

From the Outside: Helpmann, Nolan and Williamson's Australian Ballet *The Display* (1964)

Carolyn Philpott & Anne-Marie Forbes

The characterisation of a country and its culture can often be confronting for the citizens, particularly when this is critical and emphasises negative aspects of accent, lifestyle or behaviours. Couched as humour it can be more readily accepted, but it takes courage and perhaps a degree of personal outrage to mount serious critique on one's own countrymen.

On 14 March 1964 a new work was premiered by the Australian Ballet at Her Majesty's Theatre, Adelaide, as part of the programme for the third Adelaide Festival of Arts. *The Display* was the result of a commission by the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust to Australia's most famous ballet dancer, Robert Helpmann (1909–1986), for the creation of a new ballet. This ballet resulted in an unprecedented collaboration with two other expatriate Australians, Sidney Nolan (1917–1992) and Malcolm Williamson (1931–2003). The following article explores the nature of this collaboration and the ways in which this ballet employed tropes of both traditional ballet and 'Australianness' to satirise and comment upon aspects of Australian culture. Furthermore, it invites reconsideration of the symbolic and autobiographical aspects of the principal dancer who is known only as 'The Outsider.'

Prior to his involvement with *The Display*, Helpmann had enjoyed a dazzling career in London, and by the late 1950s was becoming increasingly renowned as a producer and choreographer. The involvement of such a celebrity (and a South Australian by birth), was the kind of drawcard

needed to raise the international profile of the fledgling Adelaide Festival. By the time the project came to fruition, Helpmann had enlisted the services of two other Australian expatriates also resident in London: the artist Sidney Nolan and the considerably younger composer Malcolm Williamson. The fusion of their talents brought about a creative work of great emotional power, which simultaneously challenged conservative aesthetics and notions of ‘Australianness’.

The Collaboration

Robert Helpmann was approached by the artistic director of the Australian Ballet, Peggy van Praagh, to produce an original ballet for the new company shortly after it was established in 1962. He decided right away that he wanted to produce a work that was ‘essentially Australian,’ in order to help the young company to ‘develop its individuality.’¹ In fact, he already had a dramatic theme in mind that was uniquely and identifiably Australian—one that satisfied his criteria that the theme for an Australian ballet should be ‘something that no other country could produce, and yet not be too remotely Australian to be understood should it be performed in other countries.’² Helpmann had witnessed the dancing of lyrebirds in Sherbrooke Forest during a tour to Australia in 1955 with the Old Vic and his friend and theatrical colleague, Katharine Hepburn, and had decided then and there that if ever he was asked to produce a ballet for his homeland, he would ‘base it on the lyrebird.’³

In addition to employing an Australian subject for the ballet, it was important to Helpmann that his collaborators were also Australian. He planned to devise the choreography himself and in order to add a ‘dramatic touch’ to the work, he and van Praagh asked the Australian writer, Patrick White, to produce a scenario based on Helpmann’s lyrebird idea.⁴ They were not entirely happy with the storyline White submitted, however, and abandoned it within a few months in favour of a simpler one developed by Helpmann that was, according to van Praagh, ‘more suitable to the medium of ballet.’⁵ In the meantime, they had approached the London-based Australian artist Sidney Nolan, who was close friends with Patrick White,⁶ to produce the décor and costumes for the proposed ballet. In early September 1963, van Praagh reported to the Executive Director of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, Stefan Haag: ‘Sidney Nolan has already produced early sketches for décor and costumes, which I think are

¹ Robert Helpmann, ‘Conversation with Robert Helpmann,’ interview with Hazel de Berg, 13 Mar. 1964. National Library of Australia (NLA) ORAL DeB47. Helpmann became joint artistic director of the Australian Ballet with Peggy van Praagh in 1965, a position he held until 1974, before leading the Ballet solely in 1975.

² Robert Helpmann, ‘Choreography,’ *The Australian Ballet 1962-1965: A Record of the Company, its Dancers and its Ballets*, ed. Ian Brown (Croydon: Longmans of Australia, 1967), 120.

³ Helpmann, ‘Conversation with Robert Helpmann.’

⁴ Letter from Peggy van Praagh (Artistic Director of Australian Ballet) to Stefan Haag (Executive Director of Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust 1962–8), 2 Sep. 1963. NLA MS5908/35 Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust 63/15 Australian Ballet 1963. Permission to access and view records of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust at the NLA was kindly granted by Mr Warwick Ross, General Manager of The Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust.

⁵ Peggy van Praagh, Artistic Director’s Report, 9 Dec. 1963. In a cable sent on 11 October 1963 from van Praagh to Helpmann, she was trying to ascertain, ‘Should Patrick White’s name be included in any way on publicity material for your ballet [?]’ and when a contract letter was drawn up by Geoffrey Ingram (Administrative Officer of the Australian Ballet) for Nolan (18 October 1963), the work was described as ‘the new Ballet to be created by Mr Helpmann.’ NLA MS5908/35 Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust 63/15 Australian Ballet 1963. It appears that White’s involvement in the project had ceased by mid-October 1963.

