

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.

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*.

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.

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.

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 Bereżowsky. 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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'.

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.

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.