms of my creativity. I think “Kraanerg” [1988, _Music: Iannis Xenakis_] was another that allowed me a vocabulary that fed probably another six works after that in various forms. And I don’t feel, you know, I don’t feel that I am pinching from myself. I feel I’m evolving what I’ve created and what I’ve invented. Umm … see, I don’t even know chronologically. Is that [list of selected five works] chronological?

_Yes_

“Daphnis & Chloe” … _umm_, was probably a direct … a direct attempt to _evoke_ the Diaghilev era and the creativity of that era, as was “Afternoon of the Faun” as was “Scheherazade” probably. They were works that _directly_ came out of my obsession and love of what was happening in the _Ballets Russes_ in that period.
Do you think that in “Scheherazade”, there is a lot like “Le Coq D’Or” [Fokine/Diaghilev Ballets Russes, 1914, Music: Rimsky-Korsakov]?

It is, it is so...but it’s not the external “Scheher…”, but its not the external bravura and kitchness of the original “Scheherazade”. It really tries to capture; it can capture the harem within. You know, (laughs) that feeling.

Question 19

You comment, “dance is so joyous“; from these five works ... what inspires you the most?

I think that you know … I think that the joy that I get from dance is the joy that one feels when one communicates something. It’s not the sort of joy like Isadora [Duncan 1887-1927] type, “Dance is so - jumping around – dddrrr … (muses)” It’s so much about finding those beautiful connections with people in the auditorium. I know that some of those connections are eternal; they are life changing for people. And that’s what art is. That give me the joy in what I do. You know that’s what I do. When I think of “Shades of Gray”, I have this sadness. I have this absolute sadness that permeates the work, and it’s frivolous and it’s all about that Warhol stable, that emptiness and that need for drugs. But at the end, that work is all about that madness that comes with drugs. And that’s what I wanted to achieve with Rudy. Rudy came and saw it on his last Australian tour and he also saw “Poppy”, which he adored. And it was great that he saw “Poppy”. Like Rudy, he came back to see all the cute boy dancers. (Laughs).

And the dancers were, of course, like none of them have worked with him, none of them knew him. I worked with him since I was about seventeen or eighteen.

Question 20

I’d like to ask you about the thoughts you had on doing a ballet about Helpmann [Sir Robert Helpmann, 1909-1986]? The story is told about you meeting Helpmann at a Sydney hotel before you conceptualised “Poppy” and asking his permission to create a ballet about his life, and his reply was or that virtually amounted to, “Are you up to it?”

It was actually – only the location was wrong. I was plotting my first Australian work. I thought that would be marvellous for an emerging choreographer with no credentials … with only three ballets to his name, to do. And I found it a … hav … ? I have done - a fair bit of work already - and maybe get the backdrop of the Electra, and the Boyd and the Nolan and a few bits and pieces. And it would be so fabulous to do it. And of course I always intended, I was going to start in a meat factory and very
similar and it becomes “Shades of Grey” because all those carcases, because Bobby was going to come out of a side of beef in a tutu, rip himself out of his humble meat working beginnings at his father’s abattoir and become the great - you know it was going to be - looking back over a life. Ummh … I got the courage up and I rang and took him to the most expensive restaurant I could afford for lunch and hosted him almost until dinner – it was in Jersey Road, Rose Bay - Patrick’s I think it was called – it was a famous restaurant at the time and wined and dined him with Janet [Vernon] and put the proposal. And I don’t think he decided there and then that he would or wouldn’t. I think he was deeply flattered, but I don’t think sufficiently sort of confident. And I think he also got the smell that it would have been a warts and all ballet. I wasn’t going to do the nice public side of Bobby; you know, there would have been dunkings at Bondi beach, and … (laughs)

What are your thoughts on resurrecting the idea?

I spoke to David [McAllister – Artistic Director, Australian Ballet] because I actually think it belongs to the Australian Ballet. As much as I would have done it, I would have loved to have done it in that period with the Sydney Dance Company; I now really firmly believe that the heritage would be the Australian Ballet. And I would have loved to have done it I think, it was interesting, for the hundredth anniversary of his birth … but I didn’t have the time. So I would have loved to have done it in ‘09 but somehow the Ballet Russes sort of got in the way. All of that because that ate up all the planning for four years with the Australian Ballet, and I think David is very interested in it – but (sighs) - nothing.

No concrete plans?

No, not at this stage. Oh, I just think it is a work waiting to be done, and I think the scope of it is … it would give so much work to so many different dancers – we would have to have so many Helpmann’s because there were just so many different Helpmanns! (Laughs).

