

DANCE DINING BOOKS CULTURE



Dancers of the West Australian Ballet in "Giselle" at the Maj theater in Perth, Australia, in May. Below, Margot Fonteyn and Nureyev rehearsing "Giselle" in 1962 in London. When Fonteyn danced as Giselle at the Maj in 1970, she left a deep impact on the writer. SERGEY FEYEV

A ghost hovering over 'Giselle'

PERTH, AUSTRALIA

West Australian Ballet summons memories of a dancer's younger days

BY TONI BENTLEY

The West Australian Ballet in Perth was founded in 1952 by Kira Bousloff and is now the oldest classical ballet company in Australia. Ms. Bousloff was one of the earliest members of the first of several overlapping Ballets Russes

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companies created after the Russian impresario Serge Diaghilev's death in 1929.

After an Australian tour in 1939, Ms. Bousloff — born Kira Abricossova in 1914 to Russian parents in Monte Carlo — chose to remain on the wharf as her company sailed back to Europe, predicting that Australia would be a safe outpost during World War II. She became one of the many, often unsung, pioneers of the enormous Ballets Russes diaspora that brought classical ballet to all corners of the world as dancers, teachers, designers, seamstresses, choreographers, ballet masters and directors — George Balanchine being the most celebrated and influential.

Ms. Bousloff moved to "little Perth at the end of the world," as she put it, several years after the war, and there created, ambitiously, a ballet company in a

town more accustomed to sheep shearing than tutus or tiaras. It was no small dream to bring one of the most demanding and sophisticated European art forms to a place still often referred to as the "world's most isolated city." But the company thrived — as has the city. Ms. Bousloff died in 2001 at 87.

In 2012, the Belgian dancer and director Aurélien Scannella was named the company's director and, in collaboration with his wife, Sandy Delasalle, a former French ballerina and ballet mistress, the company recently performed its new production of "Giselle."

This ballet, which had its premiere in Paris in 1841, boasts a distinguished literary legacy, with a libretto by Théophile Gautier and Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges rooted in texts by Heinrich Heine and Victor Hugo. It is a parable about the power of feminine love.

The heart of the lovely peasant girl, Giselle, is won by Albrecht, a duke in disguise slumming it in the local village. But he is already engaged to an appropriate aristocrat and his deception breaks Giselle and she dies in the legendary Mad Scene — a crucible for a ballerina — that ends Act I.

She is resurrected in Act II as one of the Wills, a battalion of betrothed-then-betrayed virgins who, united in the afterlife, reconsecrate their unused wedding gowns as diaphanous armor and dance men to death every evening.

The Wills are unlikely exemplars of radical feminism, appropriately embedded as they are in an art form whose very language — physically and morally — champions female supremacy. In

a final twist, however, Giselle's love runs so deep for her two-timing man that she breaks ranks and saves his life. So Albrecht learns about true love but is left alone to mourn his beautiful ghost.

These performances in Perth offered the opportunity to see the ballet in a particularly unique setting. His Majesty's Theater — known affectionately as the "Maj" — was built in 1904 during the height of the gold rush boom in Western Australia. It is an exquisite example of Edwardian Baroque architecture and one of only two remaining theaters worldwide — the other is in Aberdeen, Scotland — so-named during the nine-year rule of King Edward VII.

Its public spaces are ensconced in creamy ivory walls, gold trim, Art Nouveau-style paneling, grand foyers, marble staircases and red carpeting, while the inner sanctum is a delight of red, royal blue and gold sprinkled with whimsical theatrical murals: a Victorian fantasy of grand opera meets vaudeville.

This jewel-box theater, a State Heritage Icon, was purchased by the Western Australian government in 1977 and was given a multimillion-dollar renovation. It has been the site of performances ranging from opera, Shakespeare, films, and Gilbert and Sullivan to "Russian spectaculars," political rallies and boxing matches. The stage has seen the likes of Nellie Melba, Barry Humphries, Claudette Colbert, Katherine Hepburn (advertised as "Ivive and in person"), Judy Garland, Anna Pavlova, Rudolf Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn.

It is with this last with whom I have my own particular memory at this very



AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE

Fonteyn's autograph became a sacred talisman for me.

theater, when, as a very young student at Balanchine's School of American Ballet in New York, I was visiting the city of my birth and saw Fonteyn dancing as Giselle at the Maj in 1970. Like Pavlova before her she traveled the globe, a devoted ambassador of her art. After the performance I waited by the stage door and asked Fonteyn for her autograph. Graciously, she signed a scrap of yellow paper, creating a sacred talisman for a young dancer.

As I sat in a red-velvet seat in the orchestra at the Maj during the sold-out opening night here of "Giselle," Fonteyn's ghost inevitably hovered. But as I watched those 26 impeccably rehearsed Australian girls in Act II hop in those famous five opposing horizontal lines of unison creating a veritable fortress of white tulle — I saw something else more fantastic.

Not only was Kira Bousloff's dream of ballet in the outback a reality — Brooke Widdison-Jacobs is a world-class Giselle with her willowy limbs and delicate sensibility while Matthew Lehmann is an Albrecht of gravitas and Valentino good-looks — but one of the most fragile symbols of culture itself had landed with perfect precision, like a Google Map pin drop, in this remote city.

Toni Bentley danced with New York City Ballet for 10 years and is the author of five books, including "Winter Season: A Dancer's Journal."

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