WHAT IS BALLET?

Exciting to do and watch, ballet is an entertaining theatrical art performed on stage to an audience. It is about art but it is also about life.

Classical ballet technique was established centuries ago in the courts of Europe, and it has been evolving ever since as dance teachers, artists and researchers refine approaches to training and add to the vocabulary of steps and movements that are unique to the ballet discipline.

Ballet dancers are fit, strong and flexible, and they are lifelong students. They take class every day of their lives to keep in shape, to maintain the quality of their style and technique and to enjoy the community of other dancers. In order to consistently perform at the best of their ability, dancers need focus, commitment and a capacity for hard work.

Hear dancers of The Australian Ballet talk about the daily ritual of morning class.

HISTORY OF BALLET

Ballet began as a clever way to fill the time between courses at a banquet. In 1489, to celebrate the marriage of the Duke of Milan to Isabel Aragon of Torrona, Bergonzio di Botta presented a series of entrées, choreographed to complement the many different courses he was serving. It started a fashion. Ballet became an elegant pastime in the royal courts of Italy; a way for them to show how cultured, talented and wealthy they were.

One of the most talented, cultured and wealthy women of the time was Catherine de Medici who married Henry II of France. At the French court in 1581 she staged what is regarded as the
first court ballet, *Ballet Comique de la Reine Louise*. Instead of a series of divertissements (short
dance showing technical skill), it was based on a story, the legend of Circe, an enchantress who
turned men into animals. Performed almost entirely by royalty, it lasted five and a half hours
and cost more than three and a half million gold francs, almost bankrupting the French court.
However, it was immensely successful and served to underline the power and majesty of France.

All of the kings of France danced, but it was during the reign of Louis XIV (1643–1715) that
court ballet reached its peak. Louis XIV loved to dance, becoming known as ‘The Sun King’ after
the role he portrayed in the *Ballet de la Nuit* in 1653. In 1661 he ensured that dancing would be
regarded as an art and not merely a craft by founding the Academie Royale de Danse, consisting
of 13 ballet masters who he charged with the task of “re-establishing the art in its perfection”.
It was the king’s ballet master Pierre Beauchamps who established the important principle that
each leg must be ‘turned-out’ – a theatrical adaptation of the fencer’s stance – and that the feet
must move to and from the five fundamental foot positions of classical ballet.

At first the only dancers on stage were men. Female roles, as in Shakespeare’s plays, were
performed by slender young men wearing women’s costumes, wigs and masks. This all changed
in 1681 when, led by Mademoiselle de Lafontaine, the first professional female dancers appeared
in *Le Triomphe de l’Amour*.

Well into the eighteenth century, both male and female dancers were encumbered by masks,
wigs or large headdresses, and heeled shoes. Women wore panniers, hoop skirts draped at the
sides for fullness. Men also often wore a hooped skirt, the knee-length *tonnelet*. These costumes
made it difficult for dance technique to progress. When Marie Camargo shocked French
audiences by shortening her skirt to ankle length, she not only allowed her sparkling jumps and
beats to be seen, but also encouraged the development of cleaner and more accurate footwork.

While the dancers of the Paris Opéra concentrated on the brilliance of their technique,
choreographers in other centres of ballet were experimenting with the dramatic side of dance.
In London, the English choreographer John Weaver tried to convey dramatic action solely
through dance and pantomime, and in Vienna the Austrian choreographer Franz Hilferding and
his Italian pupil Gasparo Angiolini experimented with dramatic themes and gestures.

