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## The Australian Ballet and Dame Peggy van Praagh: the second wave of classical ballet in Australia

Classical dance in Australia truly came into its own with the foundation of [the Australian Ballet](#) in 1962. Together with the establishment of the Australian Dance Theatre in 1965 under [Elizabeth Cameron Dalman](#), Australia confirmed its position on the international dance stage. Today the Australian Ballet is renowned world-wide for its versatility and excellence.

Between the early 1960s and mid-1970s, under the artistic directorship of Dame Peggy van Praagh in association with [Sir Robert Helpmann](#), a new approach to classical dance was initiated. The Australian Ballet initiated education workshops, guest tours, scholarships, student exchanges and international tours.

This supported new Australian choreography. In addition, the instigation of the Australian Association for Dance Education (now [Ausdance](#)) provided a national voice and leadership for dance in Australia.

### Early international exchanges

Prior to the establishment of the Australian Ballet, dancers and audiences relied upon touring international companies. These early international tours had a long-lasting effect on the model, training and tutelage of Australian ballet. [Anna Pavlova](#), who worked briefly with the Ballet Russes, toured widely in 1926–27. [JC Williamson Ltd](#), for example, produced the operetta *Frasquita* in Sydney in 1927 with Robert Helpmann as the principal dancer.



Australian Ballet, *Coppelia*, 2010.  
Production by George Ogilvie & Peggy van Praagh from 1979.

Anna Pavlova, the Ballet Russes—who toured Australia three times between 1936 and 1940—and the Borovansky Ballet defined the first wave of classical ballet in Australia. Some of these overseas dancers stayed in Australia to become the foundation of the Australian Ballet and Australian dancers, in turn, toured overseas.

Peggy Van Praagh came to Australia to direct the Borovansky Ballet in 1960 after [Edouard Borovansky's](#) death in 1959. The Borovansky Ballet was then dissolved and reinstated in late 1961 with government funding as Australia's first national dance company, the Australian Ballet.

### Dame Peggy van Praagh (1910–1990)



Keith Byron, *Peggy van Praagh teaching at the Australian Ballet*, 1965, black and white photograph. Image courtesy of the [National Library of Australia](#): an23447419.

The Australian Ballet's first artistic director, English-born Dame Peggy van Praagh, steered the development of not only the Australian Ballet but also much of the movement towards a national Australian dance identity. When the Australian Ballet opened with a full-length performance of *Swan Lake*, van Praagh was already 52 years old with a strong career and reputation under her belt. But van Praagh was not about to slow down or near retirement. On the contrary, this was just the beginning of implementing her vision. van Praagh's plan was to establish the Australian Ballet as an international company performing both classical repertoire and also contemporary choreographed ballets.

#### **Swan Lake (November 1962)**

The Australian Ballet opened with *Swan Lake* on 2 November 1962 at Her Majesty's Theatre in Sydney, with principal dancers [Kathleen Gorham](#), [Marilyn Jones](#) and [Garth Welch](#), mostly former members of the [Borovansky Ballet](#), as well as guests [Sonia Arova](#) and [Erik Bruhn](#) dancing the principal roles.

The ballet master was Ray Powell, on loan from the Royal Ballet, and the Ballet teacher was Leon Kellaway, who first came to Australia with the Anna Pavlova company. The choreography, although revised by van Praagh and [Ray Powell](#), was credited to [Marius Petipa](#) and [Lev Ivanov](#).

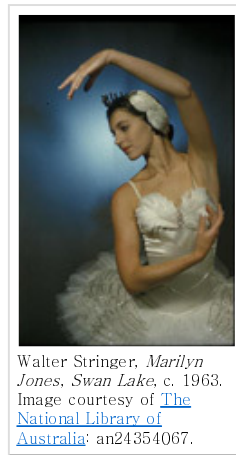
The designs were those of [Anne Fraser](#), which had been used in the Borovansky Ballet production only five years earlier in 1957. With this performance, this highly accomplished artist, van Praagh, set the tone for the next forty-seven years of classical ballet in Australia.

