

## **THE BIRTH OF BALLET IN BRISBANE**

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The birth of ballet in Brisbane has left its mark on early pupils. The discipline, grace and elegance they learned almost 60 years ago under the tutelage of Phyllis Danaher lives on today, writes Barbara Hebden.

For deportment, physique and grace, have you child taught dancing, the ballet school advertisements read almost 60 years ago.

And in the audience of any classical ballet today, you can't miss the women who were once wide-eyed little students with arched backs and feet turned out, dreaming of becoming star performers. They still walk like ballerinas.

Some attended the legendary Phyllis Danaher Ballet Theatre of Queensland, as it is now called. The theatre is pirouetting into its 60<sup>th</sup> year. Brisbane-born in 1908, Phyllis Danaher – who would later dance with Pavlova – began dancing lessons with Margaret St Ledger. She continued with Marjorie Hollinshed who took over Miss St Ledger's pupils in 1925.

It was primarily through her efforts that young dancers from various studios around Brisbane came together under her expert eye to presents excerpts from the great classical works.

The year was 1937. The Queensland Branch of the Australian Society of Operatic Dancing had its first meeting and the foundations of Ballet Theatre of Queensland were laid. Two close associates of Phyllis Danaher, Clare Drew (O'Bryen) and Valma Hunter (Lock) remember those early days well.

“After returning from studies abroad in 1934, I worked with Phyl until 1947. It was a very happy partnership. I loved teaching and continued for a while after I was married”, said Mrs Drew, who now lives quietly in Toowoomba.

“Everything was so simple then. Today there are so many things to compete with, it is harder to get the young ones in. I'm a purist, I look at the old ballets as they were originally performed. It was the beautiful classical line that Phyl always taught.”

Valma Hunter Lock of Clayfield, a pupil of Phyllis Danaher in the late Twenties and Thirties, is a living example of how ballet students retain a certain spryness years later. Today she is computer literate, surfs the Internet, and insists that life is all a matter of time and motion – mainly motion.

In 1938 Mrs Hunter became Phyllis Danaher's assistant.

“She was a marvellous person. She never looked for, or received any money. It was amazing that someone who had danced with Pavlova should walk around all the department stores looking for the best materials, and then sit down and make the costumes herself. Phyl gave her whole life to her students.”

In the war years, the Queensland Ballet Society, as it was first called, continued to present recitals for the Red Cross, and to dance at Insurance Balls, Government House, the Trocadero, South Brisbane, the Albert Hall and All Saints Church Hall.

“During the war I married”, said Valma Hunter, “and in those years one was expected to be a dutiful wife, so I no longer went to the studio. Phyl had started off in the old 4BH auditorium in Adelaide Street, then moved up to 430 Queens Street. They were exciting times.”

Pam Keir, chairwoman of the Royal Academy of Dancing, Queensland Branch, recalls the regional tours, the vacation schools with 112 children billeted at Glennie School, Toowoomba and the impact ballet master Cyril Johns had on the dancers.

“Phyl was amazing before her time. She used the body in her teaching and that opened new doors to our company. Today it is different. Classical teachers are struggling. They’ve got to get into heavy metal music, but for many of us, classical is like learning English.”

The Queensland Ballet Society grew like Topsy and produced a cast of greats. (The name changed to Ballet Theatre of Queensland in 1962 to prevent confusion with the Queensland Ballet Company founded with considerable fanfare by Charles Lisner.)

Among the stars, past and present, are former pupils Garth Welch, Wendy and Susan Laraghy, Michelle Giammichele, Shane Weatherby, Susan Hogart and Nadia Thompson.

In 1987 at the age of 76 Phyllis Danaher passed her flourishing Ballet Theatre to Leslie White. Ballet Theatre celebrated its Golden Jubilee Year in 1987 with one of its most popular productions, *The Nutcracker*.

The present directors, Christopher Gillard and Louise Hellewell, former members of the Scottish Ballet, and with vast international experience, plan to carry on this great tradition with a performance of a magical new look *Nutcracker* at the Suncorp Theatre from April 3 to 5 for six performances.

In 60 years, has ballet changed? Of course it has.

Ken McCaffrey, a guiding light in performance and administration at the Ballet Theatre, summed it up. “In our day there was a cross code. Ten crosses and it was not good. Today there is not the discipline.”