

# Tales of the Arabesque.

The Australian Ballet Company covers the broad spectrum of ballet from the traditional to the contemporary.





## “An outstanding company.” The Stage

By Pauline Auzou

Behind the velvety-red curtain the expectant audience imagines the rustling effervescence of the handful of slim girls in their tutus waiting in the wings. The muffled tapping of the ballet shoes sharpens the anticipation. The Australian Ballet Company is about to light the stage. For 45 years now, this flagship dance company based in Melbourne brings to life classical shows and modern choreographic creations.

Versatility, technical excellence and a warm, friendly style are the trademarks of The Australian Ballet, qualities that have earned both critical and audience acclaim. In 2006, the Company was awarded the prestigious prize “Best Foreign Dance Award” by the UK Critics Circle National Dance Award. The highly respected British magazine *The Stage* described it as “an outstanding company.”

Founded in 1962 by Artistic Director Peggy van Praagh, this young company has no reason to feel subordinate to its older European counterparts. Renowned dancers such as the Russian genius Rudolf Nureyev were regular guests in company productions. In 1972, the star produced *Don Quixote* and performed the leading role of Basilio. This classic three-act ballet, based on Spanish author Cervantes’ 17th century novel, is the light-hearted, enthralling and vibrant story of a deluded old knight on a quest to find love.

Nureyev’s *Don Quixote* was a milestone in the history of the Australian Ballet. In 2007, the company revisited this “heritage” ballet, keeping up the tradition of passing on the legends of the past to the stars of today.

Several generations of dancers and ballerinas have slipped on the costumes of those Andalusian characters over the years. The last production toured the country in 1999, and starred Australia’s most accomplished dancer, Steven Heathcote.

Heathcote, who retired in 2007 from leading roles, has teamed-up with some of the best international ballerinas (such as Sylvie Guillem and Susan Jaffe) in breathtaking duets. Steven took up dancing at the age of 10 after seeing a West Australian Ballet production of *The Nutcracker* on a school excursion. Starting at the Perth dance school, he graduated from the Australian Ballet School in 1983, impressing audiences around the world since. He performed the lead role in the *Nutcracker* during the Australian Ballet 2007 season. No doubt, the little boy inside him stamps his feet with excitement and pride.

This production of *The Nutcracker* will complete a series of Australian ballet performances known as “the Big Three” along with *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Swan Lake*. The latter two were touring Japan in winter 2007 as part of the company’s 30th international tour, after visiting China and New Zealand in 2006. Executive Director Richard Evans says, “International touring remains a top priority for The Australian Ballet. It is critical for our dancers and choreographers to be seen on the world stage, and for our national ballet company to be measured against the best in international markets.”

The tour was a massive logistical undertaking with hundreds of set and costume items being shipped to Japan – over 500 for *Swan Lake* and a further 300 for *The Sleeping Beauty*. Costumes made from 80 metres of silk sari fabric from India, countless millinery items and masks, hundreds of Swarovski crystals, 200 ostrich feathers, a frozen forest and a grand gold ballroom - with a total weight of over 20,000 kg - travelled with the dancers to Japan. The touring party consists of over 100 people including the full company of dancers plus artistic, music and technical staff, a medical team, administration and management. Overseas shows are the best way to reaffirm international position and cement a strong reputation in the world choreographic scene.

Even though the Australian Ballet Company loves to expose its eye-popping creations around the world, Australian audiences are not left behind. The company produces 170 shows every year in capital cities and regional areas. A quick glance on its website [www.australianballet.com.au](http://www.australianballet.com.au) is the easiest way to check what’s on and to book your tickets.

Now: the lights are going down and the dancers are readying themselves in the wings...