



LIST OF ABSTRACTS 24-10-2025

# Haunted?

## Locating the Spectral in Australasian Ballet

A One-day Symposium, October 31, 2025  
Forum Theatre, Level 1, Arts West Building  
University of Melbourne

Symposium email: [ballet-history@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:ballet-history@unimelb.edu.au)



*Roger Kemp, Figure in Action - Ballet Series, c.1936-1940. Unsigned, oil on card.  
Private collection, with permission kindly granted by the Kemp family*

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## ABSTRACTS

### 1 1 9:15-10:30 Session 1: *Haunted Histories: Ballet as a Lens on National Memory*

#### 1.1 Dr. Jeanette Mollenhauer, Unity Dance Group: Margaret Walker, Classical Ballet and Applying Communist Ideals in Australian Dance

In October 1938, 18-year-old Margaret Frey (later Walker) attended a performance by the Covent Garden Russian Ballet Company, and her life metamorphosed: she became entranced with ballet and, two years later, enrolled in classes taught by Edouard and Xenia Borovansky. However, it was her concomitant growing enthusiasm for the Russian (later, USSR) nation, language and political paradigms that renders Walker unique in Australian ballet history. She joined the Communist Party of Australia, its subsidiary, the Eureka Youth League, and the renowned left-wing New Theatre (Melbourne). There, Walker inaugurated the Unity Dance Group (UDG) and proceeded to educate its members in classical ballet technique. Only a few had previous dance experience, yet their repertoire quickly featured excerpts from theatrical ballets, Walker's own narrative ballets depicting life for ordinary Australians such as "Machinery Ballet" and "Waitress Dance", and folk character choreographies.

The latter quickly became her preference: ideologically, from her knowledge of Igor Moiseyev's ensemble in the USSR and their balletic prowess; practically, through encountering Zionist youth group 'Habonim' and their circle dances in Melbourne. UDG was part of the Australian delegation to the Communist-run World Youth Festival in Berlin in 1951, at which they performed another original choreography, *The Little Aboriginal Girl*, depicting first, injustice and subsequently, the emotional benefits of social enlightenment. Through UDG, Walker organised lunchtime concerts for factory workers, working towards her goal of "dance for all Australians" in both performative and participatory contexts. Her approach as Artistic Director combined knowledge and experience gained firsthand from the Borovanskys, from reading about Moiseyev, and from visiting the Bolshoi Ballet and other eminent schools in the USSR after the Berlin event. Thus, the template for her life's work was set.

#### 1.2 Dr Christine de Matos, Spectres of Australia's War History: *G'Day Digger!* and *1914*

History is filled with bodies, and dance has a penchant for resurrecting some of their stories. However, those of Australia's overseas wars are scarcely found in Australian ballet productions. This is surprising considering the importance of the idea of Anzac to Australian national narratives and public performances of nationhood; it is perhaps unsurprising for the same reason. This paper proposes to examine the hauntings of Anzac in Australian ballet through two case studies, first performed 40 years apart: *G'Day Digger!* (1958) and *1914* (1998).

Australia has a rich body of literature on the history of dance, especially ballet. It is a different case for literature on dance as history, as an interpretation and performance of the past, the approach taken in this paper. Representations of Australia's past were integral to the development of Australian dance in the twentieth century, often by crudely appropriating Indigenous forms and stories. Dance scholar Helena Hammond (2013) speaks of ballet's potential as radical history; to act as an analytical tool of the past that is rarely acknowledged due to stereotypical views about the form. But can this be applied to Australian ballet when we turn to war history, its silences, and its spirits of national formation?

The first case study, *G'Day Digger!* (choreographer: Beth Dean; composer: John Antill) was the inaugural ballet broadcast live by the ABC in 1958. It is a comical take on the returned soldier, in this case from Tobruk in WWII. The second, a more solemn production by The Australian Ballet, is *1914* (choreographer: Stephen Baynes; composer: Graeme Koehne), performed in 1998 and based on a novel by David Malouf. Through these examples, the paper seeks to understand, whether approached through humour or poetry, whether through ghosts on the stage or ghostly absences, if ballet can act as a critical historical lens and, if so, what this might reveal about Australia's wars past.

