

Email from David Hough Monday 18 June

David Hough takes full responsibility for material published.

Dear John Senczuk and John Aitken

I went to see your production of *Madame Ballet* Thursday of last week (14th June). I had attempted to see the play the previous Thursday (7th June) but the performance was cancelled. I would have bought a ticket for opening night had I not had another engagement. On my first attempt I did not know the production was to be considered for Equity judging and so was prepared to come and pay for a ticket. My tickets last Thursday were complimentary as I was there in an Equity capacity, the task of which is to evaluate a production and performances. Our task is not to pass judgement on the play as a play.

Accordingly I write to you about the play with a background as a theatre historian, a theatre critic and an associate of West Australian Ballet since I danced with the company in 1960. I was in the season at which *Koori and the Mists* was premiered (the name *Kooree* has not had a consistent spelling). I knew Kira Bousloff very well especially from 1970 onwards and up until her death in 2001. I wrote her obituary for *The Bulletin* and for *Dance Australia*. She often referred to me 'as one of her boys' as she did with a number of other more prominent dancers such as Ronnie van den Bergh. I also got to know her close friend and Ballet Russes colleague Irina Baronova during the last five years of her life, and with whom I discussed many things about Kira, her private and her professional career. I have also interviewed Tamara Walters, Kira's daughter, at some length. I knew Polish-born John Birman very well from the middle 1960s onwards until his death in about September 1989. I wrote his obituary for the *Australian Financial Review* entitled 'A last curtain call for cultural survivor'. My centennial history of His Majesty's Theatre, *A Dream of Passion* contains quite a lot about Kira and the beginnings of West Australian Ballet.

There are a number of things that trouble me about the play.

1. I understand that there was no program available on opening night. Was this because they were not ready? Or was it because you wanted to add, at a late stage, the Disclaimer that now appears so prominently in the program? The Disclaimer claims (a) that the play is 'entirely a work of fiction', (b) in no way represents 'the real lives of any person living or dead' and (c) that 'any resemblance to real persons living or dead is purely accidental.' Why then does your Cast list the characters as Kira Bousloff, James Penberthy, John Birman, Jody Robb and Mary Miller all of whom were real people one of whom is still very much alive? Are you wanting us to believe that Aitken chose those names by accident, that the incidents and events depicted on the stage are not meant to refer to real persons and real events, and that everything was coincidental? Come on; pull the other one.

What that notice effectively did, apart from making you both a laughing stock, was to kill any chance of a review appearing in the *West Australian* or any other publication that ran the risk of a defamation action. In my opinion you have taken the coward's way out as a way of stopping debate and an evaluation of the work in the market place of critical opinion.

As John Senczuk, director and producer of *Madame Ballet*, has asked in his response to you – who exactly is "laughing"? He has also pointed out that the "disclaimer" in the program is used routinely by him on his other projects and that it is common practice. It is ludicrous of you to suggest that the program was somehow held up because of it. This incident obviously has nothing to do with "reviews". I understood from John that he wasn't inviting reviewers until later in the season. Although John mentioned to me during rehearsals that he was going to put some sort of disclaimer in the program I didn't pay much attention. It seemed a routine matter. After all, why would anyone want to take any sort of legal action over *Madame Ballet*? Because the program was delayed through an accident I didn't actually see it or its disclaimer until I returned to Perth for the second week of the season. So how dare you say that I have "taken a coward's way out as a way of stopping debate and an evaluation of the work in the market place of critical opinion"? Your arrogance is breathtaking and I am most offended by that defamatory accusation. I insist that you retract it forthwith.

