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On journeys and collaborations

Abstract:

Kira Bousloff, a member of the famous Colonel de Basil Ballet Russes, remained in Australia in 1939 instead of returning to Europe with the company. She moved to Perth in 1952 and established West Australian Ballet with the help of Melbourne-born composer James Penberthy, who subsequently co-founded West Australian Opera with Italian tenor Guiseppe Bertinazzo. Their story involves both margins and mainstreams, or the creation of mainstream artistic organisations in a small western city at the margins of a continent that was itself, to some degree, still an outpost of empire. My intention in this paper is twofold: to suggest some of the opportunities and drawbacks faced by artist-entrepreneurs living in geographical and cultural isolation and to narrate a research journey started in 1993 and marked by lengthy interruptions, distractions, slip-ups, and disappointments, yet also by unexpected and promising collaborations and possibilities.

Biographical note:

Dr Ffion Murphy completed a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Queensland and is currently a senior lecturer in writing at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia. Her book publications as editor and/or author include *The gate of dreams*, *Writing Australia*, *Story/telling*, and *Devotion*. Her journal articles include 'Madame Ballet' in *Brolga: An Australian Journal about Dance*.

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On the basis of a passing suggestion that a book should be written about her, I decided in 1993 to research the life of Madame Kira Bousloff (OAM), founder of what is now the longest established ballet company in Australia. Over several months, I conducted interviews, read histories, examined archives, consulted programs, and viewed newspaper reports. I celebrated West Australian Ballet's fortieth anniversary at Government House before moving to Brisbane where I drafted a manuscript before giving the project away in late 1995. In 2002, having returned to live in Perth, I wrote an article about Madame Bousloff for an issue of *Brolga, an Australian journal about dance* that marked West Australian Ballet's fiftieth anniversary. It seemed my involvement with Kira Bousloff had properly concluded, but more recently I began to feel differently. This year I recommenced and broadened my research to encompass the life and career of composer James Penberthy (AM), who established the ballet company with Kira Bousloff and composed music for its programs, and who also, in 1967, co-founded West Australian Opera and became its first director. This paper involves both margins and mainstreams, or the creation of mainstream artistic organisations in a small western city at the margins of a continent that was itself, to some degree, still an outpost of empire. Kira Bousloff and James Penberthy were passionate and dedicated artist-entrepreneurs, and despite the problems of geographic and cultural isolation, or perhaps because of them, their years together in Perth were arguably their most creative and productive. This paper suggests some advantages and difficulties of living in the west, and briefly narrates a research journey started in 1993 and marked by interruptions, distractions, and disappointments, as well as valuable collaborations and possibilities.

Exile and settlement

Born in 1914 of Russian parents who were exiled in France as a consequence of the First World War and the 1917 revolution, Kira Abricossova grew up in Monte Carlo, Nice, Paris, and Biarritz. Her ballet teachers included Olga Preobrajenska, Alexandre Volinine (Pavlova's partner) and Bronislava Nijinska (Vaslav Nijinsky's sister), as well as Mathilde Kschessinska, whom Kira Bousloff described as a former 'prima ballerina supreme of the royal court, mistress of the Tsar' (Bousloff 1990)¹. At twenty, after touring with various small companies, she joined the renowned Colonel de Basil Ballet Russes, dancing in works by celebrated choreographers such as Léonard Massine, Michel Fokine, and David Lichine.

James Penberthy claimed that as a young man he had been 'stage struck' by the Ballet Russes, for in the late 1930s it 'flooded Australia with exotic European glamour' (Penberthy 1994). He observed that 'those wonderful, exciting, foreign girls and boys transformed the place' and 'seemed to take over the city of Melbourne. We lingered around back-stage, hoping to speak to one or even look at these gods and goddesses' (Penberthy 2005: 87). This was the eve of the Second World War, and he would soon be married, have a son, and serve in the Royal Australian Navy. His marriage did not last as long as the war, after which he attended Melbourne University to study music, assisted by the commonwealth government's repatriation scheme. His brother Wesley Penberthy, who later became a respected painter, introduced him to his second wife,

whose artistic, well-connected family was instrumental in gaining him a position as musical director with the National Theatre Ballet.

Kira and her husband Serge Bousloff chose to stay in Australia when the Ballet Russes departed in 1939. They settled in Melbourne and had a son in 1943. Kira lived for some years without ballet but was drawn back to it eventually, as a teacher and choreographer for the Victorian Ballet Guild. In 1949, James Penberthy visited the Guild to invite the Bousloffs to produce *Prince Igor* for the National Theatre Ballet.