⁶ Nancy Underhill, *Sidney Nolan: A Life* (Sydney: New South Publishing, 2015), 296.

ravishing.⁷ In the same letter, she confirmed the choice of the composer for the score: 'After hearing several composers, Bobby and I have decided on Malcolm Williamson.'⁸

Both Nolan and Williamson were well established within their respective fields in London by the early 1960s, and prior to their collaborative work on *The Display*, they had achieved success independently with various works designed for the stage. Nolan had produced sets for the ballets *Icare* (Theatre Royal, Sydney, 1940) and *The Rite of Spring* (Royal Ballet, London, 1962),⁹ while Williamson had composed a series of works for musical theatre between 1958 and 1960. His first full-scale opera *Our Man in Havana* had met with great critical acclaim following its premiere at Sadler's Wells in early July 1963.¹⁰ Although Williamson was considerably younger than Helpmann and Nolan¹¹ and had not yet produced a score for a ballet, he had gained valuable experience working as a pianist for a group of dancers during a one-month tour of Tasmania in the early 1950s. He believed this opportunity had prepared him well for composing his own music for the ballet by introducing him to the process of working with choreographers and showing him the importance of providing dancers with clear, well-articulated and varied rhythms.¹²

In addition to the fact that they were already well-known as Australians in London and had some previous experience working with the medium of ballet, both Nolan and Williamson had produced, independently, a number of creative works based on identifiably Australian subjects in the years leading up to 1964. There is little doubt that these combined factors contributed to Helpmann and van Praagh's decision to employ Nolan and Williamson as collaborators on the uniquely Australian project that they were planning for the Australian Ballet. Nolan's focus on violence in the Australian bush in his *Ned Kelly* series of paintings,¹³ the first of which he

⁷ Letter from Peggy van Praagh to Stefan Haag, 2 Sep. 1963. In the contract letter sent to Nolan by Geoffrey Ingram (18 October 1963), Ingram asked if they could use one of Nolan's sketches for the Australian Ballet Christmas card. NLA MS5908/35 Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust 63/15 Australian Ballet 1963.

⁸ Letter from Peggy van Praagh to Stefan Haag, 2 Sep. 1963. According to the Artistic Director's Report of 9 December 1963, the decision had been Helpmann's. NLA MS5908/35 Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust 63/15 Australian Ballet 1963.

⁹ Nolan also designed the costumes for this production of *The Rite of Spring* (1962) and later produced set designs for The Royal Opera for *Samson et Dalila* (1981) and *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (1987).

¹⁰ Williamson produced three scores for musical theatre: *No Bed for Bacon* (1958–59), *Trilby* (1959) and an untitled musical to *A Mid-Summer Night's Dream* (1960). Simon Campion, 'Draft of Malcolm Williamson, CBE, AO (1931–2003): Complete Catalogue' (Hertfordshire: Campion Press, 2008), 53. In the early 1950s, Williamson had written a chamber opera titled *The Haunted House* (1951) and, during the same period he was working on the score for *The Display*, he was also composing the chamber opera *English Eccentrics* (1963–1964), which was written at the request of Benjamin Britten and was premiered in June 1964 at Aldeburgh. *English Eccentrics* is based on the book of the same name by Edith Sitwell.

¹¹ Williamson was twenty-two years younger than Helpmann and fourteen years younger than Nolan.

¹² Malcolm Williamson, 'Conversation with Malcolm Williamson,' interview with Hazel de Berg, 8 Oct. 1967. NLA ORAL DeB 291.

¹³ Nolan described the story of the notorious nineteenth-century Australian bushranger, Ned Kelly, as one 'arising out of the bush and ending in the bush' and years after he created the first of his Kelly paintings, he commented that they represented a post-war meditation on violence. Sidney Nolan, quoted in Andrew Sayers, *Australian Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 168. Nolan continued to paint Ned Kelly after moving to England permanently in 1950, and, as Andrew Sayers and others have identified, he also 'explored some other stories of almost mythical dimension arising from the Australian bush—Burke and Wills, the shipwreck of Mrs Fraser, and the failed republican rebellion on the Eureka gold-fields in the 1850s' (Sayers, *Australian Art*, 169). For more information on Nolan's mythmaking, see Bernard Smith, *Place, Taste and Tradition: A Study of Australian Art since 1788* (Oxford: OUP, 1988), 232; Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting 1788-1990* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), 282.

