

Come into the Wings

THE ART OF ENID DICKSON



Enid T.L. Dickson (1895–1967)
Fokine and Dancers in the Wings, Covent Garden Russian Ballet, 1938–1939
coloured pastel drawing on velvet paper; 35.8 x 24.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3671453

Richard Stone looks at the work of a backstage ballet portraitist

On 1 March 1940, the Theatre Royal in Sydney celebrated not one but two openings. Colonel W. de Basil's Covent Garden Ballet company (also known as the Ballets Russes) was in residence. As well as being the venue for the world premiere of *Graduation Ball*, a new one-act ballet, the Theatre Royal presented in its foyer an exhibition of portraits of dancers in de Basil's company by Australian artist Enid Dickson.

Exhibitions of ballet drawings and paintings, often held in theatre foyers, were popular occurrences during Ballets Russes seasons in Australia. Members of the company, such as Savva Andreyev and Birger Bartholin, exhibited their drawings of fellow dancers. Artists Daryl Lindsay, Adrian Lawlor and Roy Hodgkinson all held exhibitions associated with the Ballets Russes.

Enid Dickson had two exhibitions of her ballet works during Ballets Russes seasons. The first, in March 1939, was opened by premier danseur Anton Dolin, a star of the 1938–39 Ballets Russes tour. Twelve months later, another star, David Lichine, opened Enid Dickson's second exhibition in the presence of Colonel de Basil and his wife, the dancer Olga Morosova. Lichine lent a portrait of himself for the exhibition, one which had been painted by Enid Dickson the year before, and which he treasured. And of which he reportedly told her, 'Don't think you're getting it back for good!'

David Lichine was a busy man on 1 March. After a short speech at the exhibition opening, he attended to the final preparations for the premiere of *Graduation Ball*, which he had choreographed. One of his leading ballerinas, Tatiana Riabouchinska, was in the foyer for the exhibition and the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that her 'hair was ready to be plaited for the premiere'. *Graduation Ball* includes a group of perky schoolgirls with bouncy plaits as part of its slight but fun-filled scenario set to the music of Johann Strauss. The one-act ballet was an instant success with audiences and critics, being performed over 60 times during the remainder of the Australian tour in 1940. It has been a popular ballet ever since, and is currently in the repertoire of many companies, including the Australian Ballet.

Enid Dickson was backstage with her sketch pad at that first season of *Graduation Ball*, capturing the ballet's joie de vivre. The process leading to her going backstage to draw dancers had begun many years before, at the National Art Gallery School in

Melbourne, where she studied for six years. Born in Melbourne in 1895, Enid moved to Queensland in 1923 where, as a budding artist and independent woman, she was Art Mistress at Ipswich Girls School. She became closely involved in the art world of Brisbane and, along with Vida Lahey, Daphne Mayo, Caroline Barker and Marjorie Hollinshead, formed a group of prominent Brisbane women artists. An active member of the Royal Queensland Art Society, Enid exhibited regularly with them. Leaving Ipswich, she worked hard at her painting and drawing, winning plaudits and awards. She was a popular lecturer on art and art history at secondary schools, and at many clubs and societies, including the Workers' Educational Association.

In September 1934, Enid married Frederic Treuthardt. Earlier that year, they had journeyed to the Jimna goldfields in northern Queensland, where Enid did a series of works depicting life on the diggings. In 1937, the Treuthardt family, which now included a son, Paul, moved to Sydney. With

the onset of World War II they added 'de Sevres' to their name, to soften the German sound, although 'Treuthardt' was in fact of Swiss origin. After the war, Enid worked as children's tutor on the film *Sons of Matthew*, and became the unofficial artist recording life on the film set. Other theatrical subjects captured by Enid Dickson included the members of the enormously popular variety show *The Kivis*.

Enid Dickson had started drawing ballet dancers in July 1926 after seeing Anna Pavlova perform during her first tour to Brisbane. As recounted in biographical notes supplied by her daughter-in-law Gill Treuthardt, Enid was overwhelmed by Pavlova on stage. In her own words: 'Coming home from the unforgettable first night of seeing Pavlova, I stayed up all night trying to capture something!'. Overcoming her frustration she approached Victor Dandre, Pavlova's husband and manager of the company:

I asked Dandre for permission to sketch her behind the scenes. I shall always remember

below left:
Enid T.L. Dickson (1895–1967)
Algeranoff as The Chinaman in Aurora's Wedding, Covent Garden Russian Ballet c.1938
coloured pastel drawing on velvet paper; 39.8 x 29.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3643703

below right:
Enid T.L. Dickson (1895–1967)
Nicolas Orloff as The Drummer in Graduation Ball, Original Ballet Russe 1940
coloured pastel drawing on velvet paper; 40.5 x 27.8 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3643750





Enid T.L. Dickson (1895–1967)
Genevieve Moulin in Graduation Ball, Original Ballet Russe 1940
 coloured pastel drawing on velvet paper; 39.2 x 27.5 cm
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-vn3643752

his answer. He said: 'Madame Pavlova cannot sit for you. It is not that she will not, but she cannot sit still. But if you would like to come into the wings, I shall be very pleased.'