Penberthy later claimed that Kira Bousloff had simply taken him over (Penberthy 1994). Her ‘universal instinct, honed by tradition and much travel, her fiery temperament, [and] her prodigious knowledge of art, music and the world,’ provided him with ‘a deluge of inspiration and education’ (Penberthy 2005: 86). Not surprisingly his second marriage, which produced his second son, also failed. He became in due course ‘the father of a Russian ballerina’s child’ (93), something he could never have predicted as a besotted balletomane a decade earlier.

Kira Bousloff, like many other members of the Ballet Russes, had never set foot on Russian soil, though she spoke the language. The company presented as an artistic satellite, a peripatetic, magical world unto itself, though many of its members were effectively displaced persons. The company was flamboyantly multicultural during a period when the perils of nationalism were all too apparent; it symbolised a history and culture that had collapsed dramatically and violently and yet was romanticised. Kira Bousloff considered ballet a ‘gipsy’ or migratory art form that thrived through its capacity to incorporate diverse influences (Bousloff 1993). Penberthy reflected that through Kira he’d been ‘permitted’ to enter the exciting and satisfying world of ballet in the manner of Diaghilev and his successor de Basil, and that these people were ‘at the centre of the world of art, where romance of the nineteenth century became modernity of the twentieth’ (Penberthy 2005: 117-118). The cultural centre, by this view, is not necessarily fixed in a particular geographic space but potentially traverses—and transforms—the world, and this occurred even though international travel involved long months aboard ships. The Ballet Russes apparently embodied in a precise and potent way all that Australians lacked culturally—history, romance, modernity. Penberthy claimed its tours marked a turning point: ‘Australia came of age and admitted it at the time’ (Penberthy 1994)¹.

In 1951, Penberthy left Melbourne for Europe on a government music scholarship. He had a ‘Prime Minister’s letter’ of introduction to key organisations in England and could impress them with the title of director of the National Theatre. As a result, he was given free seats to various shows in London for the duration of his visit. Seymour Whinyates, ‘the grand dame of the British Council’, found him ‘quaint’ and admired his ‘colonial enterprise’; he was not sure she had ‘scrutinised an Australian before’ (Penberthy 2005: 99). Kira Bousloff introduced Penberthy to key figures in the dance world when she joined him in her birth land, France, and he remained acutely aware of himself as a colonial who had to be educated by Europeans, whether on or beyond Australian shores.

Penberthy finally decided, however, that he ‘could not be an Australian composer anywhere but in Australia.’ He had ‘thoroughly saturated’ himself with his ‘European

heritage' but considered it time to discover himself 'in [his] own environment' (Penberthy 2005: 124). He moved with Kira Bousloff to Perth following their return to Australia in 1952. Penberthy knew the city already, as he had lived, studied and worked there for periods of his childhood and as a young man.

Kira Bousloff claimed she fell in love with Perth when she first set foot on its warm dry soil (Bousloff 1993). And yet, beyond sunshine and nice beaches, what could there have been to keep her there? Soon after arriving, Penberthy wrote an impassioned piece for the *West Australian* indicating that while many people were active in the arts, Perth was, for professionals, a wasteland. He decried the situation and urged change:

I believe that Perth can have quite soon an artistic life and activity which will be the envy of the Commonwealth...Much smaller cities with less advantages have risen to take a place of cultural importance in the world...Perth has a great power to attract. Amongst those attracted will come many world class artists. After a time, sad to say, this same fair city may seem to them positively repulsive. (Penberthy c1953)

He posed two alternatives for talented artists: they could regard their work in music, theatre, writing or ballet a hobby, or leave Perth to find professional status and satisfaction elsewhere. He spoke of a pervasive sense of cultural inferiority, noting that a 'musical official' had been heard to remark of an artist that 'if he were any good he wouldn't be here'. We learn elsewhere that the artist referred to was Penberthy himself (Penberthy 2005).

The ballet company was a special collaboration, wherein Bousloff's knowledge of famous European ballets combined successfully with Penberthy's desire to write Australian music for original works. Their efforts were part of a discernible cultural shift towards nationalism, which gained momentum after the Second World War, and musical modernism, which emerged in Australia in the 1960s (Murphy 2002: 9). Together with many others, they provided Perth and various country audiences with original works inspired by beaches, suburban swamps, and Indigenous legends and practices. Bousloff and Penberthy appreciated and drew upon forms of Indigenous creativity before it became commonplace for a broader cultural community and before the potential problems of cultural (mis)appropriation became widely debated and understood.

