

Preamble

Normally I wouldn't respond to the type of criticism I received below, but the author, David Hough, writes 'with a background as a theatre historian', and so I feel obliged to address his comments from an historical point of view.

To put myself in perspective, I've had a long and rewarding relationship with ballet and dance over the course of my career. While a student at NIDA, I paid my rent by working as a dresser and in wardrobe maintenance for the Australian Ballet, from about 1980 for four or five years. I dressed, initially, the corps boys and then principals: John Meehan, Kelvin Coe and Dale Baker were all in their prime, and young corps boys like David McAllister, Steven Heathcote and Greg Horseman were just starting to make their mark. The late Paul de Masson (mentioned in the play) was a good friend, who stayed with us when in Sydney. We maintain an ongoing contact with dear friend Stephen Baynes, who's spent the last couple of Christmas breaks with us here in Perth; he is now resident choreographer with Oz Ballet and currently building the Company's new Swan Lake.

One of my fondest memories and greatest pleasures was the five or six weeks spent dressing Bobby Helpmann as one of the Ugly Sisters, along with Ray Powell, in Cinderella at the old Regent Theatre. Fantastic theatrical stories and one of the great treasures of the Australian Theatre!

I was also founding chair of Paul Mercurio's Australian Choreographic Ensemble, collaborating also with Paul and Kim Walker on shows for Sydney Dance Company.

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.

I am unaware of David Hough as a critic, a writer of obituaries nor as an historian; unfortunately, I've read none of the material he mentions.

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.

The problem with the arrival of the program for opening night was time: we had a protracted get it, and on the day of the opening I'd had an accident (running into the leg of an upended table in a dark auditorium and taking a gash just above my eye); I'd a subsequent dizzy spell and collapsed in the bio box and was unable to pick up the programs from the printer as I'd hoped. I did email PDFs of the program to various media attending.

I find your assertion highly offensive that I added the disclaimer 'at a late stage'. Perhaps you could have emailed or called me before making such an inflammatory accusation?

Disclaimers are par for the course in the contemporary world in all theatrical /film/television or other productions that includes real people (living or deceased); I used the same disclaimer on my scripts of TWO OLD QUEENS and A COWARD IN VEGAS; the same is used regularly on many cop shows, and films etc. Ultimately, any dramatic recreation of history will necessarily contain the writer's imagination: in the film of "The Queen" do we really believe that the screenwriter was sitting in on the Royal Family watching television in their pyjamas?! The characters are The Queen, Prince Phillip, The Queen Mother ... but the dialogue is the writer's dramatic and imaginative entry into the factual story to, at the very least, make some suggestions as to what might have motivated these characters is their 'public' personifications. Dorothy Hewett once put it to me that she wrote "to make sense of the world"; writers explore motivations.

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.

In the spirit of Margaret Thatcher ... who in particular regards us as 'a laughing stock'; if you are going to make such a bizarre accusation, David, please provide the specific references.

I didn't invite David Zampatti to this performance; it was a new play and it has been my practice in the past to wait and not invite critics until the final few performances for such recording of history (cf my production of African Queen at the Blue Room). That said, I'm not sure why a disclaimer would risk defamation action nor stop a review? Gordon the Optom wasn't dissuaded from comment in his on line review. Can you detail what the specific legal problem(s) might have been?

I actively commissioned a play about two extraordinary – yet neglected – WA cultural icons; I rehearsed it and (with an exceptional cast) performed it in public. It was put up for public scrutiny. What specifically is 'cowardly' in what I have done?

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*.

No one from the WA Ballet has, to my knowledge, seen the play. I'm surprised given that she is the founder of the Company. I don't know Margaret Mercer; she is not mentioned at all in any of the material we have canvassed on Kira nor James.

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.

That is your inference, David.

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.

I did in fact contact the Company on a number of occasions: Steven Roth (he failed to return any of my calls, but then it was the week that the Company was moving into its new premises, so he can be forgiven); the Company's publicist and marketing personnel; the Friends of WA Ballet; I attempted, a week prior to our opening, to organize a joint photo opportunity for Community News (the Company were on leave and no one was available unless for payment).