So, it’s possible?

I haven’t ruled it out at all, I always, I mean it’s virtually planned, its just waiting for someone foolish enough to commission it.

I did a personality study on Helpmann.

Fabulous - I would love to see it. There’s the footage, the surfiie doll records, there’s that … yeah, yeah, and you have to say that there’s the one-liners. You’d have to say that, choreographically, there wasn’t anything that was ever going to change the world but the man changed the world because he was so … and that’s the Diaghilev, the showman and the fact that he was like Cocteau. He [Cocteau] was always jumping from branch to branch, but always (laughs) on the same tree.
And he was!

And Helpmann was like that too. As long as it was theatre, he didn’t care.

Concluding conversation

In your work, do you think you are dealing with post-post modernism?

Of course we are, of course we are and this will be scandalous. My thoughts are it comes out of academia and it is kept alive by academia.

My next comment was going to be why you think post-post modernism hasn’t been taught in ‘the academy’?

I think everything should be taught. I don’t mind a good bit of folk dance being taught, but at the end of the day we try to fight to find and keep alive a thread, I think. So therefore everything is valid, everything must be sort of, can be linked in and I think, “God knows, I’ve used aspects of all techniques in my work”.

Even including Chinese movements?

Yeah, and now I am working so much more in China, I feel a like a whole new vocabulary opening up to me. I’ve stolen a boy from the Mulan Company, the work I’ve created in China - a very interesting troupe of dancers, and the Sydney dance company collaboration and one of the boys is just so extraordinarily good and two years down the track, we’ve got the papers and he’s down there [rehearsal studio] – he’s in. You’ve got………… Just fabulous, land bringing with him, like Dewey did, a whole world of knowledge, and a whole generosity that allows that to be given, and therefore dance again takes another sub-route, and that’s what. I’m not anti any dance style, any dance but I know what I am sick of, I know what I never need to see again.

What is it?

It’s just a limited vocabulary that hasn’t evolved sufficiently to keep my interest. It’s like music, there is certain music that I just don’t bother about any more, you know. I’m finished. I’m through with the shallowness of rock and pop and shit you know – it’s alive and well and regurgitating itself endlessly. But it’s not for me.

I mean, it’s nice at a some stage of your life to go, “I don’t have to go, “Oh, I’m out of touch now because I don’t have to listen to some crappy local radio”, you know. It’s fabulous; you know what you want and the challenging aspect. There is no one sphere of music that I go, you know, this is where it went, this is where it all ended for me, I need to hear something else. I’m just fascinated with what is coming, and also having said that, some of these guys in this industry of rock and punk and pop and hop, (laughs) they actually are pushing boundaries and that becomes interesting but - what it amounts to - I can’t cope anymore.
Are you concerned by the conservative bias of today’s younger generation regarding sexuality and its effect on creativity?

No, you know why, because it’s a very ping pong game of this generation does, this generation does, and will and the next generation doesn’t, and the next one will you know and its happening all the time and its just an evolutionary thing, and you get phases of Puritanism and then you get phases of excessive behaviour and that makes it interesting.

Do you think the collaborative process during rehearsal demonstrates the Apollonian and the Dionysian of life?

Yeah! And you know that makes it really interesting and when it overlaps, when someone in the middle of one of those you know very conventional moves suddenly throws the cat among the pigeons, and does something that is shatteringly exciting, different and shocking, that’s part of the theatrical process, you’ve got to shock people into being there. They become blind; they become immune so quickly to things. Yes, absolutely!

You’ve ruined my day, now I’m thinking; I don’t want to be thinking today!

I hope you’ve enjoyed the questions?

They were beautiful! They were beautiful and your research is extraordinary. I didn’t know anyone had that sort of depth. Actually I do know because there are people in our audience, who have been in our audience since we started and they are the ones who are a bit sad at the moment - scared for the future of the company.

I’m one of them.

I don’t think you have seen the last of me. You might have to travel a bit more.

I like “Salome” [1998, Music: Michael Askill].

Fabulous, fabulous - that belongs in the canon really doesn’t it?

I like “Mythologia [Commissioned by the Sydney Olympic Arts Festival, 2000, Music: Carl Vine]”, but it didn’t have great acceptance.

Strangely, I don’t know. Very bad, I don’t know.
Well, I thought the work was beautiful in the extreme. I thought the score was so stunning. And you know, it won’t go away, that’s the best thing about music, my memory will fade because it only lives for the moment, but Carl and those people, those works might have only got you know ten or twelve performances, they will re-surface.
Malcolm Tucker, in Daylesford, was part of the “Gay and Lesbian Choir” in "Mythologia”.

