



## A HISTORY OF RINGWOOD BALLET GROUP INC.

Compiled by Joan Broadley

Committee member 1968 - 1971

Secretary 1972 - 1975

Secretary/Treasurer 1976 - 1990

With amusing recollections from Alve Rokos

Committee member 1976 - 1977

Assistant Secretary 1978 - 1982

Representative Civic Committees 1983 to the early '90s

The Ringwood Ballet Group Inc.

The Ringwood Ballet Group came into being in April 1962 and the first official meeting was held at the home of Mrs Elva Blackmore with 22 interested people present. In 1961 a group of very enthusiastic ladies had come together with a desire to set up a ballet school in Ringwood. A committee was soon formed and events moved quickly. The

first classes commenced in the following year on Monday 30th April under the Artistic Direction of Mr Bruce Morrow, a former soloist with the Borovansky Ballet. Mrs Bernice Morrow, a former dancer with the company also taught classes.

The classes were held in the 1st Ringwood Scout Hall in Bedford Park. In term 3, an extra class was set up for students who wished to take part in the end of year performance held in the Croydon Theatre. Ringwood students continued to be part of the Croydon Annual Recitals in 1963 and 1964. The first independent Annual Recital was held in the Ringwood Town Hall on Monday December 6th 1965 and continued there until 1968 when the complex was demolished. The Town Hall existed until then in the Highway, on the block now bounded by the Melbourne Street Mall and Midway Arcade. During this period the number of students increased rapidly and classes which were originally held in the Scout Hall moved to St. Pauls Church Hall, then located on the Ringwood Street and Civic Place corner (but demolished in April 1967), then to Scots Church Hall part of the site in Adelaide Street now occupied by the Eastland covered car park.

Meanwhile the Lower Town Hall was used for other classes as the number of students continued to grow. Periodically these classes were displaced by Blood Bank visits and extra classes were held at Scots Hall. Mrs Val Wilson was at this time welcomed as an additional member of staff. Committee members looked forward to the day when a ballet studio could be built. A Ringwood City Council grant of land seemed to answer to all difficulties. The land was located in Miles Avenue. A building sub-committee was established as a consequence of the grant, but the project was finally abandoned when extremely protracted soil tests established the site as unsuitable for building foundations due to the creek bed having once taken this course.

The original Croydon Ballet School was discontinued in 1966. Mr and Mrs Morrow set up the Morrow Ballet School in Kilsyth and senior students of the Ringwood School then did most of their classes at the Kilsyth Studio in Churchill Way.

The R.A.D. Teachers Workshop of Victoria conducted Sunday classes giving more advanced students valuable experience. The workshop produced performances over many years with ballets by invited choreographers. Ringwood students were involved in these performances which were held in professional theatres.

The Bruce Morrow Production Club was formed in 1966 and the first performance took place in the Croydon Theatre in May 1967. The club performed with other artistic groups in the area, in particular with the Warrandyte Experimental Dance Group. Over several years a varied program emerged due to Bruce Morrow's enthusiasm and skills.

One of the greatest problems to overcome was the lack of suitable venues. Halls invariably had unsuitable slippery floors, only basic lighting and very ordinary seating. Until 1968 classes continued to be held in the Lower Town Hall and at Scots Hall. It seemed certain that the Town Hall would be sold and in fact it became unavailable for the 1969 Annual Recital. In 1969 the Annual Recital was held at the Norwood High School Assembly Hall and in 1970 it was moved yet again to the Ringwood High School Hall. In 1969 affiliation with the Ringwood Arts and Crafts Society took place with two members representing the Ballet Group at General Meetings.

Significant changes arrived with 1971. The Artistic Director, Mr Bruce Morrow was appointed to the full time staff of the Australian Ballet School. This was at the time devastating to the committee, involving as it did the loss to the group of not only a very talented choreographer and teacher but also one who had produced wonderful sets and props for performances. Some of the ballets which will always be associated with Bruce Morrow "The Party", "Tamboo", "The Comedians", "Pas Classique", "Peer Gynt", and "Valse Concertante".

The committee announced the appointment of Mrs Bernice Morrow as Artistic Director. She is a gifted teacher and during her time with the school several of her students were amongst those accepted for training at the Australian Ballet School. Three students entered the school in 1973 and three more in 1982. Over this period another student was accepted giving Mrs Morrow an extraordinary number to achieve this distinction. She gave quite a number of her senior students the opportunity to learn to teach and choreograph ballets, in fact many of them have developed worthwhile careers as ballet teachers.

Bernice Morrow produced exciting ballets for her Annual Recitals including "Cinderella", "Asian Suite", "Graduation Day", "Sacred and Profane Dances", "The Ugly Duckling", "Hansel and Gretel", "Spring Picnic", "The Shoemaker and the Elves".