### Dame Peggy van Praagh's ballet lineage

Peggy van Praagh was trained at the King Alfred School in London. She had previously performed with the [Ballet Rambert](#) and danced with [Antony Tudor's London Ballet](#). During the Second World War, van Praagh initiated lunchtime ballet shows called *Ballet for a Bob*, which attracted large audiences of civilian and military personnel.

Even as a child of only five, she was already a star, singled out by the media and public as 'quite a clever little artiste.' Most significantly, she been noticed by Russian ballerina [Anna Pavlova](#), who said of van Praagh and two other dancers, 'I consider all three girls sufficiently advanced in their training to become professional dancers and would do credit to any company of which they might become members.'

In 1941 [Ninette de Valois](#) contracted her to teach company classes for [Sadler's Wells Ballet](#) while she continued to dance in productions including *Les Patineurs*, *Comus* and *Coppelia*, dancing the leading role of Swanilda. She also taught staged ballets throughout England, Canada, Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Norway in the 1950s.



Walter Stringer, Marilyn Jones, *Swan Lake*, c. 1963. Image courtesy of [The National Library of Australia](#): an24354067.

### Philosophy and structure of the Australian Ballet under van Praagh



Terry Phelan, Colin Peasley, Kelvin Coe and Barry Moreland, *East Melbourne studios*, 1964. Image courtesy of the Australian Ballet.

Following [Edouard Borovansky's](#) death in 1959 and the dissolution of his company, van Praagh's first assignment as Director was to set up the Australian Ballet itself. She established the Australian Ballet as a touring repertory company—a model inherited from the Borovansky Ballet and the Ballets Russes. The company would present works including the great classics from the 19th century, the most distinguished ballets of the 20th century and new works of Australian origin.

#### Peggy van Praagh's vision for the Australian Ballet

[Marilyn Rowe](#)—a protégé of van Praagh and consequent Director of the Australian Ballet School—said, 'Peggy had a five point plan for the development of the Australian Ballet'. In addition to the establishment of its

own dance school as a national ballet school, van Praagh's vision for the company included:

- dancers engaged on annual contract;
- a repertoire of established classics together with
- the best works by contemporary choreographers, designers and composers;
- guest artists, the world's best dancers and teachers; and
- an international company tour;

Van Praagh, of course, achieved all this and more.

*The company's founding Artistic Director Peggy van Praagh brought with her initiative, exacting standards and dedication, enabling The Australian Ballet to flourish and achieve international status early in life.*

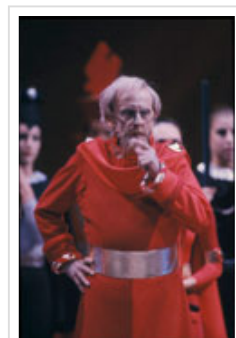
[Australian Ballet website, 2009](#)

### International guest dancers and choreographers

One of Van Praagh's first initiatives as artistic director was to continue the tradition of bringing guest dancers and choreographers into the country. These included world-renowned dancers Sonia Arova, Erik Bruhn, [Margot Fonteyn](#) and [Rudolf Nureyev](#). On 9 January 1963 Tatiana Zimina and Nikita Dolgushin were the first Soviet guest artists to appear with the company. They debuted with the ballet in *Les Sylphides* and *Don Quixote* at Her Majesty's in Adelaide. In 1964 Australia was taken by storm when Fonteyn and Nureyev were guest stars in *Swan Lake* and *Giselle* at the Elizabethan Theatre in Newtown. This was the first time they danced a complete ballet with another company other than the Royal Ballet of London.