2. When Steve Bevis' article, 'Bousloff drama causes a stir', appeared in Friday's paper (i.e. 8th June) only one person that I knew of had seen the play – it had only had one performance -- and that was Margaret Mercer. I was asked for an opinion but could not give one as I hadn't seen the show. And neither had anyone from West Australian Ballet. Margaret is someone I have known since 1959. She was in a television production of *Koori and the Mists* and if my memory serves me right, appeared in a publicity photo with Olympic marathon runner Ian Sinfield (one of

the devils in the cast) published in one of the papers of the day. Margaret has an excellent memory of the company, its events, its dancers and its progress, and particularly of Kira and James who were friends of her parents—they lived in the same suburb. I have great respect for her technical knowledge of dance and her aesthetic judgement. In my dance writings as an historian and critic I have consulted her many times to check facts, learn who is important to talk to about one thing or another. She now writes for Dance Australia.

Because of how events have unfolded I am extremely relieved that I didn't talk to Margaret Mercer. By the way, the article "Bousloff Play Causes Stir" by Steve Bevis was published on Saturday the 9th of June, not Friday the 8th. Any reasonable person reading this article would have believed that there was a sort of groundswell of people telephoning newspapers and the WA Ballet Company to complain about the play. We found this puzzling. There were two performances on Wednesday the 6th of June. There was only a small audience at the 2.00 pm preview so I had the pleasure of talking to them. There were several ex-performers of the WA Ballet Company including an understudy of Terri Charlesworth. They were full of praise for the production and the performers. Again there was only a modest crowd at the opening night performance so we were able to talk to most of them – again, they were very complementary about the production. So – who was making all these complaints? Obviously two or three people at the most – presumably the Mercer woman was certainly one of them. Again, anyone reading the article in the 'West' could be forgiven for believing that this Margaret Mercer was a leading figure in the WA State Ballet Company during the Bousloff years. We later discovered that that is certainly not the case. John Senczuk was rather puzzled about why the article said that the WA Ballet company was "distancing" itself from the production. He telephoned and was told by the CEO of the company that there had been "lots" of telephone calls from people wishing to complain about the play. However when pressed he admitted that there had been only one complainant – I don't know for sure but I wouldn't mind betting that this sole complainant has the initials "M.M." During the second week of the season people who know the Mercer woman well told me that she had gone along to the theatre with a pre-determined agenda to attack the play. She has also been described to me by a colleague as "someone who hangs around the fringes of the amateur dance scene." If my memory serves me correctly Margaret Mercer is not mentioned once by either Kira Bousloff or James Penberthy in around eight hours of oral history tapes kept in the National Library.

3. In the Writer's Notes in the program, Aitken says you asked him to write a play 'about the life and career of Madame Kira Bousloff to help celebrate the 60th anniversary of the West Australian Ballet company.' This sentence implies an emphasis on fact rather than fiction despite what your Disclaimer says. I understand that neither you nor Aitken contacted the company either during the writing of the play or during rehearsal. Apart from the company's archives it seems strange to me that you want to be part of a celebration yet show neither the courtesy nor the interest in getting the company's cooperation or support.

Yes, John Senczuk asked me to write a play about the life and career of Kira Bousloff however it is your inference that "the sentence implies an emphasis on 'fact'". Having directed three of my plays John would have been aware that I wouldn't have been interested in writing a documentary play. I have also written two plays "about the life and times" of William Shakespeare but there is no way that I would claim that these works are "documentaries". You may have noticed that later in my program note I wrote: "...the memory warps and weaves. What is fiction and what is truth?"

When I started work on the project I certainly had intended to contact the WA Ballet Company. However John Senczuk as producer had attempted to contact them. The management did not return his calls and the publicity staff told John that they were making their own arrangements to celebrate the 60th Anniversary. So why would I contact them? In any case I saw the *Madame Ballet* project as a celebration of the origins of the WA State Ballet Company and the legacy of Kira Bousloff and James Penberthy. This legacy does not belong to you or Margaret Mercer or even the current administrators of the WA Ballet Company. It belongs to the people of Western Australia. I must also say that I was rather bemused when I saw the "Diamonds" program presented by the WA Ballet Company. Not a hint of any work of Bousloff or Penberthy. How much more adventurous it would have been for the Company to have revived or re-constructed *The Beach Inspector and the Mermaid* or *Kooree and the Mists*? What a lost opportunity! As it stands I believe that instead of resorting to personal rancour and outrageous vilification you and Margaret Mercer and the ballet company should be thanking John

Senczuk and his Janus Entertainment together with a host of wonderful performers and musicians for commemorating the life and times of the co-founders of the WA Ballet Company.