Also in 1971 the Forest Hill Theatre, which offered air-conditioned comfort and a well equipped theatre became available and was booked for the Annual Recital over two nights. This event in fact continued to be held there for the next three years.

#### Forest Hill

My earliest recollection of a performance recalls the Forest Hill theatre. This must have indeed seemed a luxurious venue compared with some in the past. The theatre I later heard recalled most, was the Croydon Hall where to transfer from one wing to the other it was necessary to go outside and across the back of the building. Bruce Morrow is reputed to have carried small dancers across, to save their ballet shoes from the mud. Current ticket sellers may be interested to know that to obtain tickets for that venue it was necessary to sit at the phone the morning booking opened.

Within the theatre there was a small box/balcony which could be accessed from back stage, students could don their costumes then watch from there until the time came to go on. I imagine this was some sort of crowd control. During "Snuggopot and Cuddlepie" in the 1974 production, this box was packed with "Bad Banksias" in full regalia. They were a fearsome sight not only for their appearance but because they were some of the more mature girls not noted for their placid natures. Would the possibly flimsy structure hold all that excited mass or would they make an unscheduled dramatic entrance!!

With the sale of the Town Hall and a record enrolment in 1971, arrangements were made to hold classes at the Lutheran Church Hall in Wantirna Road whilst still using Scots Hall. In 2nd term Miss Heather Scott joined the staff and also during this period Modern Dance was introduced at the Kilsyth Studio with Marita Loudon conducting classes.

In November the first Arts and Crafts Festival by the Lake was held and continued over many years. It was only with the amalgamation of Ringwood and Croydon Councils that the event changed somewhat.

In 1972 most of the major R.A.D. classes were held at the Kilsyth studios. At this time class numbers at this level were low at Ringwood. By 1973 the group had set up an Annual Ballet Demonstration. R.A.D. examination students were able to take part as added experience for forthcoming exams. This demonstration of work continued over several years.

Two ballet awards were presented at the Annual Recital in December 1972. The City of Ringwood sponsored the Senior Scholarship and continued to do so until 1994 when the new system, with Commissioners in charge decided against it. The Lions Club of Ringwood Junior Scholarship, began in 1973 and remained in existence until 1981. When this award was discontinued the Ringwood Ballet Group offered two Junior students their fees for one term.

At the Annual General Meeting in February in 1973 Cr. Jack Martin, Mayor, surprised to find the group had accumulated quite a sum of money in the Building Fund Account, due in part to the early committees firm resolution to build a Ballet Studio, suggested the committee write a letter to the Council again requesting a suitable block of land and financial assistance to build a studio.

This was done and the Ringwood Council agreed to assist the Group through the third/third/third scheme, i.e. one third provided by the Ballet Group, one third grant and one third a loan to be paid back by the Group over ten years. Suitable land in Bedford Park was included in the offer.

Coinciding with all this excitement a letter was received from the Treasurer of the Croydon Ballet Group, defunct since 1966 asking for incorporation with the Ringwood Ballet Group, with Croydon members eligible for membership and furthermore that two members should become ex-officio members of the Ringwood committee as observers, but without voting rights. Put to the vote this motion was carried. The sum of \$1250 had been held by the Croydon

Treasurer and their few remaining members decided the incorporation would ensure that the funds were put to the use originally intended, which was the erection of a ballet studio in the area.

Immediately following the offer and the go-ahead from the Council to build the studio, tenders were called for the proposed building. Two tenders were received, one quite beyond the Group's financial reach and the other from MR and Mrs J. R. Young for \$39,718.00, which was accepted. Betty Young, Treasurer and her husband worked on plans and specifications and in February 1975 work commenced on the building.

By June the brickwork was almost completed and the roof was to be put in place the next week. Vandalism caused damage during this period and the S.E.C. erected a special light to discourage further interference. In spite of these problems the building came into operation by 22nd September and the Official Opening was arranged for Sunday 9th November 1975, at 3.00 pm. The building now complete, had to be equipped with barres and floor coverings in the dressing room area. A piano, donated by the Rotary Club of Ringwood was moved in and sundry other items required in a ballet studio were purchased.

It was hoped that Dame Peggy Van Praagh D.B.E. would be available to open the building but she was not free to do so. Mr Garth Welch accepted the invitation and a very successful opening took place on a warm day in November. Subsequently a plaque was placed in Studio 1 in honour of J.R. & B.L. Young without whose enormous effort the studio would never have become a reality. The Ringwood Ballet Group had now gone full circle and moved back to Bedford Park where it originally began.