### Sir Robert Helpmann

Sir Robert Helpmann (1909 -1986) became associate artistic director of the Australian Ballet in November 1965. Helpmann had already gained a huge international following, having partnered with Fonteyn at the Royal Ballet in London and, like van Praagh, had been singled out by Pavlova as a great dancer. One of Helpmann's first achievements was the commissioning of the first all-Australian ballet, *The Display*, with design by Australian artist [Sidney Nolan](#). Later, he directed and choreographed *Elektra* with stage designs by [Arthur Boyd](#), another great Australian artist.



Don McMurdo, Sir Robert Helpmann as the Red King in *Checkmate*, transparency. Image courtesy of the [National Library of Australia](#): an24722503.

#### *The Display* (1964)

*The Display* used the courtship dance of the lyrebird as a metaphor for Australian male attitudes, which was dedicated to American actress [Katharine Hepburn](#), who wanted to see a male lyrebird dancing.



Walter Stringer, Bryan Lawrence as *The Leader* and Kathleen Gorham as *The Girl* in the Australian Ballet production of *The Display*, 1964. Image courtesy of the [National Library of Australia](#): an24526801.

*[Helpmann's] appearance was unmistakable: a slim elegant figure in a cool safari suit, a deeply sun-tanned face with a shock of dyed blonde hair and a lei of gold chains around his neck. ... He simply came straight in and sat himself down next to Peggy van Praagh. We heard constant whisperings between them while his large bulbous eyes circled the room ... Then, before the class had even finished, he unceremoniously stood up and walked out. In that brief encounter he had sorted out which of us he wanted for The Display.*

[Barry Kitcher](#)

### International tours by the Australian Ballet

The Australian Ballet's first international tour of [Giselle](#) took place on 17 November 1965 at the Theatre des Champs-Élysées. The Australian Ballet's *Giselle* was awarded the Grand Prix of the City of Paris. It also toured Baalbeck, Nice, Liverpool, Glasgow, London, Birmingham, Copenhagen, Berlin, Los Angeles and Honolulu. Later, the Australian Ballet presented a gala performance of [Raymonda](#) in London with guest artists [Margot Fonteyn](#) and [Rudolf Nureyev](#), who had, of course, defected from Russia only four years earlier in 1961. This was performed in the presence of HM Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, HRH Princess Margaret and the Earl of Snowdon. It also marked the first time the Australian Ballet had performed before royalty.

### Rudolf Nureyev (1938–1993) and Margot Fonteyn (1919–1991)

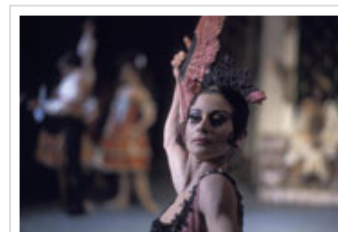
Rudolf Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn contributed greatly to the Australian Ballet. Nureyev in particular so enjoyed working with the Australian Ballet that he toured regularly. Nureyev was renowned for his roles as director and performer. Robert Helpmann invited Nureyev to tour Australia with his own production of *Don Quixote*, his directorial debut. The 1973 ballet film [Don Quixote with The Australian Ballet](#), based on his revised Vienna production for the Australian Ballet in 1970, featured Nureyev, Lucette Aldous as Kitri and Helpmann as Don Quixote. This became the most successful ballet film ever.

*Rudolf Nureyev has done so well with Don Quixote ... [It] takes the dangerous risk of wedding cinematic realism with formal ballet conventions and triumphs as a genre of its own. [Don Quixote] with ... Sir Robert Helpmann and Lucette Aldous ... is the work of top professionals who have a firm understanding of their material.*

New York Times, 1973

### Lucette Aldous (1938-)

In *Don Quixote*, renowned dancer [Lucette Aldous](#) played the role of Kitri, partnering with Nureyev. This suited Aldous, as she was a 'vivacious, effervescent and technically accomplished'. Aldous had already made her Australian Ballet debut in 1970 as guest artist and had been appointed resident principal dancer the following year. She received the award for services to dance at the 2001 Australian Dance Awards and, in 2009, was honoured with the award for lifetime achievement.