#### 1.4 Yvette Grant, A Triple Haunting: Valrene Tweedie's 1957 Australian ballet, *Wakooka*

At first glance, Valrene Tweedie's 1957 ballet *Wakooka* is a light-hearted ballet about life on a sheep station. However, the reviews of its premiere suggest that to its contemporaries, *Wakooka* was a culturally significant work which captured the zeitgeist of Australia at the time. They compare it to the iconic Australian play, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, and state that the discovery of choreographer Tweedie and her ballet "ought to be regarded in Australian ballet history as something akin to the discoveries of Diaghilev in Paris before World War I."

In the twenty-first century, *Wakooka* has been largely forgotten and, like many other modern Australian ballets of the 1950s, its ghostly remains now haunt only the archive. In this presentation, I will firstly argue that *Wakooka* is an important Australian ballet in which Tweedie has, with a nuanced and almost documentary lens, captured a transitional moment of modernisation in Australian history. Secondly, and within this, I will argue that it is haunted by an historically denied but persistent Aboriginal presence in a white Australian rural economy. I will finally argue that the nationalistic and documentary form of the choreography is due to its haunting by the creative presence of Tweedie's twelve-year experience in the Americas working with iconic dancers, choreographers and directors such as Alicia Alonso, Agnes de Mille and George Balanchine.

## 2 2 11:00-12:30 Session 2: *Material Presences, Unseen Forces*

### 2.1 Dr Emily Collett, *Tricksters and Agitators: The ghosts of ballet costume*

This paper and its accompanying small experimental exhibitions examine Australian ballet costume as ghosts – tricksters agitating from their archives, traversing time and context to challenge the present. Developed in collaboration with colleagues at the Wilin Centre (VCA), the work explores how Wilin's concept of 'culturally agile scholarship' – which bridges western and Indigenous approaches to knowledge – can reframe ballet costume from Australia's western canon. In doing so, it seeks to restore context, connection and complexity into the stories we carry forward as a community.

The two exhibitions question what these costume-ghosts could teach us by unpicking and decentring dominant relationships to object-based learning. The online exhibition centres on a single costume from *Sun Music* (1968), the Australian Ballet's first non-narrative work which drew heavily on visual references to Aboriginal culture. The exhibition website can be re-activated for the symposium. The second exhibition examines Sidney Nolan's costumes for the Royal Ballet's *Rite of Spring* (1962), which are currently part of an exhibition at the Canberra Museum and Art Gallery (and the ballet is still in repertoire). These costumes bear the ghosts of direct appropriation from Australian Aboriginal culture, and the exhibition explores the role of language in their relationship to identity and erasure. This small, interactive exhibition could be installed at the symposium.

This paper reflects on both exhibitions, drawing together Wilin's culturally agile scholarship with Mary Kate Connolly's notion that the unique slipperiness of costume-ghosts positions them as 'witnesses to current erasures' (2024, p.3) who can 'repair or interrupt the predominant cultural and historical discourse' (2024, p.27). These ghosts invite us to choose: remain haunted by their silences, or engage their costumed shadows as possibilities for enriching the stories we carry forward.

### 2.2 Debra Winn, *Spectral Traces: Monotype and the Memory of Movement*

This paper explores drawing and monotype printmaking as a spectral mode of research and response to contemporary ballet, focusing on Alice Topp's *Annealing* as performed by The Australian Ballet. Topp's choreography, grounded in transformation and non-traditional gender expression, resonates with my ongoing themes of strength, vulnerability, and fluid identity.

My practice-based methodology situates drawing not simply as documentation, but as an embodied argument in itself – a staging of the spectral through process. Working from studio rehearsals, I build layered prints that capture not only form but presence: the atmosphere of movement, the residue of emotion, and the traces left behind by the dancer. In particular, the "ghost" monotype becomes a key site of inquiry. These fainter, secondary impressions are more than aesthetic afterimages: they are

haunted cognates, echoing absence, and presence, and materialising the emotional fragility of performance memory.