You could have checked with me David; that might have been the courtesy.

We're all somewhat dismayed, in fact, that the Company chose not to engage at any level with a project about their founder; and that you and Margaret have been so hostile even to the idea.

We were not part of the WA Ballet celebration ... we celebrated the founding of the company by Kira Bousloff and (despite your version of history) James Penberthy.

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.

John Aitken, as no doubt you have done, listened to the complete set of aural histories in the National Library, and engaged in as much research as he felt necessary for the

writing of the play. This was not a documentary, nor a biography; MADAME BALLET is a dramatic construct using all the devices available to the playwright to build a theatrically viable production. We were lucky that John had known the couple and had a variety of other people to call on – people similar to yourself and Margaret Mercer in their connection with Kira and Jimmy; as well, in our cast both Alinta Carroll and Andrew Southern were students and provided further insight in the rehearsal room. We, as you would expect, had a connection with Mary Miller with regard to cultural protocols (Mary is in the Eastern States at the moment tending to a sick relative but her sister was at opening night; very moved and grateful for us telling the story) and gained her permission for Justina to perform the role of 'Mary'.

How could you possibly know that these other sources were not accessed? Any work, including your history of His Majesty's Theatre, cannot be all things to all people; it's unrealistic, it's unfeasible.

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.

Yes, I'm aware of Dr Murphy's work, and you will no doubt appreciate that one of the big difficulty she had with her biography of Kira (as detailed in the paper) was that her subject was fearful of disclosing a true and factual history; Ffion was, as she explains in the paper, so frustrated with Kira's excisions, haggling for hagiography not biography, etc that the work was abandoned. That is not a reflection on Kira nor Ffion, but on Kira's wish to keep some aspects of her life private, as is her prerogative; it also goes some way to appreciate that aural histories may not be entirely accurate reflections of the lives lived.

I've agreed in principal with Ffion that we'll write a feature film on James for FilmWest, and John is similarly engaged on a screenplay on the couple and this period of the foundation of what is now the WA Ballet.

I can confirm now, however, that we will research as we see fit, and not to satisfy your, or anyone else's, notion of what is appropriate; how dare you attempt to dictate methodology; we don't need a 'valid excuse' to create a theatrical work; that is totally the artist's prerogative and I'm astonished at your arrogance to suggest otherwise. Are you condemning us for not living up to your expectation of what constitutes adequate or appropriate research, for not using your methodology? That you suggest we didn't 'bother' is professionally offensive, especially as you've not 'bothered' to ask either of us about the material we have collected.

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.

We don't agree obviously; John's papers, family and colleagues, as well as his documentary makers (Jon Noble & Densie Cox) suggest otherwise. But I suspect this is a great project for some theatre student with an open mind to pursue.

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.

This story was given to us by a contemporary of Kira's.

I'm intrigued that you, as an historian, are able to make the extravagant claim that you can speak for 'Anyone who knew Kira' ...

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.

The quote was Kira's, but made later, referring back to her arrival in Perth; surely even you would recognize a romantic aphorism! She wasn't quoted by a reporter at the airport stepping off the plane! She may have said it at the airport, she may not ... the fact is she said it; 'where', is immaterial and it is a nonsense to say that our use of it reflects on 'the writer's credibility' and the 'play's veracity'. Were the words "That's one small step for man; one giant leap for mankind" actually said on the moon, or as is often suggested, attributed later? Does it matter?

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'.

Thank you for that piece of information; Marouska Marmalin.

The incident of the two male dancers caught at it in the toilet may have happened but I doubt it.

So, I'm not sure what to say about this; you 'doubt it' ... so it didn't happen? Again, we have a contemporary account that affirms that it did.

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.

So, as an historian, are you saying definitively that Kira did not contact the Commissioner of Police ... that he didn't say "Ballet boys will be ballet boys." You actually know for a fact that these incidents are not accurate? On this basis, of having no direct evidence either way, you, the historian, will accuse the playwright of material motivated by 'sexual fantasy'? This is astonishing, slanderous vitriol.

