

## **Survival on the High Wire West Australian Ballet 1970-1980**

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The year 1970 took off like a space rocket from Cape Canaveral. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of January, the share price of the Australian nickel company Poseidon reached \$235 on the London Stock Exchange. In early February, the shares reached a stratospheric \$280, then began a rapid decline in market value to \$12 by the 1<sup>st</sup> of April, April Fool's Day.

April in particular was a busy month. The Beatles—the Fab Four—were in court on the 9<sup>th</sup> trying to divorce each other after a remarkable band career. On the 17<sup>th</sup>, the world held its breath for 90 hours as Apollo 13 disappeared behind the Moon while technicians at Houston, and especially Carnarvon, devised ways and means to bring the crippled spacecraft back to a safe landing in the Pacific.

And on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, Prime Minister John Gorton announced the withdrawal of Australian troops from Vietnam after five years fighting a contrived non-war that divided the country and demonised for almost a generation the young Australians who fought there.

The trajectory of many of these events paralleled the dramas that shaped the history of West Australian Ballet from 1970-1980. Given the stature and status of the company today, and its corporate support, it is too easy to overlook the dedication (and intrigues) of those who, with determination, creativity and finesse, kept the company afloat as it teetered without a safety net on the tightrope of bankruptcy.

A number of activities had long-term consequences. The first full-time artistic director, the first contracted dancers and the first paid executive officer were appointed; a permanent home was sought; the company received funding from both the federal and the WA state governments, and was recognised as a State Regional Ballet Company; a fund-raising arm was established -- the WA Ballet Society -- and the company made its first international tour.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> July 1968, full-time contracts were given to five professional dancers—Jonathan Debney, Ken McSwain, Hanni Smeschkal, Dianne Taylor and Shelley Rae. Debney left before the end of the year but a further three full-time appointments were given to Lyn McLachlan, Caron Nasso and Ken Whitmore.

Three professional dancers, Veronica Alexandrow, Joanne Gray and Colin McLeod, supplemented this small troupe in company seasons at the Octagon and Playhouse Theatres. On these occasions, special guests boosted the company's technical and artistic strength -- Jenny Miller and her South African-born husband, Michael Brown, ex-Ballet Rambert principal, Patricia Sadka, Luis Moreno who became artistic director in 1973, and Elaine Fifield, Garth Welch and Marilyn Jones from the Australian Ballet.

Michael McClelland, appointed a full-time executive officer in 1968, presided over cramped headquarters at 43 King Street while Kira Bousloff, Gundi Sobkoviak (nee Ferris) and the newly appointed artistic director, Rex Reid, conducted studio practice at 59 King Street.

Mr Reid stayed in Australia after the 1947-1948 Ballet Rambert tour and joined the National Theatre Ballet Company in Victoria in 1949 as assistant director to Leon Kellaway. He continued to perform with National Theatre Ballet, and the Australian Ballet, and ventured into choreography using Australian themes—*Corroboree* (1950) and *Melbourne Cup* (1962). The Australian Ballet premiered his most successful work in December 1962 – the gothic ballet *The Night is a Sorceress*. Mr Reid restaged the work with WA Ballet in its 1970 Octagon season.

He returned to Europe in 1969 to work with John Cranko and his Stuttgart Ballet. The Stuttgart association continues to this day since the company's present artistic director, Ivan Cavallari, was a Principal there in 1994, has restaged a number of Cranko ballets for prestigious companies, and recently brought Cranko's muse, Marcia Haydée, to Perth to restage *Sleeping Beauty*.

So: it was not surprising that in Mr Reid, Madame Bousloff, the company's original artistic director, saw someone who could take a fledgling company and give it wings. *The Australian's* obituary in May 2000 said of him: 'Between 1970 and 1974, he worked with a fine team of dancers. He transformed the company from a semi-professional ensemble into the most important state dance company of its time.'

In December 1969, a deputation led by President H. W. F. ('Eddie') Edwards met with representatives of the Subiaco City Council. The company had the opportunity to long-lease the Broadway Theatre for a rental of \$5,000 a year as long as it paid for any alterations or refurbishments. Honorary architect Ean Macdonald had drawn up plans but the cost would be \$20,000. Could the council help?

In making its case, Mr Edwards tabled a document that revealed that in 1969, the company had staged three city seasons, and toured the North West of WA, the Northern Territory, the Territory of Papua and New Guinea, and three towns in northern Queensland. The State government had supported the company through subsidy for the fifth consecutive year. An artistic director was appointed, and with him, two renowned principal dancers, Luis Moreno and Robin Haig, a Perth girl who had distinguished herself with the Royal Ballet. The deputation felt certain the council would be sympathetic to having a ballet company with this record of accomplishment within its catchment area.