Dandre repeated his invitation for Enid to work backstage during Pavlova's return visit to Australia in 1929, an offer she eagerly accepted. Pavlova died in 1931. Three years later, in 1934, Dandre brought out another ballet company headed by the renowned Russian dancer Olga Spessivtzeva, often hailed as Pavlova's successor. Again Dandre accorded Enid the privilege of working backstage sketching the dancers.

In a letter to Enid Dickson, Dandre described the challenges facing an artist trying to capture the spirit of dance:

We well know how difficult it was to make sketches during the performance, when, at every moment almost, the pose changes,

the expression of the face varies ... to catch and hold the right instant requires great dexterity, and especially experience of this kind of work.

The sketches had to be executed rapidly on the spot. Valrene Tweedie was a young 15-year-old dancer who joined the de Basil company in Sydney in 1940. She still recalls seeing 'this woman perched on her stool in the corner, quietly observing and drawing dancers and everyone as they dashed by or waited in the wings for their entrance on stage'.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* declared:

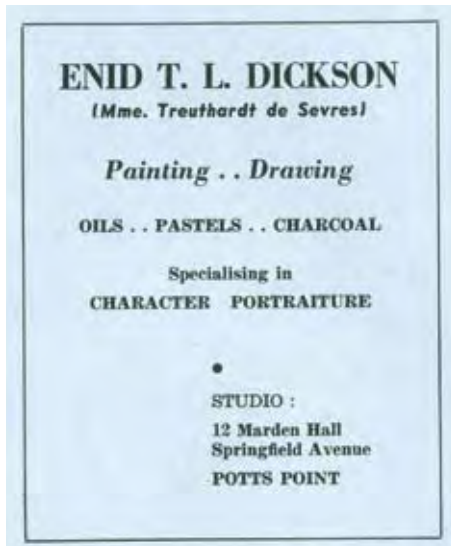
Five minutes is the average time Miss Enid Dickson has had for her charcoal and crayon portraits of members of the de Basil ballet ... sitting on a box in the greenrooms, standing in the wings, in the passages leading to the dressing rooms, in a corner backstage while the dancers are awaiting their cue and in any snatched moment the dancers could spare.

Enid saw those 'snatched moments' as an opportunity to create works which honoured the memory of her first ballet inspiration:

I remembered how Madame Pavlova had only wanted the public to see the dancer in the perfection of stage performance, and so I concentrated on the truth and beauty of the masks presented over the footlights.

After her husband's death in 1961, Enid moved to London with her collection of artworks. Her son Paul was based in London and Paris as a freelance journalist. It was only then, late in life, that Enid enjoyed the galleries and artistic riches of Europe. She died in London in 1967.

The collection of Enid's works, letters and memorabilia was kept by her family. Conscious of the documentary and artistic value of the works, they took steps to place them in key heritage institutions. A selection of pastels of ballet dancers was acquired by the Lincoln Centre Library of the Performing Arts in New York in 1974. The National Library of Australia first became aware of Enid Dickson's work in 1986. During a European trip, I made a detour to inspect the collection. It was housed in the Treuthardt's summer holiday home, an old converted farm house complex in the north of France near Dieppe. As wind from the English



Enid Dickson's pastel portraits bring a vivid dimension of colour to the world of ballet illustration. Other prime visual sources such as company publicity photographs are black and white, as are magazine and newspaper illustrations. Enid's pastels provide a rare indication of what the make-up and costumes looked like in colour. This is especially significant for the Ballets Russes, as the companies introduced Australian audiences to a host of new works with dramatic settings and costumes. Enid Dickson's passion for the world of ballet, and her skill as an artist, produced work which beautifully captures an exotic world of 'masks presented over the footlights'.

left:
Advertisement for the Enid Dickson Studio, Sydney reproduced from *Australian Theatre News Monthly*, June 1939

below left:
Richard Stone
Part of the Enid Dickson collection inspected by the author at Canehan, northern France, 1986

below right:
Richard Stone
The Treuthardt family farmhouse, Canehan, northern France, 1986

Channel buffeted the thick walls of the farm house on a dark and stormy Normandy night, I beheld the quick sketches, the expressive drawings and the finely finished pastels of exotic dancers caught in time 50 years ago, backstage in an Australian theatre. It was an exhilarating, if slightly surreal, experience.

In 2006, the Library acquired a selection of 67 of Dickson's ballet artworks. They illustrate some of the most important companies influencing the development of ballet in Australia, from the Pavlova tour in 1926, to the 1930s with the Dandre-Levitoff Russian Ballet tour and the de Basil Ballets Russes tours. Local companies represented include the Jan Kowsky (Leon Kellaway) Ballet, the National Theatre Ballet, Raisse Kouznetsova and her company, and finally the Borovansky Ballet.

All the Enid Dickson artworks acquired by the National Library have been digitised, and can be viewed through the Library's online catalogue.

RICHARD STONE is a research assistant on the 'Ballets Russes in Australasia' project, based in the National Library. His book, *Fragments of the Everyday: A Book of Australian Ephemera*, was published by the National Library in 2005

Since this article was written, news has been received that the remaining Enid Dickson artworks have been acquired by the Mitchell Library in the State Library of New South Wales, Sydney. Information and access is through the State Library's PICMAN catalogue.