In this way, the visual itself becomes an argument – images as thought, line as interpretation, shadow as evidence of what lingers. By placing my work in dialogue with the long tradition of artists responding to ballet, from Degas to the Ballets Russes, I extend this lineage into the contemporary, where drawing is not merely reflective but transformative: an act of conjuring, witnessing, and honouring the unseen truths layered in every performance.

### 2.3 **Serena Graham, 'Between Flesh and Tulle': Ghosting Identity, Inherited Mime, and the White Skirt in Ballet**

This work reclaims and restages the deeply traditional and haunting pas de deux between Albrecht and the 'wili' Giselle. It exposes how binaries persist not only in performance but in deep muscle memory, particularly within such a canonical ballet. The piece considers three key forms of haunting beyond Giselle's overtly spectral presence—the most physical representation of haunting in classical ballet.

Firstly, the ghosting of masculinity and the haunting of identity. Historically inscribed in the body through strength, elevation, and leading the partner, masculinity in ballet is here restated from within—not rejected outright, but softened, reassigned, and reimagined. The male as the ghost.

Secondly, the ghosting within ballet's inherited language and mime. Passed down almost unchanged for centuries, especially in Romantic works like *Giselle*, mime lingers even when removed. A cultural ghost inhabits the body and the stage: in the extension of arms, the pauses between narrative actions, and in the audience's collective recognition. It haunts both physically and semiotically.

Thirdly, the haunting of costume. The iconic white tulle, long synonymous with supernatural femininity, embodies one of ballet's most powerful visual ghosts. In this work, it is not simply a costume but a spectral material of expectation, shaping how dancers inhabit it and how others respond to it on stage.

Through these hauntings, the work interrogates tradition from within, restaging the pas de deux to reveal how history, language, and costume continue to live—ghostlike—in the bodies of dancers today.

### 2.4 **Dr Gareth Belling, Dead Dreams and Monetary Men: Or, How money haunts the directorships of Australian ballet companies**

The dreams of Australian ballet companies have always been haunted by the needs and desires of the (mostly) men who hold the commercial and government purse strings. Deliberately riffing on the title of London-based, Australian choreographer Lloyd Newson's seminal dance film, this paper looks at the artistic cost of fiscal requirements, and two women whose careers were dramatically altered by spectre of monetary men. Drawing a line between Laurel Martyn's 1976 assertion that the "bigness" of subsidised ballet harms its artistic vibrancy, and recent deficits posted by The Australian Ballet and Queensland Ballet, I ask, what cost will ballet's future pay for continued financial growth?

The artistic development of Australian ballet companies have always been haunted by economic stability. In 2024, a financially troubled Queensland Ballet abruptly lost its newly appointed Artistic Director after only six months, before posting an almost \$10 million deficit the year after. Similarly, in 1976, Ann Woolliams resigned from The Australian Ballet, claiming it was more a business than a ballet company, when the board of directors would not support her artistic programming. When money is the guiding principle, and growth — in dancer numbers and production costs — is unsustainable, whose artistic dreams must be sacrificed next to secure the future of ballet in Australia.

## 3 3 12:30-1:15 - *Cameos I*

### 3.1 **Anne Butler. Fantastic Vegetable Garden: Unearthing dancer/choreographer Noelle Aitken, costume designer Wendy Tamlyn, and composer Edith Harry**

In the Performing Arts Collection at Arts Centre Melbourne rests a costume design titled *Onion Hornpipe*, created in 1951 by seventeen-year-old Wendy Tamlyn for *The Vegetable Garden* at the National Ballet School. The work, donated by John Cargher, is a rare survival of a vibrant collaboration.

On the eve of Halloween, we might imagine the rolling rhythm of *The Pumpkin Man*, composed by Edith Harrhy, or light candles against the shadows while exploring *La Potage Fantastique*, choreographed by student dancer Noelle Aitken.

Tamlyn, Harrhy, and Aitken—shadows from the past—were early collaborators shaped by a production model that echoed the Diaghilev era, a model fostered at the National Theatre Ballet School by its director, Jean Alexander.

All three went on to become leaders in their fields—design, music, and dance. In 1950s Australia, their partnership was not only imaginative but quietly groundbreaking: a statement of women’s creative authority in the performing arts.