4. Aitken says that, in contrast to the library of material available to him when writing *The Enchanters*, there was virtually nothing available about Bousloff or Penberthy and that whatever facts he could glean 'would need to be blended with a swirling serve of fiction, if not total fantasy.' In Bevis' article Aitken says he conducted research in the National Library where 'the facts were scanty'. There are some 13 tapes of interview available on-line from the National Library; hardly scanty. Why not our own Battye Library where there is quite a lot of material including an oral history interview of some length. There are plenty of people on whom he could have called: Terri Charlesworth and Margaret Mercer, long-time members of the company present during the events covered in the play. John Down, life member and an early chairman of the board; in his 90s but still with an amazing memory. Gundi Ferris who will celebrate her 90th birthday on Tuesday (i.e. tomorrow) who was Kira's lieutenant almost from the beginning and who has not (in my view) received the recognition she deserves. Irina Norris who, as Irina Asotoff, danced with the company at the time I was there and who now runs one of the largest ballet schools in the metropolitan area – the Irina Norris Ballet School. Mary Miller, the original Koori. Ivan King's wonderful collection at the Maj. I have used the WAB collection in his custody so I know what is there. And John Birman's widow, Wendy, herself a significant historian.

Now you are definitely serving up swirls of fiction and fantasy yourself David. I have never said that "there was nothing available about Bousloff and Penberthy." I stated in my program note that, unlike the case of William Shakespeare (the subject of my play *The Enchanters*) there were no library shelves stacked with weighty works about Kira and her partner, composer James Penberthy." I stand by that statement. Certainly there is quite a lot of information about Bousloff and Penberthy in the WA State Library in the form of articles, papers, program and other ephemera. I consulted all of it but I certainly did not come across any "weighty works" to assist me. You say "In Bevis' article Aitken says he conducted research in the National Library where the facts were scanty". I said no such thing to Steve Bevis. He didn't contact me before he wrote his article so Steve must be responsible for his own interpretation. Why do you say that I never listened to the oral history tapes available from the National Library? Of course I did. I even transcribed them in longhand not just for the valuable information but so I could become familiar with the voices of Kira and James, their speech patterns and etc...You must have missed my note in the *Madame Ballet* program where I acknowledged the National Library's Esso Oral History Project. However it must be said that there was one very important area where information was somewhat lacking. Kira Bousloff and James Penberthy were both very discreet. They left us very little information about their personal lives and their emotional journeys. Dr Ffion Murphy describes her frustrations in an article when she had to abandon the writing of a biography about Kira when her subject kept on insisting that there be no references to her personal life or the struggles she and James faced when establishing the WA State Ballet Company. I also understand that a prominent Australian arts publisher rejected an autobiography by James Penberthy on the grounds that it only described his work and that there was almost nothing about his personal life which by all accounts was very colourful. So whilst I would agree that there is quite a lot of material available in the form of dry "facts" and suitable, perhaps, for the writing of historical tracts, in the area of their personal and emotional journeys there was a scarcity of material. At one stage I doubted, because of this, that a play could be written about Bousloff and Penberthy. Accordingly I will be eternally grateful to the people who certainly knew Kira and James well during the time span of the play and who generously gave me their time and recollections.

5. Helene Gowers write a dissertation on Kira and has recorded interviews with her. Ffion Murphy (who coined the term 'Madame Ballet') wrote a conference paper in 2009, 'On journeys and collaborations' that is about the main events in Kira's life. Ffion also wrote an essay in the dance magazine *Brolga*. In other words, there was plenty of local material had Aitken (or yourself) bothered to track it down. That time was short is not, in my view, a valid excuse. Let me address some of the so-called facts in the play.

