



Three former Ballets Russes dancers returned to The Australian Ballet to share their personal expertise on *Revolutions*.

# Coming full circle

They called them the 'Kangarussky Ballets', and fittingly, some of the Russian dancers who arrived in Australia with the famous Ballets Russes troupes have never severed their links with this country. After inspiring Australian companies and dancers all those years ago, they have passed on their knowledge to a new generation of dancers during the lead-up to *Revolutions*. Valerie Lawson traces back over those hops, skips and jumps in ballet time.

A girl who dreams of the spirit of a rose, a princess seduced by a slave, a sylph who inspires a poet. Elusive characters, perhaps, but roles that mean much in Australian ballet history. So, too, do the dancers who stepped into their skin in *Les Sylphides*, *Le Spectre de la rose* and *Schéhérazade*.

The dancers represent a link from the Ballets Russes of the past to The Australian Ballet of today – none more than Irina Baronova, Helene Kirsova, Valrene Tweedie, Kira Bousloff, Tamara Tchinarova and Anna Volkova.

Baronova made her sensational Australian debut in 1938, dancing in *Les Sylphides* while still in her teens. Born in Russia, Baronova was one of the most admired dancers of her generation. A child protégé emerging from one of the famous ballet schools of post-World War I Paris, she was soon labelled a 'baby ballerina', a tag that remained all her life.

Almost 50 years after her Australian debut, Baronova returned to Melbourne in 1986 to stage *Les Sylphides* for The Australian Ballet. She later settled with her family in Byron Bay where she recently wrote an autobiography of her dancing days.

*Les Sylphides* runs like a silvery thread through so much of Australian dance history. First danced in Australia in 1913 by a company led by ballerina Adeline Genée, *Les Sylphides* was also part of The Australian Ballet's inaugural season in 1962.

Between those two landmark dates, *Les Sylphides* ushered in the era of the Ballets Russes in Australia in 1936. Along with two other ballets choreographed by Mikhail Fokine, *Schéhérazade* and *Le Spectre de la rose*, it was part of the first performance in Adelaide.

*Les Sylphides* was seen throughout Australia in 1936 and then became a cornerstone of the repertoire in both the subsequent Ballets Russes tours of Australia. Appearing on opening night in 1936 was the Danish dancer Helene Kirsova, described by one Australian critic as "a beautiful artist, graceful, fluent..."



Left: A 14 year-old Valrene Tweedie with Colonel W. de Basil after being accepted for his ballet company, Sydney, 1940. Photographer unknown National Library of Australia nla.pic-an1371129-3

Above: Valrene Tweedie rehearses *Les Sylphides* with dancers of The Australian Ballet and below with Anna Volkova, watches rehearsal. Photography: Lynette Wills

*'Australia's first professional ballet company paid little – some received a wage of just three pounds a week – but Kirsova was a major force in dance, employing other Ballets Russes dancers who stayed behind in Australia.'*



Kirsova settled here in 1938. She married and then in 1941, formed Australia's first professional ballet company, the Kirsova Ballet. It paid little – some received a wage of just three pounds a week – but Kirsova was a major force in dance, employing other Ballets Russes dancers who stayed behind in Australia, along with many Australians, some of whom went on to have influential careers in teaching, such as Joan and Monica Halliday, or as principal dancers or soloists with Australia's second professional company, the Borovansky Ballet, among them Peggy Sager and Paul Hammond.

*The dancers represent a link from the Ballets Russes of the past to The Australian Ballet of today.*

Kirsova also nurtured local artists, designers and composers. In the words of Tamara Tchinarova, "Kirsova wanted to do everything Australian. She did the choreography herself and used Australian artists like Loudon Sainthill."

While Kirsova left Australia in 1947, two other Ballets Russes dancers who made their mark in *Les Sylphides* still live in Sydney. They are the Russian Anna Volkova, and the Australian Valrene Tweedie.



The allure of Australia for Ballets Russes dancers was strong, but the traffic was mainly one way. Only a handful of Australians were contracted to dance with the Ballets Russes, among them Valrene Tweedie, whose stage name was Irina Lavrova.

Aged only 14, Valrene Tweedie successfully auditioned in Sydney and left Australia in 1940 with the dancers of the third Ballets Russes touring company. She returned in 1952 to become artistic director of the National Theatre Ballet, and then taught in Sydney for almost 30 years. In a fitting return to the stage, she appeared as Clara in *The Australian Ballet's Nutcracker* in 1992. Choreographed by Graeme Murphy, the ballet told much of the dance history of Australia following the life of the fictional Clara, a Ballets Russes dancer who retires in Australia.

But Clara is based on so many real stories, among them that of Kira Abricossova, a Ballets Russes dancer who came to Australia with the second tour and is often pictured in Fokine's ballet *Le Carnaval*. She stayed behind with her first husband, fellow dancer Serge Bousloff, and then established the West Australian Ballet in Perth.

Another who stayed from the second tour was Romanian-born Tamara Tchinarova who, after working with Kirsova, danced for the Borovansky Ballet, directed by former Ballets Russes dancer Edouard Borovansky.

For his company, Tchinarova danced the role of Princess Zobeide in *Schéhérazade*.

The ballet, her own favourite, was immensely popular with audiences. After Diaghilev's death, it became the most performed ballet of Colonel W. de Basil's Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo and was danced more than 80 times during the Ballets Russes Tours of Australia.

Tchinarova helped re-stage the work for the Borovansky Ballet in the mid 1940s. "I knew it all," she told me, "because I had danced it all." Tchinarova married the actor Peter Finch and moved to London, but she has retained strong links to Australia, acting as an interpreter for The Australian Ballet during its tours of Russia.

For this production of *Revolutions*, Irina Baronova once again worked with The Australian Ballet and shared her personal expertise on all three works with the dancers.

Similarly, Valrene Tweedie returned to the company to add her original touch as a coach for *Les Sylphides*. She is joined by Anna Volkova, who will also leave her mark on the company's interpretation of this work.

The Ballets Russes tours created a dance revolution in Australia, but 'revolution' also means 'a single complete turn' – an apt phrase not only for Australia's love of the Ballets Russes and the reciprocal embrace of the Ballets Russes' dancers, but also for this reunion of former and new performers.

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Above: Artists of The Australian Ballet rehearse *Les Sylphides* in the rehearsal studios of the Sydney Opera House under the watchful eyes of the former Ballets Russes ballerinas Valrene Tweedie and Anna Volkova. Photography: Branco Gaica



A personally signed card showing Anna Volkova in costume for *Les Sylphides*, 1939. National Library of Australia nla.pic-vn3415337