Walter Stringer, Lucette Aldous as Kitri in Rudolf Nureyev's *Don Quixote*, 1970. Image courtesy of the [National Library of Australia](#): an23712268.

### Dance through education

One of van Praagh's many achievements as artistic director was the development of dance through education. Van Praagh was true to her goal with the opening of [National Ballet School](#) under the direction of the former [Ballet Rambert](#) dancer [Margaret Scott](#).

### The Armidale summer schools—choreography and dance workshops

The Australian Ballet with van Praagh and dance educator [Shirley Mckechnie](#) hosted several highly successful summer schools organised by the University of New England and held in Armidale, NSW. The schools of the 1960s focused on classical ballet whereas those in the 1970s were billed as choreographic and dance workshops. By 1976, they became an international institution, attracting tutors from Australia, London and New York.

*The summer school schedules were always so full ... what is certain is that from the creative and the cross-disciplinary environment of the UNE summer schools, there emerged some of Australia's strongest talent.*

Michelle Potter, NLA News, 2002

### The Australian Ballet (1962–)

The Australian Ballet under Dame Peggy Van Praagh and Sir Robert Helpmann inspired the achievements of many highly acclaimed Australian dancers and choreographers including Marilyn Jones, Garth Welch and [Lucette Aldous](#).



Branco Gaica. *Graeme Murphy* in the *Sydney Dance Company* production of *Shining*, 1986. Image courtesy of the [National Library of Australia](#): an12693573.

Later, [Anne Woolliams](#) (1976–1977), Marilyn Jones (1979–1981), [Marilyn Rowe](#) (1982) as caretaker ballet director, [Maina Gielgud](#) (1983–1996), [Ross Stretton](#) (1997–2001) and [David McAllister](#) (2001–) followed in her footsteps as artistic directors.

[Graeme Murphy](#), [Stanton Welch](#), [Stephen Baynes](#), [Natalie Weir](#) and [Adrian Burnett](#) were principal choreographers.

#### Graeme Murphy (1950–)

It was in 1976 as the first resident choreographer of the Australian Ballet that renowned choreographer [Graeme Murphy](#) became one of these summer school students. At age 21, Murphy had already created *Ecco le Diavole* in 1971 for four dancers at the Australian Ballet, including his future wife, [Janet Vernon](#). Murphy choreographed more than eight pieces for the Ballet. These included *Glimpses* (1976), *Beyond Twelve* (1980), *Nutcracker* (1992) and *The Firebird* (2009).

#### Dame Peggy van Praagh's legacy to Australian dance

#### The Australian Ballet (1975-)

Van Praagh lived through fascinating historic times in Australian dance. By the time she fully retired in 1978 (having briefly returned as director for a year). Van Praagh saw the Australian Ballet's first work expressly commissioned for television, *The Foot on the Hill*, during the period when Woolliams was director.

In 1980 van Praagh also saw the first time the Australian Ballet made a trip to the People's Republic of China since the [Cultural Revolution](#). There was the 26-day dancers' strike of October 1981 and the momentous opening of the Australian Ballet building in Southbank, Melbourne.

In 1982, van Praagh's solid foundation for the Australian Ballet Company at South Bank, Melbourne, was extended with her appointment as coordinator of dance studies at the [Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts](#), Edith Cowan University, Perth in 1982. This further extended her influence in dance education with the Academy at the Mount Lawly campus producing some of Australia's finest dancers of the next generation.



Princess Diana, Maina Gielgud and Australian Ballet dancers at a Royal Gala performance of *Coppelia*, London, 1992. Image courtesy of the Australian Ballet.

By the time of her death in 1990, van Praagh had seen the invaluable contribution Maina Gielgud made to the Ballet as its longest serving artistic director, not to mention the foundation of the Dancers Company under Marilyn Jones, which offered performing and touring experience to senior students at the Australian Ballet School and younger dancers the chance to gain experience in principal roles.