1. Aitken makes a great play on the idea that Penberthy was co-founder of WA Ballet. He wasn't. He was Music Director, as the very first program makes clear (it is available on the Museum of Performing Arts website). A similar claim has been made for Marina Berezowsky. There is no convincing evidence for either claim. I have read contemporary accounts including the West

Australian from October 1952 onwards and can find nothing to substantiate such a claim, a claim that needs a little more than a 'swirling serve of fiction'. Certainly Madame had support, and the Bousloff-Penberthy artistic partnership was a remarkable one. Even after they separated and divorced, once the pain and recrimination subsided, there was immense affection particularly on Kira's side. Co-founder of WA Ballet – No; co-founder of WA Opera – Yes.

James Penberthy was certainly a co-founder of the West Australian Ballet. He is described as such by Wikipedia, the web site of the Australian Music Centre (the national peak body for the curating and promotion of Australian classical music), the ABC, Move Records (a leading classical label) and even Dr Ffion Murphy whom you yourself David cite as an authority on the subject. In her paper "On Journeys and Collaborations" she refers to James Penberthy as a "co-founder of the West Australian Ballet." So why do you say that this is a "swirling serve of fiction" on my part? I interviewed an artist who was present on the day when Kira Bousloff and James Penberthy were first attempting to gather together young dancers and musicians in order to form a ballet company. The turn-out was disappointing and my source was sent by Kira to gather together dancers who might be interested. Kira wouldn't have a bar of using recorded music so James set about recruiting part time and amateur musicians to form an orchestra. A Herculean task. Sounds like a co-founder to me. I am bemused by the lack of generosity on this point demonstrated by yourself and the present administrators of the WA Ballet Company.

2. The murder of the dog because there was not enough money for a Vet was certainly a gratuitous swirl of fiction. On the way out to Australia in 1938, the Ballets Russes stopped off in Aden. Bousloff and Baronova rescued a little fawn from ill-treatment by some boys, smuggled it on board ship and brought it to Australia, courtesy of an understanding captain. There is a remarkable photo of Kira with Aden the fawn. I wrote a story and the photo was reproduced in the WA Ballet's Ballet News and in Dance Australia. Anyone who knew Kira would know that she was incapable of destroying an animal in the manner depicted on stage.

I was given the story of the dog by an artist who was very close to Kira and James during the time span of my play *Madame Ballet*. This person was a dancer in the original company and went on to create choreography for Kira. The story has also been supported by descendants of neighbours of Kira and James. I know the story of the fawn. Kira refers to it in the National Library oral history tapes. She also talks fondly of the pets that travelled with *Ballets Russes* on its American tours. However humans are complex beings and how do you know Kira didn't consider she was being "cruel to be kind" in putting the dog out of its misery?

3. The story and the quotation, 'This is where I'm going to live, and this is where I'm going to die. This is my place', is so well known, as is the fact that it occurred at the airport, that it seemed a nonsense to have her say it at the beach, though I will concede dramatic license on that one. There are some facts you just can't transpose, I suggest, without it reflecting on the writer's credibility and the play's veracity.