For Penberthy, living in Perth was never straightforward. Sydney and Melbourne were the centres for musical composition and performance. Nevertheless, he considered Perth in some ways paradisiacal: 'That strip of golden Western Australian sand, City Beach to Trigg Island, is a lotus land where young, middle-aged and old romantics run their lazy lives away' (Penberthy 2005: 6). In Perth, at least for a while, he considered himself a 'spiritual millionaire, writing ocean-inspired music' (9). Indeed, the west represented the 'real Australia', but he spent much of his life moving between what he termed the 'extremities of our land' (10), deeply attracted, but never entirely satisfied, with either. In a 1993 letter to Penberthy, forty years after their ballet company's first concert at His Majesty's Theatre, Kira Bousloff agreed that it had been 'a big mistake' for him to leave Perth in the mid-seventies, adding 'the city

is getting an important place for Ballet, Music and Opera—still it is never too late...’ (Bousloff 1993b).

Performance and publication demand various forms of collaboration, but scholarly and popular attention more often attends to individuals, a cultural habit that disguises the crucial point that many artistic works and organisations would not exist but for fruitful and often complex partnerships. Besides his work with Kira Bousloff, James Penberthy established friendships and creative collaborations with several writers, including Donald Stuart and Gwen Harwood. In 1959, his controversial opera *Dalgerie*, which was based on a libretto by Mary Durack from her novel *Keep him my country*, became the first Australian opera on an Aboriginal theme. This opera became part of the opening of the Sydney Opera House in 1973, supported by Aboriginal dancers from the Kimberly.

In *Farewell Cinderella*, Bolton, Rossiter, and Ryan suggest that Western Australia can at last farewell the defensive epithet ‘Cinderella State’ in matters relating to the arts: it has ‘arrived at the ball—but not without a struggle’ (Bolton et al 2003: 1). It is partly this struggle and the tensions that artists commonly experience by living in Perth that has drawn me to research two people who chose to undertake, strategically, the project of *making* culture as a vehicle for their own creative ambitions *and* as a kind of national duty. Penberthy’s determination to put Australian music on the map was fierce, often dominated his life, and instigated a decades-long, often uncomfortable correspondence with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the policies and attitudes of which were instrumental in determining the contemporary and future viability of classical works by Australian composers.

Cultural identity is dependent upon ‘conscious and unconscious choices by small and large communities over time’ (Bolton et al 2003: 2). Bousloff, Penberthy, and those who worked with them aimed to make distinctively Australian culture by producing in Perth art forms that could be readily accessed in most major cities of the world, but with some important additions. They sought to create mainstream works that would be performed in conventional theatres and on makeshift stages in isolated, regional towns where ballet was a rarity. An inquiry into their life-stories provides an opportunity to explore the roles of collaboration, tradition, and innovation in international, national and local contexts, and contributes to narratives on immigration, multiculturalism and the enrichment of national and regional cultures. Importantly, these artists encountered and overcame a resilient, regional strain of the ‘cultural cringe’, and became, in their different ways, enablers of a more confident Australian culture based on diversity.

A long research journey in brief

When I wrote to Kira Bousloff in 1993 with the suggestion that I write her story, she enthusiastically agreed. Fremantle Arts Centre Press (FACP) expressed interest in the project, and it was also supported by small grants from ArtsWA and the WA Historical Society. I was on my way, but somewhat underprepared for the difficulties of the life-writing journey, especially where the subject participates and is invested in

the result. I quickly discovered that Kira Bousloff had told her story many times, to many people, including former National Library of Australia dance historian Michelle Potter. The story had been carefully choreographed and rehearsed, with romance and good fortune as organising principles. She wished to protect and enhance her reputation. She would not elaborate on the difficulties of living in conservative Perth in the 1950s or of establishing the ballet company, whereas I wanted the veils of privacy and propriety to fall, the story behind the myth, the gritty details, and became increasingly frustrated by the constraints of historical veracity and her selective and fading memory.

After several months haphazard writing in Brisbane, while my newborn took afternoon naps, I sent a manuscript to FACP that comprised four sections, each in a different style and voice. It had problems, but I needed to be rid of it. The Press would fix it, I thought. They would know what to do. They did, and several months later a rejection letter arrived. In its present form, the work could not be considered for publication because the subject demanded a more historically ‘grounded approach’. The difficulties were ‘conceptual’ (Coffey 1994). However, a new version of Bousloff’s story would be considered.

When I wrote to Kira Bousloff with the news, she suggested I send the manuscript to another publisher—and to her. I had not sought her opinion on it, or told her I was submitting it to a publisher. I had wanted the Press’s opinion before I had hers. This was not courageous, but I had been concerned that some content, particularly comments by some interviewees, might displease or upset her: what was the point of that if a press had not yet accepted the manuscript? Before sending her a copy, I removed any names attached to quotations, whether flattering or not, as well as some views expressed by Penberthy that might disappoint or distress her. Their marriage had long been over, but Bousloff’s love and admiration for Penberthy remained fervent.