The approach was unsuccessful. It was not until 1971 that the company's desire to own its own home was realised when it acquired premises in North Fremantle with the assistance of a bank loan. The former Town Hall owned by T. S. C. Investments Pty Ltd had been valued at between \$45,000 and \$50,000. In a letter to the WA Arts Advisory Board, Mr Edwards said that the property was 'short of the ideal but it is home, [the] first in our history.'

Mr Reid approached Barbara Ahern and asked her to start a ballet society. On the 11<sup>th</sup> October 1969, with the Lady Mayoress, Mrs T. E. Wardle in the chair, a number of women, 'prominent in social and public life', met at the Parmelia Hotel. From that meeting, and a membership of six, grew the company's principal fund-raising arm, the WA Ballet Society, known today as the Friends of West Australian Ballet, now under the leadership of Rodney Thompson.

The company received its first government grants in 1966. The Elizabethan Theatre Trust, a federal body, gave £1000 and the WA State government, £1,500. By 1970, the federal grant,

via the Australia Council, had increased to \$8,000 (we had decimal currency by then) and the State government grant to \$10,000 (to facilitate the contractual employment of full-time dancers and so beginning life as a fully-fledged 'State Company').

At the 1969 Annual General Meeting, Treasurer Gerard Tonks announced that for the previous 16 months, Income had amounted to \$49,804 and Expenditure, \$48,593. The result was a small operating surplus of \$1,211. The company's assets amounted to \$7,628 but only \$816 of it was cash. Such precarious finances meant that bankruptcy was a spectre waiting in the wings.

The Papua-New Guinea tour had been an extraordinary success (as was a repeat in 1970). Thousands packed the Port Moresby Rugby League ground over three nights to see a ballet in the open air. The Australian Ballet had visited shortly before so this had stimulated interest, as well as acquainting the local organisers with the technical challenges of staging ballet. In Lae, Caron Nasso's hour-long lecture/demonstration captivated more than 1,500 eager children.

On that regional and international tour, 20,000 people came to see West Australian Ballet, among them, 10,500 children. The company realised even then that the young today mature into the audiences of tomorrow.

At a special meeting on the 7<sup>th</sup> June 1971, Mr Edwards resigned as president, a position he had held since 1960. The company's morale was at 'an all time low', there were factions among members that were 'not conducive to a progressive State Ballet Company' and there were persistent attempts to 'undermine the authority of the management committee'.

A special general meeting on the 17<sup>th</sup> June elected Dr Bruce Pratt president and John Ahern his new deputy. They began a healing process and most importantly, put the company on a more businesslike footing. A sub-committee drafted a new constitution and this was adopted in October. In the second half of 1971, private donations amounted to \$3,250 and corporate sponsorship, \$3,000. The president's Christmas message to members proclaimed that 'this total of \$6,250 is most gratifying and gives your Executive the confidence that the image of the WA Ballet Company is held in good esteem within our community.'

Mr Ahern, as managing director of Aherns Pty Ltd, a prominent department store, was a well-known businessman. As president of the Perth Chamber of Commerce in 1968 and 1969, he had further developed his business and government contacts. He was in a strong position to represent the company when he took over as president from Dr Pratt. He attracted high profile businessmen to the board in Terry Quartermaine and Simon Williams.

According to Mr Williams, 'our aim was to put the company on a business footing, separating artistic operation from policy and direction setting by the board.' An administrator linked the two fields of endeavour. 'If either the artistic director or the administrator was not doing the job, it was the board's prerogative to sack them,' he said.

Despite presidential letters to firms soliciting assistance, and persistent doorknocking by Ballet Society members, the financial response was poor. Mr Ahern had a quiet word with the under-treasurer, Ken Townsing. The result was that the government would offer funding on condition it could have two representatives on the company's board.

John Down, then superintendent with the Department of Education (and also a footballer and state 100 yards sprint champion), not a dancer, was another board appointment. Harry Barton was the Director of Education. 'He asked me would I like to be on the board,' Mr Down recalled. 'They want someone with an education background who can further the work in schools.' Mr Down, now a Life Member, rang Mr Ahern, also a Life Member, and they had a chat over morning tea before Mr Down joined the Board.

The schools program was a most important part of the company's activities. In 1970-1971, representatives had visited 60 per cent of metropolitan schools. Two of the most enthusiastic advocates were Margaret Mercer, an early member of West Australian Ballet, and board member, Desmond Banwell, the former proprietor of Delilah Florist and, as a performer, noted for the 'flamboyant authenticity' he brought to the stage.

