

## Sir Robert Helpmann

Robert Helpmann, born in Mount Gambier, South Australia, pursued a singular career as an actor, dancer, choreographer and director beginning at an early age and continuing until just two months before his death. After taking ballet lessons in Australia from a variety of teachers, including Anna Pavlova during her Australian tours, he left for London in 1932 and over the next thirty or so years secured engagements in dance, theatre and film. His career took him around the world. His name became an international one, synonymous with theatricality. He worked across art forms, appearing in ballet, drama, revue and film, and he was skilled not just as a performer but as a choreographer and director as well. He worked, too, with the most celebrated artists in his various fields of endeavour. His partnership with a young Margot Fonteyn was legendary. His friendship and professional association with Katharine Hepburn led him to dedicate his well-known Australian ballet *The Display* to her. His connections with the cinematographer Geoffrey Unsworth resulted in the highly successful dance film *Don Quixote*, which starred Rudolf Nureyev, Lucette Aldous and artists of the Australian Ballet. He returned to Australia to perform on various occasions from 1955 onwards. He became joint artistic director of the Australian Ballet in 1965, sharing the position with Peggy van Praagh until 1974. He directed the company alone during 1975.

Probably Helpmann's most significant contribution to the development of theatre in Australia was his time with the Australian Ballet. Helpmann joined Peggy van Praagh at the helm of the fledgling national company in 1965, was her co-director until 1974 and sole director throughout 1975. He was initially appointed for one year and was required to be in the country for not less than three months. His fee was A£2,000 plus various allowances. They also record that Helpmann originally argued for being in Australia for only six weeks each year, while remarking that his home was in London.

During and immediately prior to his directorship, Helpmann did, however, contribute in a major creative way to the development of the Australian Ballet. He choreographed several ballets for the company, which were taken overseas during the company's early tours to Europe and the United Kingdom. They brought considerable publicity to both Helpmann and the company. Two works in particular, *The Display* (1964) and the Japanese-inspired *Yugen* (1965), were important early successes for the Australian Ballet. But, as was usual where Helpmann was concerned, there was controversy behind the creation and performance of these ballets, particularly with *The Display*.

*The Display* was ostentatiously Australian and was at least the first 100 per cent Australian ballet to be created for the flagship company. Set in the Dandenong Ranges of Victoria during a bush picnic, the ballet explored themes of hostility and aggression in Australian society. It even featured an Aussie Rules football game and the dancers were coached for this part of the ballet by the football star Ron Barassi. Helpmann's scrapbooks show that the work received a mixed critical reception both in Australia and overseas. Headlines from newspaper reviews of the premiere range in tone from 'New Ballet a "Shocker"' to '*The Display* is a Triumph'. But perhaps the ballet's most interesting reception was in Glasgow, where the work was performed during the Commonwealth Arts Festival in 1965. The ballet's sexual overtones incurred the wrath of the Church and the Glasgow Presbytery only narrowly voted out a move to have the ballet banned.

Although probably none of his other works created such a stir as *The Display*, Helpmann continued to choreograph for the Australian Ballet throughout his term as director. In 1966 he mounted his stark and savage production of *Elektra*, with designs by Arthur Boyd, which had originally been created for London's Royal Ballet in 1963. In 1968 he created the dramatic and virtuosic *Sun Music* with music by Peter Sculthorpe and décor by Kenneth Rowell. *Perisynthyon* followed in 1974. While directing the company he also took to the stage himself, dancing the role of The Dago in the Australian Ballet's production of *Façade*, a role he had previously danced in England with Margot Fonteyn, and starring as one of the Ugly Sisters in the company's production of *Cinderella*.