painted in the mid-1940s, resonated with Helpmann's ideas for the 'violent' bush setting he had in mind for his lyrebird ballet.¹⁴ Furthermore, the series of seventy-five paintings on the subject of Leda and the Swan that Nolan had exhibited to great success in London in 1960¹⁵ engaged with an ancient version of the 'girl and bird' theme that Helpmann planned to explore within an Australian context in *The Display*. Williamson, like Nolan, actively maintained a connection with Australia through his creative work following his expatriation to London in the early 1950s, especially during the early 1960s when he composed a number of works based on recognisably Australian topoi. These include the 'Sydney' book of *Travel Diaries* (1960–61) for solo piano (a collection of thirteen pieces inspired by scenes and landmarks from the composer's home city),¹⁶ and a series of three compositions based on texts by the Australian poet, James McAuley (1917–76): *Symphony for Voices* (1960–62) for solo alto and unaccompanied SATB choir,¹⁷ *Celebration of Divine Love* (1963) for high voice and piano¹⁸ and *An Australian Carol (Nativity)* (1963) for SATB and organ.¹⁹ Some of the themes presented in *Symphony for Voices*, in particular, which sets five poems selected from McAuley's collections *Under Aldebaran* (1946) and *A Vision of Ceremony* (1956), are unmistakably Australian and share parallels with ideas that also preoccupied Nolan and Helpmann and eventually fed into the creation of *The Display*. For example, *Symphony for Voices* explores ideas relating to the wildness and savagery of the Australian environment and the notion of a 'mythical Australia'.²⁰

Another factor that undoubtedly played a role in determining the collaborators for *The Display* is that, in spite of the age differences, Helpmann, Nolan and Williamson had been mixing in similar social circles in London in the 1950s and early 1960s. While they had not collaborated with one another prior to working on *The Display*, Helpmann and Williamson both had previous associations with Sadler's Wells²¹ and shared friendships with the British

¹⁴ Helpmann, 'Conversation with Robert Helpmann.'

¹⁵ Nolan's series of paintings inspired by the ancient mythological theme of Leda and the Swan was exhibited at Matthiesen Gallery in London in the summer of 1960. Jane Clark, *Sidney Nolan: Landscapes & Legends* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987), 116. According to his wife, Cynthia Nolan, Sidney had been painting Leda and the Swan 'over and over' (Cynthia Nolan, quoted in Clark, *Sidney Nolan*, 131); later, the artist admitted that he had been completely captivated by the subject, stating, 'I found my mind full of images of necks and wings' (Sidney Nolan, quoted in Clark, *Sidney Nolan*, 133). Again, violence is a theme within Nolan's *Leda and the Swan* paintings; Leda sometimes appears submissive and frightened of the Swan and the pair is often 'bloodily intertwined.' Brian Adams, *Sidney Nolan: Such is Life* (Melbourne: Hutchinson, 1987), 146.

¹⁶ Malcolm Williamson, *Travel Diaries: Sydney* (London: Chappell, 1962).

¹⁷ Malcolm Williamson, *Symphony for Voices* (London: Joseph Weinberger, 1962).

¹⁸ Malcolm Williamson, *Celebration of Divine Love, for High Voice and Piano* (London: Novello & Co., 1967).

¹⁹ Malcolm Williamson, *An Australian Carol (Nativity)* (London: Novello & Co., 1963).

²⁰ These ideas are particularly apparent in the second movement of Williamson's *Symphony for Voices*, which sets the poem 'Terra Australis' from McAuley's *Under Aldebaran*. 'Terra Australis' refers to a 'mythical Australia, where reside all things in their imagined counterpart,' where 'the white cock-a-too Perch'd on his limbs screams with demonic pain' and 'Where the sun like a centaur vertically shoots his raging arrows with unerring aim.' James McAuley, 'Terra Australis,' *Under Aldebaran* (Melbourne: MUP, 1946), 51. See Carolyn Philpott, *An Australian Composer Abroad: Malcolm Williamson and the Projection of an Australian Identity* (PhD thesis, University of Tasmania, 2010), 152–81.

²¹ Helpmann was accepted into the Sadler's Wells Ballet School soon after he arrived in London from Australia in the early 1930s, and remained with the company until 1950. Peggy van Praagh also worked at Sadler's Wells during the 1940s, both as a teacher at the Ballet School and as a dancer in a number of the company's productions. After Williamson's success with his first opera at Sadler's Wells, *Our Man in Havana* (1963), he produced another two full-scale operas, *The Violins of Saint-Jacques* (1966) and *Lucky Peter's Journey* (1967–1969), as a result of commissions received from the Sadler's Wells Trust. *Lucky Peter's Journey* was premiered by Sadler's Wells Opera.

poet Edith Sitwell (1887–1964).²² Nolan and Williamson also had close ties to Benjamin Britten.²³ These common connections, in addition to Nolan’s and Williamson’s profiles as well-known Australian creative artists in London who had previously engaged with Australian subjects in their creative outputs, no doubt contributed to Helpmann and van Praagh’s decision to seek their involvement in *The Display*.

Helpmann guided the collaboration on *The Display* from the outset, as he later described:

In my first approach to this ballet I discussed with Malcolm Williamson the atmosphere as a whole and waited to see what music he would produce. After the first sketches we then, in detail, discussed the timing of each sequence until the score was completed in the comparatively short time of a month. At the same time I had discussions with Nolan regarding the theme, and he immediately produced the décor and the complete atmosphere for the ballet.²⁴

Helpmann later stated that he ‘could not have been more fortunate’ in the choice of Williamson for the score and Nolan for the décor, because both composer and artist understood all the dramatic points he wanted to make ‘almost without discussion.’²⁵ While the creation of *The Display* was a three-way collaboration—one that Charles Lisner has described as ‘perfectly fused’²⁶—according to Williamson, Helpmann clearly had control over the project from start to finish:

Sir Sidney Nolan and Sir Robert and I worked together almost daily. Helpmann came to my house and sat by the piano while I played my music and he made the most extraordinary balletic gestures, sitting on a kitchen chair ... We would work for five or six hours together, then he would take me down to Sid Nolan’s studio on the south of the Thames and with Cynthia, Sidney Nolan’s wife, we would go over the sets and Sid would be obliged to listen to the music. It was a three way collaboration but, as always in ballet, particularly with a great choreographer and, let it be said, a great thinker, Sir Robert not only drew us together into a collaboration, but he was ever in charge.²⁷

²² Peter Ward, ‘Bobby,’ *The Bulletin*, 27 Sep. 1959, 33; Elizabeth Salter, *Helpmann: The Authorised Biography of Sir Robert Helpmann*, CBE (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1978), 75. The Australian expatriate writer Elizabeth Salter was Edith Sitwell’s secretary and wrote biographies of both Helpmann and Sitwell in the late 1970s. Williamson established a friendship with Sitwell in the mid-1950s and composed a series of works that are either based on her writings (e.g. *English Eccentrics*, 1963–1964; *A Young Girl*, 1964; *The Cradle of the Hope of Peace*, 1982) or dedicated to her (Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, 1964–1965; *Epitaphs for Edith Sitwell*, 1966). Campion, ‘Draft of Malcolm Williamson,’ 13, 21–22, 36, 39.

²³ Nolan met Britten at the 1951 Aldeburgh Festival and they eventually became good friends, with Nolan later producing a number of works inspired by Britten’s music (Underhill, *Sidney Nolan*, 233). The pair shared many similarities in how they approached their creative work, as Kenneth Clark observed: ‘Both are ready to assault with a sort of reckless innocence, subjects from which more prudent men would have drawn back. Both draw their strength from a locality, but transcend it so that the local becomes universal’ (Clark, quoted in Adams, *Sidney Nolan*, 154). Nolan also introduced Patrick White to Britten in the early 1960s (Sarah Engledow, ‘Cultural Kaleidoscope,’ *National Portrait Gallery*, accessed 15 July 2015, <www.portrait.gov.au/magazines/21/cultural-kaleidoscope>). Williamson established a friendship with Britten in the mid-1950s and Britten played a key role in ensuring that the younger composer’s works were performed and published (Paul Conway, ‘Malcolm Williamson—A 70th Birthday Tribute,’ *MusicWeb International*, accessed 30 July 2015, <www.musicweb-international.com/Williamson/index.htm>).

²⁴ Helpmann, ‘Choreography,’ 121.

²⁵ Helpmann, ‘Choreography,’ 120.

²⁶ Charles Lisner, *The Australian Ballet: Twenty-One Years* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1984), 54.

²⁷ Malcolm Williamson, quoted in Anna Bembrose, *Robert Helpmann: A Servant of Art* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2008), 135.

The choreography was completed last, after the décor and score had been created, and not until Helpmann was in Australia and had met the dancers in the Australian Ballet, as he later revealed:

On my arrival in Australia to start rehearsals [for *The Display*] I had no preconceived idea of the movements except the *pas de deux*. I considered this a dangerous thing to do until I was familiar with the movements and style of the dancers concerned. I knew that it must be strongly athletic, virile and modern in its approach ... Although I had not pre-planned or conceived any of the movements, I had completed the choreography in fourteen days, which is very rare indeed. I was fortunate to be working with people completely in accord to myself and the whole atmosphere of the work.²⁸

The Ballet

The scenario of *The Display* references the notion of display on a number of levels. The most direct is the central focus on balletic representation found in the ritual dance of the Australian lyrebird (*Menura novaehollandiae*). The lyrebird is native to the temperate and subtropical rainforests, woodlands and fern gullies of South-Eastern Australia and on first appearance is a relatively unprepossessing ground-dwelling bird, similar in size to a pheasant, with plumage in greys and browns conferring the advantage of camouflage as it searches for food on the forest floor.²⁹ The name 'lyrebird' refers specifically to the male of the species which is renowned for its enormous tail that it fans out and holds spread as part of its mating display. Unlike the tail feathers of the peacock with iridescent eyes that are held perpendicular to the bird's back, the lyrebird's tail in display resembles an enormous lyre with curled feather side pillars (lyrates), and is not held upright but swept forward over its back and head (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1. The Australian lyrebird (*Menura novaehollandiae*). Image by Attis, licensed under Public Domain via Commons, accessed 7 Dec. 2015, <<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lantfarku.jpg#/media/File:Lantfarku.jpg>>.



²⁸ Helpmann, 'Choreography,' 121.

²⁹ Graham Pizzey, *A Field Guide to the Birds of Australia* (Sydney: Collins, 1980), 220–21.

This unique plumage has resulted in the use of the lyrebird as an iconic Australian image such as is currently seen on the reverse of the Australian 10-cent coin, but it was featured on the Australian one shilling stamp first issued in 1932 (reissued 1937 and 1941)³⁰ and was also used as the distinctive trademark of the Paris-based music publishing company Éditions de l'Oiseau-Lyre, founded by the Australian Louise Hanson-Dyer in 1932.