Of course I know that the "This is where I am going to live" story actually happened at the Perth airport. It is one of the most cited stories about Kira and again, she refers to it on the National Library tapes. However it would have been very poor dramaturgy on my part to have created a whole new airport scene for a thirty second "moment". There are several artistic considerations as to why many moments and incidents in the play are depicted occurring on the beach (which both Kira and James adored) or in the nearby cottage. In any case many of us have favourite "sayings" or mottoes that we may repeat from time to time. So how do you know that Kira didn't repeat these phrases on her beloved beach? As John Senczuk has pointed out to you in his response – *Madame Ballet* does not pretend to be a documentary. Gordon Johnson in his very favourable review of the play on the Theatre Australia web site puts it rather well: "*Madame Ballet* is an intriguing work of fiction based on historical facts." I said to Steve Bevis in response to his article "Bousloff Play Causes Stir" that around 80% of the play was suggested by "facts" but that you cannot create effective drama simply by cobbling together a lot of "facts". I'm sure that we could all cite several theatrical disasters of recent years where plays, often after years of "development" and the expenditure of tens of thousands of dollars, written by authors who, by being over-reverential to historical tracts and wishing to offend no-one, serve up turgid productions that are certainly of interest to no-one.

4. Likewise the incident of falling through the stage while on a tour of the north-west. It was Marouska Harmalin who fell through the floor. Again an event and the personality too well-known to be the victim of a 'swirling serve of fiction'. The incident of the two male dancers caught at it in the toilet may have happened but I doubt it. What defies plausibility is that Kira would have contacted the Commissioner of Police to have the charge dropped. Or that he would have said, 'Ballet boys will be ballet boys'. That is Aitken's sexual fantasy. The period of the events would seem to me to be about 1959-1964. If so, why bring Robin Haig into it? She wasn't around until the 1970s, and artistic director in 1977. Finally, it was Kira who invited Rex Reid to come to Perth to be artistic director, which he became in 1969. They had worked together in the eastern states and Penberthy had composed music for at least one of his ballets. If my memory is correct she remained on the Board after his appointment. It was Rex who subsequently undermined Kira, not the Board. When she retired it was because she wanted to spend more time with her family and concentrate on teaching which she so enjoyed.

I was given the story of the two ballet boys getting into trouble at Onslow by Deborah Savage who was a personal assistant to Kira, James Penberthy and then Rex Reid during the time span of *Madame Ballet* and who so therefore knows a lot more about these events than you or the Mercer woman. So how dare you say it was a "sexual fantasy" on my part? By the way Deborah came to see the play and loved the production. She was also most complementary about the script and praised its depiction of events.

Deborah also agreed with our account of the board of the ballet company finally betraying Kira. The story was originally given to me by a dancer and choreographer who worked with her at the time. Apart from her other qualities Kira was always the discreet diplomat. Perhaps you are depending too much on the press releases of the time David. I have been told that although *Madame* continued to attend opening nights after her departure from the company she never uttered a word of criticism about the work of her successor. Ever the Grand Lady.

5. You have named the journalist as 'Jody Robb'. There was a journalist of that name - but he was born in the mid-1950s. There are precocious dancers but a West Australian journalist at five years of age is a bit of a tall order. Or another swirl of fantasy.

The real Jody Robb was a close friend of mine. I met him when he was a cadet reporter in Esperance. Later on we lived together in Highgate in the mid-seventies. Jody also appears as a cadet reporter in my earlier play *Some Other Town*. Of course he was alive then and he loved the fact that he was a character in that play. In *Madame Ballet* his appearance is simply my way of remembering a good friend. A young woman who was also a friend of Jody said to me the other day: "If Jody is looking down from somewhere he would love the fact that you've remembered him like that."

6. The most grievous damage the pair of you have done is to portray John Birman as a lecherous, Les Patterson Svengali. Birman was a very cultured man, strong and forthright, yes, but he was a Polish émigré, not Australian-born. Why make him an ocker Australian? The scene where he attempts to gain a kiss from Kira when they are standing in the wings was another of Aitken's sexual fantasies, a 'swirling serve of fiction'. He was a great supporter of the company and worked tirelessly for its security. Eric Edgley was another. Kira always referred to him as the 'godfather'.