Yes, they keep popping up in my life. I reckon there were fifty - I can’t quite remember - but yes!

Ok, but I love - but you are probably right, “Mythologia”. It probably didn’t have the impact it should have. I remember it went off like a rocket when they saw it. It out did every other performance in the festival, because that was the Olympic Festival.

It was especially commissioned.

Yes it was, by Mister …? because “Tivoli” [commissioned in commemoration of the Australian Centenerary of Federation, 2001, Music: Graeme Koehne] was commissioned by that Melbourne Festival Direct/Composer - I can’t remember, Jonathon …? “Tivoli” was commissioned by the Olympic, the Olympic Committee …?

I remember we outstripped Pina [Bausch, Tanztheater Wuppertahl Contemporary Dance Company, who performed “Masurca Fogo”] by “millions”. That was fabulous. And it actually did good business, but I think the reviews were a bit sort of, “Why?” you know. One day I have got to sit down and read reviews and see what they mean to me now. Because, I read them the next morning and that’s it, you know. When I pass my breakfast two days later, the review had already gone.

You have created a very special extra audience – including new age groups, notably males – and a new awareness of sexuality.

Have I? Yes, I think it’s a great demographic. It’s a great demographic. Except that isn’t it strange? … but our audiences in Melbourne are very small compared to our audiences in Sydney. But the loyalty factor in Melbourne is quite extraordinary. There are those people its just like, they’re there – if we’re there, they are there. Where Sydney is like, “I’ve got something else to do this week”.

Is that to do with Melbourne theatre tradition?

I just think there are people who appreciate the fact that even though we couldn’t afford - we lose. Whatever we make in Sydney we lose in Melbourne. So the Sydney audiences pay for the Melbourne subscriptions. So it’s quite an interesting phenomenon.

Lovely to be able to speak to you.
But it’s important - in a funny way, you know - in a funny way, because times are a changing you know. And I hope so, and I know this company’s going to go through a dramatic change. Watch this space, watch the name, and watch the bonfire and get burnt.

All the recourses here are not professionally archived. I do think it should be done.

Its pretty well archived. But let’s just leave the stuff. We’ve got a meeting with Lee, Lee Christoff ... [Lee Christofis, Curator of Dance, ANL] ... who is the new Michelle Potter [Inaugural Curator of Dance, ANL, 2002-2006 and now Curator of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library]. We’ve got a meeting with him next Friday to discuss what bits might go to him because they do need to be looked after, and costumes and things.

At the National library?

Well, the National Gallery under James Mollison were smart enough to realise and bought a shitload of early, early stuff, which is beautifully preserved and kept alongside the Ballet Russes stuff down at, in Canberra.

I’ve seen the Ballets Russes collection, it’s beautiful.

Umm ... beautiful, and beautifully curated. Yeah. Look - are we too obsessed, are we going - are we blowing it out of all proportion?

I don’t think so. It’s that the academic world is finally catching up with the significance.

Yeah!

They are – slowly - they are calling it a notable, worthwhile venture to invest.

Its very dangerous stuff to play with because the role model is pretty good, and unless, the historic aspect could be terrible, you could reproduce a work from me and you know I saw because when I was in New York in the ‘seventies, Joffrey [Joffrey Ballet, New York] was doing so much of the Ballets Russes. I was in one of his very beautiful stage productions of “Petrushka” and you know it is a very dangerous thing, because some of them don’t stack up, no matter how well they are produced. Because they have moved into the beautiful realm and what they represent is totally valid, but the reality of them is not ... another thing. And another thing, of course, is to keep their relevance, you know ... sometimes they are perfectly relevant but sometimes it is just as well that they live in the realm of our memory or our imagination, because ... (laughs).
I think it is to do with performance. It won’t technically be what we are used to today. We have wily skills that outstrip, if you look at the Ballet Russes documentary, which I found superb …

*It was lovely to see the older ballerinas alongside the images of their performances as fourteen year olds.*

Yes, that was lovely too, but it’s the experience of the dancers, not the technique of the dancers.

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In my own very limited experience, I remember being in the corps in the Royal Ballet in “Petrushka” [1966] in the ‘sixties.

Yes, that is gorgeous. Same with Joffrey, I was only an extra because I was trying to get a Green Card. And the detail that they went for, and the magic and you could smell the history, and it was because I was only eighteen and absolutely crazy pressure, and here I was attempting and keep rehearsal…….? But see you know it’s those experiences that sort of mark us forever. But its been - its not whether you hate something or love something, its whether you are indifferent.

……? 