The display of the male lyrebird and the fanning out of his tail is associated with both song and dance, and takes place on one of several low display mounds he has raked up from leaf litter.³¹ These elements are apparently combined in an ordered sequence of melody types, each accompanied by particular dance steps and gestures.³² The biological purpose of the lyrebird's display is of course to attract a mate, and a breeding female may actually watch a number of such displays before settling on a mate, and there are accounts of the males displaying to one another.³³ Beyond its own significant melodic repertoire, the lyrebird has a powerful voice and is also renowned for its mimicry of the calls of other birds, as well as man-made sounds such as whirring and clicking of camera shutters, car horns, and hydraulic machinery.³⁴ Therefore an element of deceit is inherent in the symbol of the lyrebird; the lyre may be a liar.

The notion of display is also inherent in the stage spectacular of human ballet performance, with the posturing and preening of star performers and in the mystique and artifice of the theatre. Birds (particularly swans) have held a prominent place in ballet for their grace and symbolic mythology, with female dancers of traditional repertoire such as *The Dying Swan*,³⁵ *Swan Lake*³⁶ and *The Firebird*,³⁷ adorned with feathered headdresses and other plumage. Along with the obvious assonance of 'firebird' and 'lyrebird,' the choice of the lyrebird for Helpmann's ballet evoked the trope of balletic birds in a distinctively Australian context. Yet, the lyrebird has none of the grace or mythological power of the swan, and its substitution in a ballet is almost a perversion of the trope, as has been noted by Robin Grove.³⁸ Helpmann had observed:

So many ballets have been based on bird life, *Swan Lake*, *Firebird*, *Bluebird* and so on, but here was a bird that actually danced and could be found in no other country in the world but Australia. It, therefore, seemed to me the obvious choice.³⁹

Taking as its setting an iconic Australian bush picnic, the scenario of *The Display* provides a further dimension as it parallels the display of the lyrebird with depiction of the 'display' of young Australian men in their Australian Rules football plumage designed to exude masculinity

³⁰ *Animals on Stamps*, accessed 11 Dec. 2015, <animalsonstamps.wordpress.com/2014/05/18/australian-1shilling-lyrebird-stamp/>.

³¹ Abram Rutgers, *Birds of Australia*, illustrations by John Gould, vol. 2 (London: Methuen & Co, 1967), 194.

³² R.A. Mulder and M.L. Hall, 'Animal Behaviour: A Song and Dance about Lyrebirds,' *Current Biology* 23.12 (17 June 2013): R518–R519.

³³ Ambrose Pratt, *The Lore of the Lyrebird* (Melbourne: Robertson & Mullens, 1945), 60.

³⁴ Pratt, *Lore of the Lyrebird*, 30.

³⁵ *The Dying Swan* was a short solo originally for Anna Pavlova and choreographed by Michel Fokine (1905) to Saint-Saëns's 'Le cygne.'

³⁶ Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* was premiered by the Bolshoi Ballet in 1877, with choreography by Julius Reisinger.

³⁷ Stravinsky's *The Firebird* (1910) was composed for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. The original choreography was by Michel Fokine.

³⁸ Robin Grove, 'Robert Helpmann's Ballet "The Display,"' *Meanjin Quarterly* (Mar. 1965): 126.

³⁹ Helpmann, 'Choreography,' 120.

and attract the female of the species.⁴⁰ The opening scene of the ballet showcases the male lyrebird (designated as 'The Male') dancing for a human, rather than avian, female (designated as 'The Female') in the depths of the rainforest.⁴¹ Capturing the essence of the mating ritual of the lyrebird, 'The Male' dances display after display, attracting the attention of 'The Female,' who responds in turn with a dance of her own. This vignette provides the frame for the two central movements of the ballet, which focus on a group of young Australian men and women who have gathered in a forest clearing for a picnic.

The delineation of 'Australianness' is managed through stereotypical actions of the males: drinking beer and playing sport,⁴² in this case passing around the football in the method characteristic of 'Aussie Rules,' hand-balled from one palm with the other hand clenched in a fist. The young women, including 'The Female,' simultaneously gather downstage around a picnic basket. The leader of the group of young men ('The Leader') makes his own individual athletic display for 'The Female' whose interest is piqued and she begins to respond until the entry of a male stranger. Designated as 'The Outsider' in the cast list, this newcomer is welcomed into the group by 'The Leader' and the other males by shaking of hands and sharing of beer, but when 'The Outsider' starts to show an interest in 'The Female' and she reciprocates, the atmosphere abruptly changes. 'The Female' continues to dance with 'The Leader' but is distracted, angling her body to the admiration of 'The Outsider,' whose interest grows. In their eagerness to draw back 'The Female' to their leader, the young males engage in a football match channelling energy into a rowdy display of athleticism and male vigour. At the end of the match, 'The Outsider' dances his own somewhat effeminate display for 'The Female' and when she shows interest, 'The Leader' erupts. In the scene that brings the second movement to a close, 'The Leader' focuses his aggression on 'The Outsider,' lubricated by an excessive amount of beer. Attempts by the women to distract 'The Female' and lead her away fail. As the scene closes, 'The Female' and 'The Outsider' are left together and they dance a passionate *pas de deux*.⁴³

As with the lyrebird in breeding season,⁴⁴ such encroachment on territory and liberties with 'The Female' cannot be tolerated. Thus, 'The Leader' challenges 'The Outsider' and the group of males attack him in a violent choreographic display of stylised combat.⁴⁵ 'The Female' flees the violence, dropping her scarf in her haste to retreat. 'The Outsider' is left alone on the forest floor, injured and unconscious. When he wakes, he finds the scarf left by 'The Female' and leaves to find her, fired by his pain and humiliation.

