

## **A rich life fully lived**

### ***THE INTERVIEW***

**VALERIE LAWSON**

Irina Baronova stopped dancing years ago but took a leap into the past to write her autobiography, writes VALERIE LAWSON.

*Irina: Ballet, Life and Love*

By Irina Baronova

Viking, 534pp, \$35

"My life has been lived out of suitcases, in foreign lands, with foreign people," writes Irina Baronova. But what lands and what people.

In her dancing years, Baronova, 87, met Hitler, danced with Edward, the Prince of Wales, worked with Shirley Temple and took tea with Vaslav Nijinsky.

She danced for the legendary choreographers George Balanchine, Leonide Massine, Michel Fokine and Nijinsky's sister, Bronislava Nijinska, creating roles for their ballets when she was still in her mid-teens. As a child, she escaped Bolshevik Russia and travelled to Paris, Monte Carlo, London and throughout the United States before capturing Australian audiences in the 1930s as one of a trio, along with Tamara Toumanova and Tatiana Riabouchinska, dubbed "the baby ballerinas".

Although her sight has now almost gone, she spent the past four years writing her autobiography, *Irina: Ballet, Life and Love*, in Byron Bay, where she lives with one of her daughters. Writing her life story up to the age of 48 (when her second husband, Cecil Tennant, died in a car smash) was "very difficult because the things that happened to me took 48 years and I had to relive it in four years. It was emotionally very hard to write about the accident ... I worshipped him. He was a wonderful person and my soulmate.

"Now that it's finished, I'm still in it. I haven't surfaced to just me, living my life today. I'm still derailed. Half of me is still in the past."

Baronova wrote the book without the memory-joggers of letters and photographs.

"I have a very good memory. The things I wrote about are imprinted as if they happened yesterday. It was like looking through an album of photos that did not fade. As a child I was always thinking and imagining and observing."

Baronova's account of her parents' early life in Russia reads like Chekhov, but the Bolsheviks put an end to all that. Lydia Baronova and her naval lieutenant husband, Michael Baronov, fled with their little girl to Romania, where Irina began learning ballet.

Nicknamed "Bouboule", meaning little ball or bubble, she was a charming, pretty and round-faced girl, with a great deal of talent. "When my mother took me to my first teacher, I didn't have any idea at all about ballet. I had never seen a ballet or been to a theatre. Mother wanted me to do it. Ballet was her dream. She loved it in Russia but was never allowed to do it herself. Girls of good families did not go on the stage in those days. But when we found ourselves in Romania as emigres, she decided that class distinction didn't matter any more and that if she couldn't do it, then by jove, she was going to make me do it.

"My father was not very happy about it but my mother promised that if she saw I had no talent, she would not persist."

Baronova learned her first exercises by hanging onto a kitchen table instead of a barre. "I still didn't know

what the hell they wanted from me, until I saw a performance by [the ballerina Tamara] Karsavina. Mother told me on the way home that she hoped one day I would be like Karsavina. I thought my mother had gone bananas. I couldn't see what this magical woman had to do with my hanging onto the kitchen table."

Six months after her first lesson, the teacher "told my mother that I might have some talent but if I stayed with her, she might ruin me. She encouraged for us to save and move to Paris" where she might attend the classes of the great Russian teacher Olga Preobrajenska.

"It wasn't until I got to Paris and I was accepted into her school [that] I saw a real studio. I was a bit scared, and didn't particularly like it and then when I saw what the others were doing was really difficult, that got me. And I thought if they can do it, I'm bloody well going to do it. Then gradually, I started to like it, then love it."

Baronova was only 13 when she became a professional dancer, as a member of the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo.

Her early life was dominated by her mother, who once said that "women are either cats or rats". Asked once which she was, Mother lied: "I am a pussycat." Ferocious tiger, more like it.

Her mother screamed, "Idiot, idiot!" and whacked her daughter when she did not show enough facial expression in classes. When she was in her mid-teens, her mother shrieked at her "liar, liar!" and hit her with such force that she gave Irina a black eye. She danced that night anyway, the bruise smothered with make-up. That incident led to her elopement with a Ballets Russes employee, Jerry Sevastianov, a man she did not love, but whose affection for her provided the chance to escape from her mother.

But Mother does not emerge as the complete villain. "My biggest regret in life is that I didn't try harder to make friends with my mother," Baronova says. "The day before she died, I was bending over her. She was in bed. She twiddled my hair and in a most lovely way said, 'When you were little, you were blonde, blonde, blonde and now you are white,' and I could see such love in her fading eyes. And I thought God, why could we never really be friends? It was like a war between us."

The man who was to become her second husband, the theatrical agent, Cecil Tennant, asked her to marry him, but demanded that she give up her dancing career and, for five years, see no one in the ballet world. Remarkably, she agreed.

Would she do that again, if her life could be rewound?

"Yes, I would, because I had the most blissful, wonderful 18 years, with the most wonderful husband who made me very happy. We had three children, a wonderful home and family life and that is the end of it all. It was the most precious thing in life. If I had never had children, I would be a miserable old bag by now. I'm blessed with six grandchildren and one great-granddaughter aged three."

She did return to the ballet world, becoming a vice-president of the Royal Academy of Dance in Britain, teaching and examining and passing on mime sequences taught to her by those who had danced in the 1890s in St Petersburg.

But there is no teaching now.

"I can hardly see. The retina is going. All I see is a silhouette, not a face. Movements are like a picture out of focus in the fog.

"I wrote the book by hand and a lady came to me once a week and read back to me what I had written. And if I didn't get the right words, I would ponder and change and she typed and printed."

Now that she is slowly emerging from her past, Baronova is cleaning out her wardrobe and dresser drawers, another spring clean of life. At the end of the day, she sits on the veranda, sipping bourbon and soda.

As she says, "I count my blessings."