### The Kitchen

Joan has failed to mention that the hub of the new ballet studio was and has been ever since - the kitchen. After years of working in different halls, often completely segregated people could begin to know each other. Weary parents were revived with tea and coffee as were teachers themselves. Mothers discussed problems from their children's classes or that ever recurring problem - costumes. Fees were paid and tickets sold. Small children appeared regularly in search of an elastic band or a spare pair of tights - just anything they failed to find in their ballet bag on the day.

At the end of 1975 the Artistic Director, Bernice Morrow outlined the direction she wished to pursue in 1976. As well as the General Syllabus course, she proposed introducing a Professional course for students suited to a career in ballet. These systems continued until her retirement in 1982.

Two problems of continuing concern to the committee were first, finding a suitable theatre for the performances and secondly, managing to achieve bookings for the desired dates. In 1975 and 1976 the Annual Recitals were presented at the M.L.C. Theatre in Kew, then from 1977 to 1979 at the Kew High School Community Theatre. The Annual Demonstration in 1979 was at the Nunawading High School Theatre.

During this period a few months apart, both Heather Scott and Val Wilson resigned from the teaching staff. Val had had a very long association with the group having joined the committee in 1963 and she taught in the school for twelve years. Heather as well as teaching responsibilities at Ringwood, directed her own ballet school which was expanding and she wished to spend more time there. Val Wilson actually joined Heather's staff and taught at this school for a number of years.

From 1976 to 1981 performances of Peter and the Wolf were presented for kindergarten children. The sets were erected at the far end of studio 11 with the audience sitting on rugs on the floor. This worked very well as the young children were able to see all the action and became very involved being so close to the performers.

In 1978 Luba Baksheev began teaching character dance to senior students. This was a new style of dancing and had a great effect on performances with very energetic routines and wonderfully colourful costumes. Luba had studied R.A.D. method to Solo Seal. She had performed as a soloist with the Kolobok Dance Company and became Artistic Director of the Russian Theatrical Society. Luba continued to teach Character Dance and her work with the students contributed many exciting and colourful items in performances. She resigned in 1991.

In February 1980 a quote from the Gas & Fuel Corporation was accepted to extend a line from the gas main in Bedford Road into the park and on to the Studio at a cost of \$1908.00. A quote submitted by V. Murphy of West Preston to install ducted heating was accepted at a cost of \$2074.00. This replaced the electric heaters installed in June 1976. Again the project was made possible by funding from the Ringwood Council under the third/third/third scheme. The improved winter comfort with the acquisition of overall space heating was much appreciated.

The long awaited Ringwood Theatre became a reality in 1980 and the very attractive well equipped venue was opened on the 19<sup>th</sup> April with many celebrities in attendance. Various free performances were held throughout that week with supper to follow. The Annual Demonstration was held there on 9<sup>th</sup> of August and it seemed all our dreams had come true now that Ringwood Ballet Group had its own Studio and access to a nearby district Theatre.

At a Special Committee Meeting on 19<sup>th</sup> May 1980, the Vice President, Mrs Nadine Taylor, announced the death of the Group's President, Mrs Fay Fairfull who with her husband had been visiting America. This announcement came as an enormous shock to all. Fay was an early member of the Ringwood Ballet Group joining 12 years previously and had served as President for 8 years. In addition to the duties surrounding her office she had contributed as an indefatigable and creative sewer of costumes. Her three daughters were students at the school. The Fay Fairfull award was introduced in 1981 as a lasting tribute to our late President.

In November 1980 a second piano was purchased from Allans. An appeal to parents raised \$600 and this allowed the piano, which was on lay-by, to be installed earlier than expected.

Bernice Morrow retired at the end of 1982 and she was given a farewell evening on Friday, 25<sup>th</sup> March 1983 at the North Ringwood Community Centre. With her retirement the Morrow era, which had lasted for 21 years came to an end.

Susan Massey became Artistic Director in 1983. She is a highly qualified teacher and directed her own ballet school in the U.K. before going to New Zealand where she both taught and improved her qualifications before coming to Australia and with her family, settled in Heathmont. Her qualifications include Fellow of the International Teachers Association, Associate of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing and Fellow of the Australian Institute of Classical Dance. She is a registered teacher of the Royal Academy of Dancing.

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During her years as Artistic Director of the Ringwood Ballet Group from 1983 to 1994 she produced many wonderful ballets "The Bluebird of Happiness", "Mist in the Glen", "Scrooge", "The Magic Faraway Tree", "The Nutcracker Suite", "Coppelia", "La Fille Mal Gardee" and "The Cotton Club". Her contemporary work with the students became a highlight of performances. Susan Massey's husband Charles Heathcote produced brilliant sets for these ballets with the assistance of fathers and friends of the Group. Susan is a very careful and successful teacher of classical dance with excellent results in R.A.D. and C.D.T.A. examinations. Her son was accepted at the Australian Ballet School during her time at the Ringwood school. She retired as Artistic Director in 1995 but has remained a member of the teaching staff.