Jim McFarlane, *Miranda Coney* and *Albert David* in a study for *Stephen Page's 'Rites'*, 1997. Image courtesy of the [National Library of Australia](#): an23764028.

In 1997 there were three new commissions for the Melbourne Festival including Stephen Page's *Rites*, choreographed for his own company, Bangarra Dance Theatre, and The Australian Ballet.

#### Honours

Dame Peggy van Praagh's significant contribution to Australian dance was posthumously recognised in 2000 with her induction into the [Australian Dance Awards](#) Hall of Fame. She had served Australian dance for more than 30 years up until her death in 1990.

Van Praagh was already a Fellow of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (London) by the time she reached Australia but most of her awards were achieved after this. These have included: Member of the Royal Academy of Dancing, 1969; Hon. D. Litt (University of New England), 1974; Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE, 1966); Queen Elizabeth Coronation Prize, Special Artist's Award, Australia Council, 1975; Britannica Australia Award for Arts, 1970; Honorary life member of the Australian Ballet Foundation, 1979; and Dame Commander of the

Order of the British Empire (DBE, 1970).

Today '[Australian Dance Week](#)' is celebrated every May. In 2010 the Australian Ballet honoured the 100th anniversary of the birth of Dame Peggy van Praagh with her 1979 production of *Coppelia*.

#### Related Culture Portal Stories

- [Australian Indigenous ceremony - song, music and dance](#)
- [Dance](#)
- [The first wave of classical ballet in Australia](#)
- [Elizabeth Cameron Dalman and Australian modern dance](#)
- [Contemporary dance in Australia](#)

## Useful links

### Classical dance companies

- [Australian Ballet](#)
- [Sadler's Wells Ballet](#)
- [Sydney Dance Company](#)

### Dance resources

- [Australian Dance Awards](#)
- [Australian Dancing - National Library of Australia](#)
- [Ausdance—Australia's professional dance advocacy organisation](#)
- [Australian Ballet's illustrated timeline of its history \(PDF\)](#)
- [Performing Arts Collection](#) at the Arts Centre, Melbourne relating to the history of circus, dance, music, opera and theatre in Australia.
- [Adeline Genee Medal](#)

### Classical dance training

- [National Ballet School](#)
- [New WA Ballet facility](#)

### Australian classical dance history

- [J.C. Williamson](#)
- [Borovansky Ballet](#)
- [Ballet Rambert](#)
- [Ballets Russes](#)
- [Rudolf Nureyev](#)
- [Adrian Burnett](#)
- [Anne Fraser](#)
- [Anne Woolliams](#)
- [Antony Tudor's London Ballet](#)
- [Margot Fonteyn](#)
- [Marilyn Jones](#)
- [Marilyn Rowe](#)
- [Garth Welch](#)
- [Ross Stretton](#)
- [Graeme Murphy](#)

### Dancers - other

- [Dame Peggy van Praagh](#)
- [David McAllister](#)
- [Erik Bruhn](#)
- [Janet Vernon](#)
- [Kathleen Gorham](#)
- [Lev Ivanov](#)
- [Lucette Aldous](#)
- [Maina Gielgud](#)
- [Margaret Scott](#)
- [Marius Petipa](#)
- [Natalie Weir](#)
- [Ninette de Valois](#)
- [Ray Powell](#)
- [Shirley Mckechnie](#)
- [Sonia Arova](#)
- [Stanton Welch](#)
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- [Felix Blaska](#)
- [Katharine Hepburn](#)
- [Kenneth Gillespie](#)
- [Maggie Scott](#)
- [Paul Mercurio](#)

### Listen, look and play

- [Don Quixote with The Australian Ballet](#)
- [Beyond Twelve](#)
- [Cultural Revolution](#)
- [Giselle](#)
- [Raymonda](#)