Absolutely. And is that original? Its mine now, Sir Robert!

Went to America……?

...we did it tough…..?

In terms of the people he had worked with and used. And in terms of ………?

I think that the Sydney Dance Company, or dance represents that. Now we have had actors that we can send overseas. You know there aren’t many plays that actually hit the international market. But on a regular basis there are companies and dancers, performances, trotting off around the world - are known locally. You don’t get an inch in the paper, we are about to do a six-week tour of America, and the things you’ve done before, like this collaboration with Mulan [“Hua Mula”, a collaboration with the Shanghai Song and Dance Ensemble, premiered at the Shanghai International Arts Festival, 2005] it was like. The politicians have been trying to do, like connect to China, you know…

*In the mid 1960’s, “The Bulletin” magazine [“Australian Ballet Export Action”, Cover feature, April10, 1965] portrayed Helpmann representing the Australian Ballet, like a businessman, in fact the success of the Australian Ballet was reported as an international trade thing.*
Yeah, yeah … *like a cultural thing?*

I don’t tend to see it because I live in my own world; and unfortunately I get dragged out, like a screaming newborn baby and slapped on the bum, for the funding bodies, for the board, for my board and all of that. You know, taken out of my warm womb, frequently interrupted, and practice the art of survival, not the art of dance. I think that it really is time to go. I really think even if the world at large, I have created a world here. It’s not going to happen elsewhere. I’m going to be bringing people together, making projects, walking into rooms full of strange dancers and trying to make a ballet in 6 weeks, and that’s going to be very different, but I’m not daunted. I don’t know if the works will ever be as deeply personal as - I think that autobiographical thing has probably come to an end. They’ll be biographical.

You are darlings, thank you very much. It was such pleasure. You are so welcome. So exciting to talk to people who know what they are talking about.

*Well, I hope.*

The other thing that is worth remembering is that almost everything we have done will never be seen publicly but exists - a little Frenchman [Philippe Chaurulet] who is sitting on a goldmine and he has been doing it ever since the year dot and, and they’re all sitting unedited, and three all ready. It’s all ready to roll and half a million dollars will be right - then they are ready to rock: they can go into schools, they can go into cinemas, they can go into documentaries, they can be used in a film - talking about such a pissy amount of money - but they’ve pulled the …?

………the man who gives Richard Tognetti [Australian violist, composer and conductor, 1970- ].

………*personally I love the history*………

I’ve …….that ability to be spontaneous, ………sorry, the best works you have fly into your ears and you have to do them immediately and I’m over the Australia council and sitting around a board room tables and choose to run - *and you are qualified in what way?* You are as qualified as I am to choose your next CEO!

……….?

No, to make my ballet, ………?

*It is true that Dame Margaret Scott [1922 -, Inaugural Director of the Australian Ballet School, 1964-90] said at one stage that you were pinching her students?*

Oh, yes - that was over Paul Mercurio – they were never going to graduate - so funny, but I still sometimes take the left overs, *the dregs*, and turn them into stars.
I know your relationship with her is very special.

And she is eighty-nine [actually eighty-five] and she is just unbelievable, and her husband is on the board, a bit of fresh air on the Board, Dick, and we are in contact. I try to avoid travelling overseas with her because they make me feel very old.

I think there is work to be done on Margaret, and I just think that is screaming to go. And others like Laurel Martyn, too, who is ninety-one years of age.

Absolutely, see, Val Tweedy [Valrene Tweedie, 1925-, the only Australian dancer to join the Ballets Russes, as “Irana Lavrova”, on tour to Australia between 1936 and 1940], who is not very well at the moment, and she is a - she’s an artist. I mean I love working with those people. That was the great thing about “Nutcracker” [Australian Ballet, 1992]. Actually bringing those people back on stage was like a gift for me; there’s rich pickings and no one knows.

I think we are smelling it.

Yeah, good on you.

So many ideas - so we have to work out who is working on the same ideas, so we don’t clash.

That’s what I’m like, it’s the same like …

Have you see this American book on Cocteau? It’s in the Melbourne University library. You and your work “Poppy” are mentioned.

Wow!

No one else wanted it for the last two years.

And now everyone wants it?

No, I’m the only one who wants it I’m sure it was put in there for a reason.

Wow!

I’m going to photocopy the whole lot because I have had a two-year wait on the Internet for a copy with the book searchers without luck.

No way!

Would you like us to send you a copy? It will be a rough photocopy of the whole thing.
Yes, please! Where are you going to get a photocopy – Indonesia? (Laughs).

(Close)
Sydney Dance Company. Repertoire 1978 - 2008
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