Kira Bousloff wrote that she liked the manuscript, was reading it a second time, and correcting a few facts (Bousloff 1995). However, a week later another letter arrived, typewritten and entirely different in style and tone. It said Kira Bousloff should be referred to as ‘madame’; that some comments were insulting and some details incorrect; and that we risked being taken to court. It commanded that I *do nothing* with the manuscript until I had written approval (Bousloff 1995b).

I was surprised, offended, *furious*. How dare she speak to me in that imperious manner! Did she not realise how much precious time I had spent on her story? My previous letter had said I would not send the manuscript to the same or any other publisher before doing a substantial rewrite which would take months, perhaps years. So why was she ordering me to *do nothing*? No, I would not even attempt a rewrite now. I responded that I refused to write hagiography and a biography free of criticism would likely be dull and worse, dishonest, concluding:

You did not commission me to do this work, nor are you paying me for it. I am under no obligation to you to produce a book or show you the end product...I will not compromise my professional integrity in an attempt to appease egos. I am not a disrespectful student writing a school essay. (Murphy 1995)

She responded immediately and contritely. She had read my letter with ‘amazement’. Why was I so upset? She loved the manuscript! (Bousloff 1995c). She begged me to finish the book before she died. I was appeased, relieved, but less so when she returned the manuscript with editing suggestions. Every criticism of her had been blacked out, no matter how mild. She queried all information from other sources, ‘Where you get this stuff?’ She wanted to cut paragraphs about an esteemed Perth ballet teacher, Linley Wilson, since they shifted the focus from her own story. Mention of her daughter to Penberthy a decade before their marriage in 1961 was crossed out in case conception out of wedlock might upset the grandchildren. Occasional sexual references were deleted, despite their modesty. I put the manuscript aside. Our correspondence returned to normal for a while, and then stopped. By the time Kira Bousloff died in 2001, she had long given up on me.

Recalling this in 2009 is not to underplay Bousloff’s occasional bossiness or her capriciousness, but rather to question her biographer’s response. What presumption! What impertinence! After all, my several months’ work had to be compared with her 81 years of living and hard won esteem. She was not being unreasonable. She was old, she was crippled, she was justly proud of her heritage and achievements, and she was a self-confessed romantic. In a letter to Penberthy, who was living on the New South Wales coast, she wrote: ‘We did some good work in the past—we practically made a legend of our lives together—this is good’ (Bousloff nd).

New directions and collaborations

James Penberthy died in 1999. In 2003, his papers were deposited in the National Library of Australia by his first son, David Reid.³ Among them is correspondence with numerous musicians, writers, and arts organisations. Embedded in this archive is a tale of great effort to survive financially and emotionally despite frequent setbacks and disappointments, as well as Penberthy’s unquenchable desire for his music to be appreciated by his peers and the Australian public. Matthew Westwood argues that ‘Australian composers are generally an under-recognised lot’ (Westwood 2007), while John Carmody considers that a singular focus on Peter Sculthorpe has occurred due to our ‘attraction to tokens and icons to the neglect of the broader canvas’ (Carmody 2008). James Penberthy’s cultural contribution will be explored in a documentary being produced by Filmwest, a company established in Perth in 1967 but now located in New South Wales. Filmwest’s project had stalled for some years, but lately has been reinvigorated by our shared objectives. In addition, should a 2009 ARC Linkage Grant application be successful, the roles of artist-entrepreneurs in the cultural development of Perth will be further explored, opening the way for new creative and scholarly collaborations and enriched understandings of creative arts practice and development in Australia.

Endnotes

¹ Kschessinka had a relationship with Nicolas II when he was a grand duke, before he became Tsar.

² The Ballet Russes' importance to Australia's cultural history is demonstrated by a four-year Australia Research Council funded project involving the National Library of Australia (NLA), the Australian Ballet, and the University of Adelaide (2006-2009) entitled 'Ballet Russes in Australia—Our Cultural Revolution'. The company toured Australia three times from 1936 to 1940. Bousloff was part of the second tour (1938-39) when the company travelled under the name Covent Garden Russian Ballet.

³ An ECU research grant for 2009 enabled me to visit: the NLA to review the Papers of James Penberthy; Filmwest in NSW to discuss the Penberthy documentary and view interviews filmed to date; and Brisbane to meet with David Reid, Penberthy's son. My thanks to Jon Noble and Denise Cox of Filmwest for their valuable support, and to David Reid for generously providing a copy of Penberthy's unpublished autobiography to me on CD.

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