At the opening of the final movement, 'The Outsider' finds 'The Female' in the dark depths of the rainforest where she is listening to the lyrebird. He seizes her, roughly forcing himself upon her and tearing her dress as he rapes her. 'The Female' is being punished for behaving in a way that was seen to be provocative, reflecting a dominant cultural paradigm. Just as the

⁴⁰ Helpmann, 'Choreography,' 120.

⁴¹ Helpmann's designation of the lyrebird as 'The Male' helps to draw parallels between the behaviours of the male bird and those of the male humans.

⁴² These activities are commonly regarded as typical Australian pursuits according to Simone Pettigrew in 'Australians and their Leisure Time,' *AP—Asia Pacific Advances in Consumer Research* 5 (2002): 108–12.

⁴³ A *pas de deux* is a duo dance, literally meaning 'step for two.'

⁴⁴ Pratt, *The Lore of the Lyrebird*, 30.

⁴⁵ Amanda Card, 'Violence, Vengeance and Violation: "The Display," A "Powerful Dramatic Work, Intended to be Very Australian,"' *Australasian Music Research* 4 (1999): 79.

polygynous lyrebird⁴⁶ abandons one mate for another, he leaves abruptly after his savagery, abandoning 'The Female' in the forest.⁴⁷

The closing scene of the ballet recalls the opening with a reappearance of the lyrebird ('The Male'), who displays his vast tail to 'The Female' and shrieks, as if calling to his mate.⁴⁸ Rising to her knees, 'The Female' allows the lyrebird to bring his fanned tail down over her, willingly succumbing to the bird's display.⁴⁹

The Outsider View

It is obvious from a number of statements made by Helpmann, Williamson and Nolan before and after the premiere of *The Display* that aspects of the ballet were autobiographical in nature; the trio had clearly been reflecting from 'the outside' on their earlier experiences in Australia working outside mainstream culture as artists. In fact, Helpmann's depiction in the ballet's scenario of what he described as the 'hostility of a group to any outsider who does not wish to be part of communal life; how a number of people when they band together in a mob can lose their humanity and become brutalised'⁵⁰ was derived from his own personal experience. During Helpmann's youth, his dress sense and interest in ballet had frequently left him feeling segregated from mainstream Australian society. In the late 1920s, he had been publicly humiliated by a group of lifesavers at Bondi Beach in Sydney, who unceremoniously dumped him into the surf because he looked different to the norm with his Oxford bags, pink shirt, purple tie, plucked eyebrows and painted red nails.⁵¹ He later admitted, '[Before] I left [Australia] ... ballet was not accepted ... I was not accepted ... I was considered a freak for wanting to be a ballet dancer.'⁵² His experience as an outsider in Australia fed directly into the scenario he devised for *The Display*, as he explained a few years after the ballet's premiere: 'A slight hang-over from my youth [is the] resentment of the group, or the mass, to the individual who did not conform to accepted standards ... the memory of my being regarded as somewhat extraordinary in my wish to become a ballet dancer helped contribute to the theme of this ballet [*The Display*].'⁵³ While some scholars, such as Joel Crotty and Rachel Hocking,⁵⁴ have suggested that the character known as 'The Outsider' was intended to represent a migrant, in the late 1960s, Helpmann conceded that this aspect of the ballet was, indeed, autobiographical:

⁴⁶ Pratt, in *The Lore of the Lyrebird* (1945), claimed that lyrebirds are monogamous (p. 37) and defend a territory around their mound for food-gathering (pp. 58–9) but later sources (for example, Pizzey, *A Field Guide*, 220–21, published in 1980) indicate that the male lyrebird may mate with several females in his territory.

⁴⁷ Williamson described *The Display* as 'worshiping the grandeur of savage Australian Nature.' Malcolm Williamson, quoted in Robert Helpmann, *Tales of Helpmann: A Portrait of Sir Robert Helpmann*, Australian Film Finance Corporation, 1990.

⁴⁸ Simon Campion, 'The Display Concert Suite,' liner notes, *Malcolm Williamson*, LP, EMI SLS 5085, 1978.

⁴⁹ 'Synopsis: The Display,' Malcolm Williamson press clipping folder, Australian Music Centre Library, Sydney.