Dancing on toe began to develop in the late 1700s, although dancers were only able to balance
on the tips of their toes for a moment or two, because blocked toe shoes had not yet been
invented; dancers merely strengthened their light ballet slippers with darning. Meanwhile dance
 technique was continuing to evolve in Italy where Carlo Blasis recorded the latest advances
in his *Code of Terpsichore* (1830). He is credited with inventing the *attitude*, derived from a
famous work by the Flemish sculptor Giambologna, a statue of the god Mercury poised lightly
on the toes of the left foot.
ROMANTIC BALLET

First performed in Paris in 1832, the ballet La Sylphide introduced the period of Romantic ballet. Marie Taglioni danced the part of the Sylphide, a supernatural creature who is loved and inadvertently destroyed by a mortal man. The choreography, created by her father Filippo Taglioni, exploited the use of toe dancing to emphasise his daughter’s otherworldly lightness. La Sylphide inspired many changes in the ballets of the time in theme, style, technique and costume. Soon after, Giselle (1841) also contrasted the human and supernatural worlds and in its second act, the ghostly spirits called wilis wear the white tutu popularised by La Sylphide.

Madeleine Eastoe in La Sylphide. Photo Jeff Busby

Ballet during the Romantic era was not just focused on the subject of otherworldly beings. The Austrian dancer Fanny Elssler popularised an earthier character. Her most famous dance, the Cachucha (in Le Diable Boiteux, 1836), was a Spanish-style solo, performed with castanets and she often performed stylised versions of national dances.

Women dominated the Romantic period in ballet. Although talented male dancers such as the Frenchmen Jules Perrot and Arthur Saint-Leon were performing, they were eclipsed by
ballerinas such as Marie Taglioni, Fanny Elssler, the Italians Carlotta Grisi, Fanny Cerrito and others.

In Paris however, ballet began to decline during this period. Male dancing was neglected and few ballets of note were produced at the during the second half of the 19th century. An exception was Coppélia, choreographed by Arthur Saint-Leon in 1870, but even here the principal male role of Franz was danced by a woman.

Denmark, however, maintained the standards of the Romantic ballet. Danish choreographer August Bournonville, who had studied in Paris, not only established a system of training but also created a large body of works, including his own version of La Sylphide (1836). Many of these ballets are still performed by The Royal Danish Ballet and companies throughout the world.

Russia also preserved the integrity of ballet during the late 19th century. A Frenchman, Marius Petipa, became the chief choreographer of the Imperial Russian Ballet. He perfected the full-length, evening-long story ballet that combined set dances with mimed scenes. His best-known works are The Sleeping Beauty (1890) and Swan Lake (co-choreographed with the Russian Lev Ivanov), both set to commissioned scores by Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky.

20th – 21st C

With time, Petipa’s choreographic method settled into a formula. Mikhail Fokine called for greater expressiveness and more authenticity in choreography, scenery and costumes. He was able to realise his ideas through the Ballets Russes, a new company organised by the Russian impresario Sergei Diaghilev.

The Ballets Russes opened in Paris in 1909 and won immediate success. The male dancers led by Russian ballet star Vaslav Nijinsky were particularly admired because excellent male dancers had almost disappeared in Paris. The company presented a broad range of works, including Fokine’s compactly knit one-act ballets with colourful themes from Russian or Asian folklore: The Firebird (1910), Schéhérazade (1910) and Petrouchka (1911). The Ballets Russes became synonymous with novelty and excitement, a reputation it maintained throughout its 20 years of existence.

Diaghilev assembled some of the world’s greatest artists to create new works for his company, and although most of them were Russian – among them designers Léon Bakst and composer Igor Stravinsky – he also commissioned many Western European artists such as Pablo Picasso and Maurice Ravel. They encouraged Diaghilev’s choreographers, Mikhail Fokine, Vaslav Nijinsky, Léonide Massine, Bronislava Nijinska, George Balanchine and Serge Lifar to experiment with new themes and styles of movement. The offshoots of Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes revitalised ballet all over the world. Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova, who danced in its early seasons, formed her own company and toured internationally, including two tours of Australia in 1926 and 1929. Two former members of the Ballets Russes, the Polish-born Dame Marie Rambert and the Irish-born Dame Ninette de Valois, became founders of British ballet. The Rambert Ballet discovered and nurtured the choreographic talents of Sir Frederick Ashton and Antony Tudor, who were to influence the formation of an English style of ballet. Dame Ninette de Valois founded what was
to become Britain’s Royal Ballet. Through her company came both Dame Peggy van Praagh and Sir Robert Helpmann, who became the first Artistic Directors of The Australian Ballet.