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.

Thanks for the clarity; of course the time of the playing is compressed; see John's THE ENCHANTERS for a similar play with time.

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.

This version invites more scrutiny. But as you have your story, we're in receipt of another.

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.

As mentioned below, Jody Robb was a long term and close friend to John Aitken.

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'.

Birman's wife attended the play on Saturday afternoon; was interested in the story, its characters and its theatricality; she spoke with John Aitken (they know each other of course) at length. It seems, too, that the Birman you knew was a very different man to those we've spoken to who are able to supply another side to his personality. Notwithstanding that you wrote his biography; can you attest to knowing the complete man? The 'character' of John Birman in the play, as often happens in a rehearsal context, especially when you are attempting to get across an 'idea', evolved ... the accent or "Polishness" was less important to a representation of the gender politics of Perth at the time. (cf David Williamson did similar in his play HERETIC about Margaret Mead and Derek Freeman)

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.

According to dancer/historian Dick Andros, Rene Blum and Col de Basil's Ballet Russe were contracted by the American impresario Sol Hurok for performances at the Met Opera House in New York during the early thirties. Kira had joined the Company, aged 17, in 1931. But I bow to your better judgement on this historical fact.

The story of Giselle [as a representation of the European classic tradition] is the theatrical metaphor that is used to hang the Bousloff/Penberthy/Birman story on; it's a theatrical conceit. The synopsis can be found at: www.the-ballet.com/giselle.php

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.

The life blood of the theatre is provoking thought and ideas, galvanizing opinions, sparking debate; you've contributed to that, I just wish that you hadn't resorted to such aggressive and personal vitriol ... surely we can have a discussion about the material without this type of bitter response? How much more interesting and beneficial to Bousloff and Penberthy's legacy if either you or Margaret had, after having problems, contacted me or John, and invited other members of your circle, as well as members of the Company and its board, to come and see the work; we could have had a fantastic open discussion about the issues; more people might be engaged in the history and the achievement. Alas, you both chose to condemn the very idea.

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.

I'm not sure, David, as to your claim nor your moral right to be the appointed gate-keeper of Kira nor Penberthy's life story. You revealed on camera to the documentary makers on Monday night at the recital that you didn't know Penberthy at all! You only got to know Kira as you say in the 1970s, and clearly was not an active participant in their lives during the time of John's play; John Aitken's was. Why is his version less valid than your own? Kira and Jimmy's daughter Tamara and her husband; John Birman's wife; Mary Miller and her sister Jenny, Claire Bramley's daughter attended the production; John was a great friend of Jody Robb (and in fact Jody featured as a character in another of his plays); ... these are 'people who [actually and intimately] knew our cast of characters and have 'praised the production' and unlike your antagonistic response, appreciated the story being told, the memories of these significant cultural identities and their legacy being championed. Had I not commissioned the play nor the Penberthy concert there would have been nothing (unless of course Margaret and yourself have already organized a tribute?) to recognize the co-founders of the 'remarkable' WA Ballet company in its 60th year.*

You have my permission to place this material, unedited, on your website. But I doubt that you will.
I have done so, David, and I hope that you will direct your friends and colleagues to read this response ...

I accept, David, the criticism, as I must; but I don't accept the mean and dispiriting way in which you delivered it.

John Aitken is a significant elder in the theatrical community of Western Australia. His contribution (as a writer, director, producer, dramaturg, teacher and mentor) is as important as that of Kira or Jimmy; his legacy is certainly as palpable. You have done him a considerable disservice with your comments, your lack of generosity and your vitriol. I believe you owe him an apology.

In your narrow and insular approach, the disrespect you also afford the company of actors who appeared in the play Madame Ballet, and to myself, is equally deplorable.

*Constance (aka Claire) Bramley [the character of Mandy in John's play] was Penberthy's fourth wife; she wrote lyrics for James (including Lotus Music heard on Monday night); Penberthy's Sonata for Violin and Piano (also hear on Monday night) was dedicated to Clair's other daughter, Claire Thomas.