⁵⁰ Robert Helpmann quoted in Salter, *Helpmann*, 216. As Joel Crotty writes, 'In his theatrical way, Helpmann tried to demonstrate that a homogeneous culture, in which difference was not tolerated, would nurture violence.' Joel Crotty, *Choreographic Music in Australia, 1913–1964: From Foreign Reliance to an Independent Australian Stance* (PhD thesis, Monash University, 1999), 211.

⁵¹ Salter, *Helpmann*, 40.

⁵² Helpmann, quoted in Meg Abbie Denton, 'An Artist of Infinite Range,' *BROLGA* (Dec. 1996): 30.

⁵³ Helpmann, 'Choreography,' 120.

⁵⁴ Rachel Hocking, *Crafting Connections: Original Music for the Dance in Australia, 1960–2000*, PhD thesis, University of New South Wales, 2006, 128; Crotty, *Choreographic Music in Australia*, 211.

When we were in rehearsal someone said to me the Outsider character was probably a new Australian. But he isn't. And most people think it's about the lyrebird. It's not at all. It's actually about *me* ... The *one* man. The Outsider. The person defying the Group. The person who was not behaving according to the accepted norm.⁵⁵

It is evident from separate statements made by Nolan and Williamson in relation to their own experiences in Australia, and as Australian expatriates, that they related to Helpmann's experience as an outsider from mainstream Australian society. Nolan, like Williamson, settled in London permanently in the early 1950s and despite remaining resident there until his death in 1992, he continued to be preoccupied with Australian subjects and projected a clear Australian identity in his artwork. In 1964, the same year that he contributed to *The Display*, Nolan claimed, 'I know there'll always be a kind of refracted Australianism in my work ... no matter how long I stay away.'⁵⁶ While he became one of the most successful Australian painters in London,⁵⁷ Nolan was at times deeply affected by the criticism he received from the Australian press, especially over claims that he had 'sold out' on his home country,⁵⁸ which caused him 'identity problems.'⁵⁹ If he was beginning to feel like an outsider as an Australian expatriate, it is fitting that the artworks for which he is arguably best known—his paintings of nineteenth-century Australian outlaw Ned Kelly—centre on a figure who is also a 'cultural outsider.'⁶⁰

While reflecting on the Kelly paintings during a private interview in 1984, Nolan let slip that the paintings were autobiographical: he stated, 'Really the Kelly paintings are secretly about myself.'⁶¹ Although he did not elaborate further, the first of his Kelly paintings had been produced in Australia shortly after he had deserted from the Army to avoid being sent to fight in the Pacific War. Nolan felt as though he was 'on the run like an outlaw'⁶² from August 1944 until he was officially given a dishonourable discharge from the Army in 1948. He spent this period of time in seclusion, exploring through a series of paintings the experiences of Ned Kelly, a fellow countryman who had gained notoriety for his time 'on the run' and for living on the fringes of Australian society. Once Nolan had made the move from Australia to London, he was able to view his homeland more objectively, as Michael Fitzgerald has observed: 'Through an outsider's point of view, and a bold black helmet, Nolan could critically frame the Australian landscape.'⁶³ Similarly, Bruce Bennett has recognised that Nolan's development of powerful iconographic symbols resulted because of 'the distance, psychological and physical, from their source, Australia.'⁶⁴

Distance from home also gave Malcolm Williamson greater perspective. He frequently compared himself to Australian composers living in Australia, and believed that his experience

⁵⁵ Robert Helpmann, quoted in Ward, 'Bobby,' 33. Helpmann has also been identified in later biographical studies as a Lyrebird (e.g. the play *LyreBird: Tales of Helpmann* by Tyler Coppin, which premiered at the 1998 Adelaide Festival of Arts and has since toured nationally and internationally).

⁵⁶ Sidney Nolan, quoted in Brian Adams, 167.

⁵⁷ Nolan was the recipient of numerous awards, including a Knighthood (1983), a Companion of the Order of Australia (1988) and four honorary doctorates (from universities in York, London, Canberra and Sydney).

⁵⁸ Adams, *Sidney Nolan*, 154.

⁵⁹ Bruce Bennett, *Spirit in Exile: Peter Porter and His Poetry* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), 90.

⁶⁰ Michael Fitzgerald, 'Man and Myth,' *Time*, 24 Mar. 2003.

⁶¹ Underhill, *Sidney Nolan*, 1.

⁶² Nolan, quoted in Adams, *Sidney Nolan*, 78.

⁶³ Fitzgerald, 'Man and Myth.'