At one school visit, the Hon. Graham MacKinnon, Minister for Education, Cultural Affairs and Recreation (1974-1977) in the Court Government accompanied President Ahern. When Minister MacKinnon waxed lyrical about the excellence of the program and how educationally valuable it was, Mr Ahern quietly advised him that in all probability the company would have to fold through lack of money. He was not joking; the result was enhanced funding.

According to Mr Williams, who succeeded Mr Ahern as president, 'we were funded to a level of incompetence, never quite enough to make a professional company.' Former Bluebell Girl, Sylvia Box, had retired to Perth in 1967 with Sydney, her film director husband. 'Dance,' she once said, 'is life with the dull bits cut out.' She joined the board and soon saw the company's financial and artistic difficulty.

Mrs Box resigned from the board to become administrator in 1978 with the objective of developing a more proficient management. 'It was the best thing that ever happened to the ballet company,' said Mr Down. Artistic director Robin Haig, who succeeded Luis Moreno in 1977, commissioned Mr Welch to choreograph *KAL* for the State's 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, in Graham Maclean's luscious costumes and sets. Ms Haig agreed to develop a scenario for Verdon Williams, an Adelaide based composer, who would then write the score.

Frustrated by continually missed scenario deadlines, Mrs Box and her husband flew to Adelaide to meet with Mr Williams. Mr Box then wrote *KAL* scene by scene for the composer.

By 1979, Ms Haig found it increasingly difficult to reconcile the role of artistic director with family demands and so was forced to leave the company. Matters came to a head in early 1979 when the board terminated Ms Haig's artistic directorship. Celebrated ballet teacher, Linley Wilson, had recommended her protégé to then president, Mr Ahern. The board did not regard such a position as a 'nine to five' job but with a small child and another on the way, it was increasingly difficult for Ms Haig to reconcile company and family demands. In a long discussion with president Down (and Simon Williams), Ms Haig 'dug her heels in; she wouldn't budge.'

Garth Welch, father of former Australian Ballet dancer Stanton Welch who is now artistic director of Houston Ballet, replaced her. When Mr Down asked Mr Welch if he would accept the position of artistic director, he replied, 'Yes. If there is a vacancy.' After the dismissal, Ms Haig wrote to Mr Down, 'I want to let you know I am not going of my own free will.'

On the 29<sup>th</sup> June, West Australian Ballet made history when it premiered, in the Perth Concert Hall, 'the first three-act evening-length ballet on an Australian theme ... created for a classically orientated company.' Dance historian Edward Pask regarded the ballet, in 1982, as 'possibly the most important work created for the West Australian Ballet ... a ballet worthy of wider showing.' Perhaps it is time to consider a revival, given the importance of the resource sector to the State's economy.

In 1980, the company over-balanced into bankruptcy. As an incorporated body, it could not continue to trade in the red. A request for support to the Arts Council, of which Dr Haydn Williams, formerly director of the West Australian Institute of Technology, was now chairman, went unheeded. A West Australian Ballet board meeting passed a motion to close the company at the end of August. Mr Down, then Chairman, met with dancers and support staff some weeks before that deadline, and advised that, 'you'll be out of a job.' He also advised Dr Williams whose reaction was, 'You can't do that!' 'We've done it,' was his response. According to Mr Down, the Arts Council chairman then 'sat on his hands and did nothing.'

Three days before the August deadline, on a rainy Sunday evening, Mr Down decided to do something. Without the board's authority, he wrote a letter on an ordinary piece of paper to Premier Sir Charles Court and personally delivered it to his Nedlands home. Mr Down knew that the following day, Monday, Sir Charles would fly north to Noonkanbah, and that unless he read the letter before leaving, it would be too late.

Sir Charles and Lady Court returned home later that night. He took Mr Down's letter inside to read it, with Lady Court still in the car. 'We must do something,' he said. At eight o'clock next morning, he rang Mr Down. 'John, I think I have found you some money, enough to keep going.' He then rang off. Later that morning, Dr Williams rang. 'I've got you some money,' he said.

But there was a trade-off. The board had to resign, with the exception of the two government appointments. Simon Williams was one of those who resigned. On his way home after the board meeting, he told his wife, Jill, what had happened and the sacrifice the board had to make in exchange for the government's bail-out. Their 12-year-old daughter, a not so silent witness in the back, responded, 'What did you expect if you were blackmailing the government!'

In May 1981, West Australian Ballet travelled north, from windy North Fremantle to the unfurnished second floor of the recycled His Majesty's Theatre, and the adrenalin rush of the 1980s.

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