

Suave servant was always a company man

This Life

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Noel Pelly

Arts administrator

1926-2003

He had the charm of the Irish and the skills of a diplomat. Trained as a lawyer, his true love was the theatre, not as a performer but the can-do man backstage. Opera was his first passion, but Noel Pelly devoted much of his business life to the ballet, first as a publicist, then as administrator, and finally as a board member.

Pelly charmed rather than confronted. With his neat, grey-white hair, eloquent eyebrows and courtly manner, he could have been a couturier from the age of Dior, or the manager of a grand hotel.

Under his breath he half sang, half whistled melodies. Music was always in the background to his phone conversations, and he made the word "dear," as in "my dear", sound gracious rather than condescending.

Pelly's life was so interwoven with the Australian Ballet it is hard to imagine the company without him.

His association spanned its 40-year history. He survived the company's triumphs and crises, and maintained that the pinnacle of his career was taking the Australian Ballet to three great theatres, the Maryinsky in St Petersburg, the Royal Opera House in London, and the Metropolitan in New York.

Noel Pelly was born in Albury, where his father, Joseph Hyacinth Pelly, was chief engineer of the Hume weir. Both his father and mother, Mary (nee Madigan), had Irish backgrounds and Noel, their third child, had a Catholic education. When he was only six he was sent to board at OLSH College in Bowral, as his parents were constantly on the move, with his father working at three more dams, Nepean, Woronora and Warragamba, before settling in Sydney as chief engineer of the Sydney Water Board.

Joseph Pelly was tall, and loved opera. Mary Pelly was short and loved ballet. The combination of passions directed Noel Pelly's life.

Mary was independently wealthy, a great organiser and a friend of Colonel de Basil, whose ballet troupes assembled in Europe and toured Australia from 1936 to 1940. Noel Pelly, aged 10, was taken by his mother to a rehearsal of the 1936 de Basil company, where he saw *Le Coq d'Or*, then a performance of the company's triple bill of *Cotillon*, *Firebird* and *Aurora's Wedding*.

At Riverview College, Pelly took part in Gilbert and Sullivan shows, and joined the G & S Society after

leaving school. His only onstage experience was as a member of the society's chorus, then some comic roles, including Ko-Ko, in *The Mikado*.

Pelly's parents steered their son away from the arts, preferring their children to follow a profession. (One of his brothers became a plastic surgeon, another was in pharmaceutical manufacturing, while his sister was a nurse.) Pelly studied law at the University of Sydney, and was articled to the firm J.N. Gammell and Company.

He was admitted as a solicitor in 1949, and practised for 11 years in Sydney, Wyalong and Camden before joining the legal department of the Department of Main Roads.

Yet the stage retained its magnetic attraction. Pelly recalled seeing the Italian opera season of 1948, and he produced musicals for a Chatswood amateur dramatic society. Invited by Hayes Gordon to become an inaugural member of the Ensemble Theatre, he publicised its productions and those of Doris Fitton's Independent Theatre. It was all honorary work.

By 1960, when his parents were overseas, he quit the DMR and went searching for showbiz publicity work. Pelly built up a modest public relations business with such wildly diverse clients as a motel and a Spanish dance troupe, before approaching the entrepreneur Jack Neary, who offered him assignments promoting country tours of Winifred Atwell, Bobby Limb and Dawn Lake.

Central to the Australian arts scene at the time was the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust. It turned out to be his entree to the Australian Ballet.

In December 1961 Pelly took his first job for the trust, publicising a season of plays at the Union Theatre at the University of Sydney. Working for its director of public relations, John Moses, he publicised the inaugural season of the Old Tote Theatre Company, and tours by such stars as Sybil Thorndike, Zoe Caldwell, Tito Gobbi, Alvin Ailey and Jose Limon.

Pelly was proud of writing the first press release for the Australian Ballet in December 1961. It announced the formation of the company under the joint direction of the trust and J. C. Williamsons. It gave its first performance in November 1962.

One of Pelly's assets was his easy charm with reporters and editors. He knew early on the need to promote different stories to different media, calling on such critically important editors and writers as Connie Robertson and Margaret Vaile at *The Sydney Morning Herald* and Virginia Gerrett at *The Daily Mirror*.

This ease with reporters continued with *Herald* dance critic and former arts editor Jill Sykes, who wrote in 1991: "From my earliest days in journalism I've observed him charming generous editorial coverage from otherwise intractable editors, succumbing just as easily myself when my turn came around."

Pelly joined the full-time staff of the Australian Ballet, as director of publicity, in 1966. At the time, the company was under the joint artistic directorship of Peggy van Praagh and Robert Helpmann, but the administrator, Peter Bahen, held the power within the organisation, as the artistic directors reported to him.

It was a difficult time, but Pelly acted as a foil to Bahen. When Bahen ruffled feathers, Pelly would smooth them down. Last week, Bahen said Pelly brought "a lot of style and class to the ballet. He could be sharp with people but he could handle all levels of the community."

Pelly loved to recall the visits to Australia of the great ballet stars, Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev, relishing the madder moments of Rudi's rages both here and overseas. One of his favourites took place on an

AB tour of Europe; Nureyev argued with Fonteyn, smashed a mirror in her dressing room and stormed off. As Pelly later told Maria Prerauer of *The Bulletin*, "Virtually down to a jockstrap, Rudi came out into the hall and started fighting with one of the company managers they were down on the floor wrestling. That was really spectacular."

After an international tour of the AB in 1973, Pelly told Bahen he wanted a greater management role. He became assistant to the administrator, then deputy administrator in 1975, the year when Robert Helpmann was sole artistic director.

In the next five years, Pelly witnessed the comings and goings of a series of artistic directors: Helpmann left, Anne Woolliams arrived and left, van Praagh returned and retired and Marilyn Jones took over.

The most dramatic moment of his career came with the dancers' strike of 1981. It had a profound effect on all concerned, not least Pelly.

After the stress of the strike, he took a long holiday in 1982. In Europe he became ill, then on the way home he felt his hair begin to fall out. Pelly became completely bald. It took two years for his hair to grow back.

Soon after Maina Gielgud became artistic director of the Australian Ballet in 1983, Bahen departed, with Pelly appointed administrator in October of that year. There followed a calm period under the reign of Gielgud and Pelly, who said he never once crossed swords with his artistic director.

With a nod to the symmetry of the date, he retired, aged 65, at the end of November 1991, 30 years to the day from the day that he drafted the AB's first press release.

Pelly became a director of the AB board from 1995 to 2000, and a member of the council of the Australian Ballet School.

He devoted his life after retirement to travel and writing, combining both with his biography of Gielgud's Hungarian mother, Zita Gordon Gielgud. It was published in Australia in 1994 and in Hungary in 1999.

Last year he completed a biography of the conductor and ballet score arranger John Lanchbery .

Pelly loved to travel to Europe, maintaining a friendship with the Gielguds, daughter and mother, and visiting the United States to see one of his favourite ballet companies, Pacific Northwest Ballet in Seattle.

Pelly never married and had no children. He became ill with cancer but appeared to be making a recovery last year.

He died in his sleep on August 21 at the home of a friend in Melbourne. He is survived by his brother, George, and was predeceased by his brother, Tony, and sister, Marie.

On his retirement in 1991, he told a reporter, "We are all only custodians for a time." Pelly was one of the most devoted custodians the Australian Ballet could hope to have.