### 3.2 **Liz Lea, *The Spirit of 120 Birds***

In 1926 Anna Pavlova toured Australia with 120 live birds as part of her entourage. With her celebrity status her impact was profound and led to the founding of ballet as a new art form in a nation emerging as a colony. Australia has become one of the most prolific training grounds of exquisite and powerful dance artists shaping companies around the world.

My talk draws on a Fellowship at the National Film and Sound Archive in 2009-10 and research at the National Library of Australia. This footage and connected research materials has led to the creation of several works in which the spirit of the choreography has been brought to life and feeds into my current choreographic practice spanning 35 years.

Pavlova’s dedication to her artistry, prolific touring, incredible creativity and refusal to bow to societal norms – hence touring with 120 birds – shaped the emergence of our powerful ballet legacy and current dance landscape. In this spirit I share a small part of her influence on my work and practice.

### 3.3 **Andreas Boyde, *Ghosts in Masks: The Film Fragments of Le Carnaval***

When Robert Schumann started composing *Carnaval* at the age of 24, he was already haunted by depression, secret love affairs, confused artistic ambitions and a split personality, all reflected in the autobiographical narrative of this virtuosic piano cycle. Less than a hundred years later, Fokine created his ballet based on Schumann’s *Carnaval*, which proved to be one of the most popular productions of the Ballets Russes. The choreography is inspired by the music of *Carnaval* and its characters are drawn from the composer’s life, hiding behind allegorical masks.

Rare footage of a live *Le Carnaval* performance, filmed during the Ballets Russes’ Australian tour in the 1930s, reveals new insights into the original production. Presented in musical and choreographic context, the 90-year-old ghostly film fragments come back to life, and can be seen as a reflection of the emerging modern ballet in Australia.

## 4 **4 2:30-3:10 - *Cameos II***

### 4.1 **Judy Leech, *Peter and the Wolf*: From Russia to Rambert and Reid**

Every ballet school and company in Australia seems to have its *Peter and the Wolf*, from Laurel Martyn’s 1965 choreography for Ballet Guild (later Ballet Victoria) to the Queensland Ballet’s version presented just last June! In the 1980s, Rex Reid created a notable version of *Peter and the Wolf* that was toured widely around Australia by his company Rex Reid Dancers. It was seen by thousands of school students and the performances often included well-known actors narrating the plot. Reid’s *Peter and the*

*Wolf* was haunted in turn by a production toured to Australia and New Zealand in the 1940s by Ballet Rambert. It was created by Rambert dancer Frank Staff. I will investigate the traces and echoes of Ballet Rambert's version on Reid's version and on the designs created by Adelaide's James Aldridge. I will also endeavour to relate how both Rambert and Reid dealt with the demise of the Duck and the ghostly – or not so ghostly – “quack!” issuing from the Wolf's insides.

#### 4.2 **Jane Andrewartha, Shining a light on the spirit of *Mathinna*: A shadowy tale laced with Australian colonialism and the cultural cringe**

It has taken a long time to uncover the real story of Mathinna, a Tasmanian aboriginal who lived c.1835-1852, and that story belongs to her people. The focus of this presentation will be the morals, values and accepted behaviours which have shaped her story, and how societal attitudes have continued to influence the telling of her story across the years. Particularly, I will examine more closely the circumstances around the eponymous ballet *Mathinna* (1954) created by Laurel Martyn, the thinking behind it, and the way it was presented.

Laurel Martyn, herself a spectral figure frequently relegated to the background of Australian dance history, was appalled to realise in her late adolescence that she had never even seen an Aboriginal person, let alone conversed with one, despite growing up in an area of Queensland well-populated by First Nations peoples.

The young Martyn considered herself a fine example of an enlightened mid-century Australian education, with a finely tuned sense of social justice. The need to shine a light on the neglected plight of the Aboriginal people and their terrible treatment haunted her. As a white woman of the mid-50s, she attempted through *Mathinna* to expose questionable underlying narratives and encourage others to examine more closely the sketchy truths and straightlaced morals of mid-century Australia.