Your remarks about John Birman are probably the most ludicrous. Yes, he was...after being an early opponent...one of the ballet company's great supporters and the play shows that. *Madame Ballet* certainly does not depict John Birman as a "lecherous, Les Patterson Svengali." I understand that the Mercer woman when conducting her vicious telephone campaign used exactly the same kind of language. Interesting... The play shows a couple of light-hearted flirtatious moments that neither Kira nor John Birman take seriously. For your information – the attempted "kiss" that you refer to does not appear in the script of my play but was introduced by the director to help punctuate the conclusion of a scene. With my agreement, of course. In any case, if you really consider these flirtatious moments to be "sexual fantasies" then you have my sympathy. Eric Edgely is also referred to in the play as a supporter so what is your point?

7. Finally, Kira was never a prima ballerina and never claimed to be. She never danced in America – as far as I know she never went to America – and she certainly never danced in WA. To portray her as Giselle-like deranged and to have her suicide in performance and on stage is just too grotesque for words.

Wrong again. Kira certainly toured the Americas. Brazil in her very early years and later on, the United States. Kira's line in the play "We danced across the great plains of America" is taken from her own words on the National Library tapes. She also refers to her time in Los Angeles when artists from Walt Disney sketched the ballets for references for the film "Fantasia." Perhaps you don't know as much about Kira Bousloff as you think you do.

John, you were quoted in Bevis' article as saying, after one performance, that 'people who knew Bousloff had praised the production'. Well, I am not one of them. Between the two of you, you have staged a grubby piece of work that is neither a tribute to the founder of what is now a remarkable company nor a contribution to the company's celebration of its 60th year. Both Kira Bousloff and James Penberthy deserve better than that. You have my permission to place this material, unedited, on your website. But I doubt that you will.

"The blending of fact and fiction in retelling history has become quite common and is a convenient way of introducing psychological theorising and speculation into the story of real people especially when the archives are lacking specific detail." Those words were written recently by Ron Banks in his review of *The Fremantle Candidate*, a current production of Deck Chair Theatre. I have been involved in the publication of the script. To be consistent will you be launching one of your vitriolic tirades against this play as well? Perhaps the Mercer woman should have a go also. After all she was able to convince *The West Australian* that there were lots of complaints about our depiction of Kira Bousloff and James Penberthy on the opening night of *Madame Ballet* when this was certainly not the case. Nor were we aware of any such complaints during the rest of the season. I believe that it would be appropriate for *The West* to now correct the false impressions given by the article "Bousloff Play Causes Stir" because there are larger issues here than simply the supposed reaction to one theatrical production.

Now that we have reached the conclusion of the season of *Madame Ballet* what do we survey?

*A successful season of *Madame Ballet* at the State Theatre Centre of WA. We were told by many theatre-goers that the crucial "word of mouth" was very positive.

*A superb retrospective concert of the works of James Penberthy held at Perth Town Hall.

*The filming of *Madame Ballet* for the completion of a significant documentary film about Kira Bousloff and James Penberthy .

*The broadcasting of a program entitled "Who was James Penberthy?" on ABC Radio National in association with the play and the concert.

*The recording of the Penberthy recital by the ABC for future broadcast.

A veritable mini-festival celebrating the legacy of two of our great West Australian artists. As I have said previously we should all be thankful to John Senczuk and Janus Entertainment for all of this and of course, the wonderful actors and musicians. What has your contribution been David? What has the Mercer woman's contribution been? What has the WA Ballet's contribution been?

After the Saturday afternoon matinee of *Madame Ballet* I spoke to two of our most senior actresses who were struck by certain parallel themes regarding the politics of the Perth arts scene between the time of *Madame Ballet* and the present. "Little has changed!" they remarked ruefully.

What I think is really bizarre is the fact that after all this time the same kind of vicious, ignorant, parochial, narrow minded, poisonous forces that Kira Bousloff and James Penberthy struggled against have re-merged to attack a play about their lives.

I must say in conclusion that I have been touched by the many people (including those who certainly knew James and Kira well and young people who couldn't possibly have known them) who have thanked us for telling an almost-forgotten story from Western Australia's cultural history.

John Aitken 25th July 2012