Mikhail Fokine worked with many companies, including what was to become the American Ballet Theatre. George Balanchine was invited to work in the United States by Lincoln Kirstein, a wealthy American patron of the arts. There he established the School of American Ballet and New York City Ballet. Serge Lifar, the last of Diaghilev’s male stars, revitalised the Paris Opéra and dominated French ballet for many years.

In the 1920s and 1930s, modern dance began to develop in the United States and Germany. American dancers Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey and German dancer Mary Wigman, among others, broke away from traditional ballet to create their own expressive movement styles and to choreograph dances that were more closely related to human life at that time. Ballets also reflected this move toward realism. For instance, in 1932 the German choreographer Kurt Jooss created The Green Table, an anti-war ballet, and Antony Tudor developed the psychological ballet, which revealed the inner being of his characters.

The technique of modern dance eventually extended the movement vocabulary of ballet, particularly in the use of the torso and in movements performed lying or sitting on the floor. Popular dance forms were also used to enrich the ballet vocabulary. In 1944 American choreographer Jerome Robbins created Fancy Free, a ballet based on the jazz-dance style that had developed in musical comedy.

Beginning in 1956, Russian ballet companies such as the Bolshoi and Kirov performed in the West for the first time. The intense dramatic feeling and technical virtuosity of the Russians made a great impact. Russian influence on ballet continues today, both through visits from Russian companies and the activities of defecting Soviet dancers such as Rudolf Nureyev, Natalia Makarova and Mikhail Baryshnikov.

Dance in general underwent an enormous surge in popularity beginning in the mid-1960s. Ballet began to show the influence of a younger audience in both themes and style. The athleticism of dancing was enjoyed in much the same way as sports and virtuosic steps were admired for their challenge and daring. Popular music such as rock and roll and jazz was also used to accompany many ballets.

THE 21ST CENTURY

Today’s ballet repertoire offers great variety. New ballets and re-staging of older ballets co-exist with new works created by contemporary choreographers for ballet companies. Choreographers experiment with both new and traditional forms and styles, and dancers constantly seek to extend their technical and dramatic range.
DANCE IN AUSTRALIA

1796 – 1900

From humble beginnings, dance, particularly ballet has become a central platform in Australia’s arts and entertainment. The earliest dance performed in an Australian theatre was not a ballet but a ‘hornpipe’, a divertissement following the play, *The Tragedy of Jane Shore* at the Sydney Theatre on 30 July 1796. As the colonies flourished then grew wealthy with the discovery of gold, theatres became grand and plentiful and manager-promoters like George Coppin in Melbourne and JC Williamson in Sydney created regular audiences for very diverse dancers and ensembles from the northern hemisphere.

The first ballet presented was *The Fair Maid of Perth* at The Theatre Royal, Sydney in January 1835. The best of Europe’s Romantic-era ballets, *La Sylphide, La Fille mal gardée* and *Giselle* appeared soon after. But the most famous arrival, in 1851, was Lola Montes, an Irish woman posing as a Spaniard whose personality, famous Spider Dance and colourful private life, entertained gold miners and city folk alike; she was like a pop star of her era.
Novelty was important in this era and amongst the Russians, Spaniards, Italians and family troupes who performed in the late 1880s. Filippo Taglioni’s comic ballet *Jocko, the Brazilian Ape*, and the routines of the one-legged dancer Signor Donato were extremely popular.

**1900 – 1950**

The new century was marked by long and repeat tours by famous ballerinas and ensembles. In 1913 Danish ballerina Adeline Genée had great success with *Coppélia, Les Sylphides, Arabian Nights* and *Robert le Diable* and established a local taste for Russian and French repertoire.