As a woman of vision, Martyn would be reassured to know the traditional owners have come forward to reclaim such stories through works like Stephen Page's *Mathinna* (2008) for Bangarra Dance Theatre. Such stories are finally being carefully researched, presented, and conserved. Martyn's own persistent dedication to representing Australian themes and social circumstances, and supporting Australian dancers, composers and artists, is rich material for further discussions.

#### 4.3 **Blazenka Brysha, 'Ballet Wars'**

The competition between fledgling ballet companies to establish themselves as professional entities in Australia during the period 1940-1960 was so fierce that it could be labelled as 'ballet wars'. The legacies of that period continue to haunt our perceptions and understanding of the events concerned.

The major players, namely the Kirsova Ballet, the Borovansky Ballet, Ballet Guild and the National Theatre Ballet Company, all had partisan allies promoting their individual causes, which in turn coloured how they, their achievements and failings came, and largely continue, to be viewed.

Meanwhile, documented facts and other information relating to the period remain very scattered and no thorough research of the period, exists. If we are to gain a more accurate view and understanding of this pivotal period in the development of Australian ballet as both a performance art and a classical practice, it demands to be thoroughly researched. We need to begin by gathering the facts and sifting through them.

### 5 5 3:30-5:10 Session 3: *Ex(o/e)rcising Classical Ghosts*

#### 5.1 **Dr Maggie Tonkin, The Mad Scene and its Afterlives: Re-imaginings of *Giselle* in Meryl Tankard's *Two Feet* and Garry Stewart's *G***

*Giselle* is frequently described as the ballerina's greatest test, both technically and expressively. She must transition from an innocent village maiden to a spirit, the very human buoyancy and vivacity of her

technique in Act I giving way to the exquisite yet deathly ephemerality of Act II. The so-called ‘Mad Scene’ that concludes the first act is pivotal to this transformation: when her lover is revealed to be a disguised aristocrat sowing his wild oats, she loses her reason, and, in different versions, either dies of her weak heart or stabs herself with his sword. The ‘Mad Scene’ haunts the two most notable contemporary Australian revisions of *Giselle*: Meryl Tankard’s *Two Feet* (1988) and Garry Stewart’s *G* (2008). Stewart takes the depiction of Giselle’s madness as an expression of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century psychiatric discourse of female hysteria, but de-sexualizes it so that it is disseminated through the entire cast as an expression of contemporary anxieties. In *Two Feet*, Tankard references choreographic phrases, music and costumes from *Giselle* interspersed with scenes from the life of one of the ballet’s greatest interpreters, Olga Spessivtzeva, who spent 23 years incarcerated in a mental hospital, in order to image the art form of ballet—with its obsessive-compulsive perfectionism and body dysmorphia—as itself a mad scene. In both choreographies, the ‘Mad Scene’ is not so much an expression of individual derangement but rather synecdochic of an enduring mass psychopathology.

## 5.2 **Dr Andrew Furhmann, The Ghost of Petrushka’s Ballerina: Body Image and Choreographic Possession in Lucy Guerin’s *The Dark Chorus***

Lucy Guerin’s *The Dark Chorus* (2016) conjures the image of the ballerina not as homage but as haunting. In this presentation, I argue that Guerin mobilises ballet imagery, condensed around the figure of a ballerina doll based on the character from Fokine’s *Petrushka*, to generate affective associations with the themes of control, subjugation and the individual self-discipline. The ballerina becomes a corporeal image through which *The Dark Chorus* reflects on the disciplinary logic of concert dance, both historical and contemporary. Guerin’s references to ballet do not so much gesture toward continuity with a living tradition as they animate its phantoms: expressions of choreographic power, of idealised bodily comportment, and of the dancer’s own complicity in systems of regulation and restraint. In doing so, she invites us to consider the extent to which contemporary dance continues to be structured by the very aesthetic regimes it seeks to resist. To frame this discussion, I draw on Gabriele Brandstetter’s concept of the *body image* as a critical tool for interpreting the circulation of cultural imagery within the dancer’s body. For Brandstetter, such images function as “engrams of affective experience”, mediating between the embodied performance and a broader archive of historically charged gestures and figures. In Guerin’s work, these images are not fleeting or incidental but central to the affective force of the choreography. I argue that the image of the puppet ballerina functions as a nexus of sensations and associations that concentrate the atmosphere of unease that pervades *The Dark Chorus*. The work stages not only a gothic fantasy of bodily possession but also a self-conscious reflection on the legacy of ballet in the imagination of contemporary dance.