The Ringwood Ballet Group became an Incorporated Association and this was officially announced at a committee meeting held on 12<sup>th</sup> September 1984. Due to the organisation having been established so many years earlier, assistance with setting this up was sought from Mr M. Williams, former Solicitor for the Group.

For the second time in just over a decade, the committee was faced with news of a President's death. Everyone was saddened by the passing of our President Pam Lang. Pam held this position from August 1986 to 1991, in addition she was Ticket Secretary from 1985 to 1991. Pam's three daughters all attended the Ringwood Ballet Group, so naturally Pam spent a great deal of time at the studio and was continually relied on to help with any emergency that arose. From 1992 the Pam Lang Junior Awards of one terms fees to two students have been awarded in memory of our former President.

Meryn Fairfull, a member of the teaching staff has had a very long association with the Group and was one of those who taught whilst still a student. She spent time in America as an exchange student and on return, entered the College of the Arts and graduated in dance in 1982. Meryn is a registered teacher of the Royal Academy of Dancing and an Associate of the Australian Institute of Classical Dance. She danced with the Russian Theatrical Society and teaches classical classes and character dancing.

Janine Box, also a student of Bernice Morrow, graduated in dance from the Victorian College of the Arts in 1982. She spent some time overseas, returned to study and is now a Graduate of the School of Early Childhood Studies and a Kindergarten Directress. Janine teaches Junior School Students at the Ringwood Ballet Group.

Many, many students associated with the Group have gone on to make a career of ballet, first as performers and some are now teachers. Quite a number attained the ultimate status of being selected as students for training at the Australian Ballet School, some entered the Victorian College of the Arts and Graduated from there, and again others entered interstate dance colleges. A number of students after graduation danced with overseas companies and others joined prominent Australian contemporary and character groups.

#### COSTUME LADIES

There has to be some space dedicated to costume ladies, they are the most misunderstood members of the ballet committee. They frequently lack the communication skills required to convince a mother that a newspaper pattern and an obviously inadequate piece of material are all that is needed to produce a delightful rabbit or whatever the current need is. People ring them. As the performance draws closer, the level of tension rises. Children hassle their parents because their costume is not finished. Then the mother rushes into the studio to complain about the impossibility of their task.

At the dress rehearsal of "Asian Suite" I saw a group of ladies crack. The girls on stage mostly seniors, were unhappy with their costumes which exposed more skin than usual. They looked grumpy and sweaty, the very opposite of the seductive demeanour Mrs Morrow was aiming for. When their headgear arrived it failed to fit - this was when the costume contingent in the front row broke down. They dissolved into uncontrollable hysterical mirth.

Presidents, Secretaries, Treasurers, Ticket Secretaries, Representatives to Civic Meetings, Committee people and parents generally have worked tirelessly for the Group, certainly they have had the incentive that it was all in the interests of their children, nevertheless it was and is, very constant work. The fathers and in some cases brothers, have not escaped either. With sets to build and props to produce there has been a job for all. Some parents have been seen as stage performers and much fun has been had by all.

Rosemary Frost joined the staff of the Ringwood Ballet Group in 1993 and became Artistic Director in 1995 when Susan Massey retired from the position. Rosemary trained in Zimbabwe and also with the Royal Ballet School, London. She is an Associate of the Royal Academy of Dance, a qualified teacher of Modern Dance (I.D.T.A.) and was on the Faculty of the College of the Arts in Frankfurt, Germany. She was a member of the Frankfurt Ballet Company and has performed many major roles. In 1995, Rosemary assisted by members of her staff, produced a wonderful version of "Cinderella", much to the delight of people who made up the "House Full" audiences.

Praise must be recorded in relation to the members who served as office bearers on the committee during the formative years. They were completely dedicated to achieving the reality of the dream of a ballet school in the community. Year by year there was an almost routine swapping of positions but they at all times continued to work extremely hard in fulfilling their dream irrespective of the office held.

With the conclusion of this history, it is so reassuring to find as in the past, parents willing to take their places on the committee and attend to the many tasks necessary in the successful running of a ballet school. The school is celebrating the 35<sup>th</sup> year since establishment. Even the students who did not go on to dance, must have benefited in later years from the poise and self discipline they gained in their ballet years.

The Ringwood Ballet Group Inc. is unique in that it is a non-profit organisation operating in its own premises. Long may it continue.