The ethereal Anna Pavlova, billed by JC Williamsons as “the greatest dancer of all time”, came in 1926 and again in 1929, when she introduced ballet to huge, captivated crowds from North Queensland to all the mainland capitals.

If Pavlova’s tours were exciting, Colonel de Basil’s Ballets Russes tours between 1936 and 1940 caused a revolution amongst Australian artists and audiences. People queued overnight for tickets, hunted autographs and repeatedly watched favourite dancers in performances of more than 40 ballets. Many were masterpieces of the 20th century including Léonide Massine’s *Les Présages* and David Lichine’s *Graduation Ball*, danced on different tours by famous artists Helene Kirsova, Irina Baronova, Tamara Toumanova, Tamara Tchinarova, Tatiana Riabouchinska, Anton Dolin and Paul Petroff.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, the scene began to change. Helene Kirsova settled in Sydney and her school provided the dancers for Australia’s first professional ensemble. Others made homeless by the war stayed too. Edouard and Xenia Borovansky’s Melbourne studio formed the basis of the Borovansky Ballet; Kira Abriccosova Bousloff went to Perth and built the West Australian Ballet; and Raissa Koussnetzova formed the short-lived Polish Australian Ballet.
In 1947, London’s Ballet Rambert planned to tour here for six months but was so popular that it stayed 18 months and brought with it a new, English aesthetic. Rambert dancer Margaret Scott settled here and in 1964 became the founding director of The Australian Ballet School. Another dancer, Joyce Graeme, was appointed director of the National Theatre Ballet in 1948, an initially successful company which lasted only till 1954 with Sydney-born Valrene Tweedie as a most creative director.

Influential companies continued to tour in the 1950s - The Royal Ballet and New York City Ballet, Alvin Ailey African American Dance Theatre, Katherine Dunham’s Afro-Caribbean troupe and the revelation of the Bolshoi Ballet from Moscow with its strapping men and technically gifted ballerinas.

All the early Australian companies seemed to adopt the principles of Diaghilev’s legendary Ballets Russes (1909-29): strong collaborations between local composers, designers and musicians, training dancers seriously, as well as exploring Australian themes. Borovansky’s Terra Australis, The Black Swan and The Outlaw, Rex Reed and Beth Dean’s versions of Corroboree and Martyn’s Mathinna were the earliest serious Australian works, performed next to Ballets Russes revivals, new modern and abstract works and familiar classics. Standards rose quickly but would suffer for lack of funding.

1960 TO PRESENT DAY

After many successful years, the Borovansky ballet finished up in 1959. British dancer-director Peggy van Praagh came to lead the company and after it closed, a government initiative allowed it to be reborn as The Australian Ballet in November 1962. Like the West Australian Ballet and Queensland Ballet (founded by Borovansky student Charles Lisner in 1960), The Australian Ballet continues to thrive to the present day.

Rudolf Nureyev’s defection to the West from the USSR in 1961 was a watershed and The Australian Ballet welcomed his influence when he brought his brilliant, classic revivals of Raymonda and Don Quixote to our shores. Soon after, the 1970s dance boom changed ballet worldwide, elevating the standards and the status of male dancers to new heights. Stars and companies of the highest quality toured to Australia, showing local dancers that they could become part of a new elite team and Australians left to work abroad in increasing numbers while The Australian Ballet became our greatest artistic ambassador.
The three main ballet companies in Australia have now been joined by a number of professional contemporary companies, which along with the high standard of many dance schools, demonstrate that dance is alive and well in Australia. The most significant and gratifying changes in the past decade include the increasing numbers of boys and students from many culturally diverse backgrounds who have been attracted to the art form.

*Lee Christofis, Curator of Dance, National Library of Australia*

*See footage of The Australian Ballet's history, during its 50th season*