## 5.3 **Dr Ellin Sears, Reframing Colonial Histories through Ballet: West Australian Ballet’s *Swan Lake* (2022)**

*Swan Lake* was the greatly anticipated final production during The West Australian Ballet’s 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations in 2022. Developed collaboratively between the WA Ballet and local Indigenous artists, this was the first professional classical ballet in Western Australia to use Noongar stories, music, and dance to replace or alter several components of the original text. The replacement of the prologue with a performance of The Black Swan Dance (performed here onstage for the first time in 120 years) gives precedence to these interstitials and foregrounds the Noongar story of how the Black Swan got its feathers, which is woven throughout the production. The change in setting to Perth (Boorloo) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century also allows the inclusion of new characters: Indigenous elder Mowadji, and a group of Indigenous dancers Gya Ngoop Keeninyarra (One Blood Dancers). These and other changes see the narrative expand beyond the tragic love story at the heart of the original text, offering a critique of Perth’s colonial past, and touching on themes of environmentalism and Indigenous rights.

The artistic aim of this production was to “interweave” Indigenous stories and culture with the European ballet tradition to create “a *Swan Lake* for Western Australia” (Nott, 2022). Described by one reviewer as “groundbreaking” (Nott, 2022), this production was greatly enjoyed by audiences and was fiscally very successful. But it has also drawn critiques that ultimately it did little more than add a “dash of local flavour” (Marshall, 2022) to a mostly traditional Romantic ballet. In this paper I will draw on

reviews, critiques, and my own responses as an audience member to discuss this production in performance within the context of its premiere season in 2022, in order to discuss its place in the broader sphere of the ongoing decolonisation of classical ballet in Australia.

#### 5.4 **Dr Priya Srinivasan, Truths Stranger than Orientalist Fantasy and Fiction: South Asian Hauntings of *La Bayadere***

In deploying decolonial methodologies through archaeological, architectural, semiotic, literary, historiographical and critical dance analysis, my research has uncovered invisible South Asian figures (dancers, dalits, mixed-race bodies) that lie beneath Petipa's 19th century creation of *La Bayadere*, thereby questioning power and troubling simplistic understandings of orientalism and colonialism within the ballet. The invisible South Asian bodies are the metaphorical "shades" reflected in their iconic "arab"-esques in Act III of the ballet, that haunt the orientalist legacy of this popular work that continues to have untroubled and uncritical "brownface" performance practices in many parts of the ballet world.

I have reshaped the libretto, costumes, set design and casting of dancers from a decolonial/postcolonial perspective while keeping much of the original dance content. I reveal the invisible traces of multiple encounters between the members of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in the Coromandel in South-East India and Indians (including artists) who lived and worked there between the 17th and 18th centuries during a particular kind of cosmopolitanism and offer a reframing of some of the characters in the new libretto. I also analyse the impact of the tour by hereditary artists to Paris and Europe in 1838-1839 who have informed some of the dance and music sequences. In a spectacular turn, the new libretto reframes the "evil" and "orientalist" South Asian characters with actual corrupt, Dutch colonial figures, and renders the "shades" as shadows and projections of the hauntings of the many Indian dancers who lie beneath the surface of dominant archives.

I am informed by my work with the Dutch National Ballet (over the last 5 years) to emerge as co-director of *La Bayadere* with Ted Brandsen, Rachel Beaujean and Kalpana Raghuraman in a world first premiere in Amsterdam in 2026. This is the first time any Australian is co-directing *La Bayadere* for The Dutch National Ballet. My work stems from a creative and critical practice based on my background as artist and scholar and the promise this generative approach holds for decolonial, cosmopolitan and equitable ballet futures is tremendous on a global and local landscape within an Australian context.