⁶⁴ Bennett, *Spirit in Exile*, 90.

as an expatriate had given him a clearer picture of his national identity and contributed to the 'Australianness' of his music, as the following statement he made in 1972 implies:

I think my music is at least as Australian as that of any other Australian composer, partly because I live outside the country and have an enormous preoccupation with it. On the other hand, I have noticed again and again that Australian composers living in Australia write with a sort of exoticism that suggests a fascination with other countries. There seems to be in their work a very strong desire to escape, at least mentally and spiritually.⁶⁵

While there were some benefits to living outside one's own country, Williamson lamented the fact that he and other Australian creative artists found it necessary to live abroad in order to sustain a career. He raised this point in connection with *The Display* on at least two separate occasions:

The ballet must be as Australian a ballet as exists, but it was entirely written in the London winter. It was designed in the London winter ... then it was shipped down to Australia and rehearsed in Adelaide by Australian dancers ... [The score for *The Display*] seems to me quintessentially Australian, but it had to be written from my studio in London where I was dreaming of Australia and wishing I was there.⁶⁶

It is extraordinary, and of course historically unfortunate, that the first really ambitious Australian ballet to be written entirely by Australians for Australians to dance should have been written in Great Britain, that all three Australians concerned with it were living abroad in order to survive ... I remember very well the day [of the premiere in Adelaide]—I was not there, I was in London—and I sat at my piano at the identical moment ... and amused myself playing the score ... and then felt very nostalgic indeed towards Australia.⁶⁷

Although Williamson felt resentment towards his homeland for his enforced exile, he had not always felt a strong sense of belonging within Australian society even before he left for Britain. Since his childhood, he had despised Australia's sporting culture, and his lack of willingness to participate in sporting activities as a youngster had not only left him feeling like an outsider on the sports field, but also continued to have a negative psychological impact upon him long after he had relocated to London. In the early 1970s, he reflected:

In Australia I could never win. I was a total failure. I loathe competitive sports and the boarding school I was at ... regarded competitive sports as an indication of manhood. It's so stupid I had, and still have, this fear of being put on a football field ... to this day I hate Saturday afternoon more than anything, for that is the time for sport ... It has left me with a deep-rooted feeling of guilt that I'm opting out.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Malcolm Williamson, quoted in Peter Cole Adams, 'The Expatriates: Feted Abroad; Ignored at Home,' *Age*, 24 June 1972, 10. In the same interview, Williamson stated, 'Living away from Australia is deeply satisfying in a way ... it enables you to dream of the place constantly, to idealise it as something perhaps better and worse than it is.'

⁶⁶ Malcolm Williamson, quoted in Andrew Ford, 'Dots on the Landscape: Comings and Goings,' ABC Classic FM, 24 Feb. 2002.

⁶⁷ Williamson, 'Conversation with Malcolm Williamson.' Williamson was unable to travel to Australia to attend the premiere of *The Display* due to commitments with his chamber opera *English Eccentrics* (1963–1964).

⁶⁸ Malcolm Williamson, unreferenced interview from 1973, quoted in Anthony Meredith and Paul Harris, *Malcolm Williamson: A Mischievous Muse* (London: Omnibus Press, 2007), 22.

The belief that he 'could never win' in Australia only intensified for Williamson the longer he stayed away from his homeland, and continued well beyond his involvement in the creation of *The Display*. His outspokenness in relation to Australia's lack of support for his music, and for the country's creative artists in general, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, incurred the wrath of the local press.⁶⁹ This was just the beginning of a long and tumultuous relationship between Williamson and the Australian press that lasted until the composer's death in 2003 and frequently left him feeling even more disengaged from his homeland and Australian society,⁷⁰ as he alluded to publicly on more than one occasion:

I feel I have not the strength of character to live in Australia ... I could not spend a life fighting indifference ... I feel it's beyond my powers to live where I am not loved.⁷¹

There is a simple malice which is an Australian speciality. It is particularly directed at non-conformists ... [including] those ... who receive acclaim abroad ... Australia kills its great. It also kills its solitaires.⁷²

While these statements were made well after the premiere of *The Display*, the fact that several of Williamson's stage works dating from around the same period as *The Display* feature a solitary, non-conforming figure suggests that, like Helpmann and Nolan, Williamson viewed himself as an 'outsider' from mainstream society. The chamber opera *English Eccentrics* (1963–1964), which Williamson was working on at the same time as *The Display*, focuses on a number of eccentric characters who, according to the composer, are 'all ultimately unacceptable to others.'⁷³ Moreover, the scenario of the ballet *Sun into Darkness* (1966) and the plot of his large-scale opera *The Violins of Saint-Jacques* (1966) are both centred around a solitary figure.⁷⁴ Although he never appears to have stated it publicly, it seems as though Williamson's focus on isolated, outsider-type characters in his creative works during this period may—like Nolan with his Kelly paintings—have resulted from the composer looking inward.

In their collaboration on *The Display*, the scenario of the ballet provided ample scope for Helpmann, Nolan and Williamson to relate, on some level at least, with 'The Outsider' who is rejected from the contrived social scene and has the violence of the mob directed against him for his audacity and impertinence. The reaction of 'The Outsider' to rejection and pain, on the other hand, is not one that any of the three would have desired to emulate; his aggression, resentment and frustration are redirected to the hapless 'Female'. Violence begets violence. Nolan referred to *The Display* as 'a ritual description of our civilisation,'⁷⁵ acknowledging a broader signification of the themes in the ballet and its commentary on the Australian male-dominated culture. Even in the nineteenth century, the preferred masculine type in Australia tended to exhibit 'athleticism over introspection, brawn more than sensitivity' and mateship

⁶⁹ For example, Neil Jillett, 'An Aussie Complains with a Pommy Accent,' *Herald*, 7 Sep. 1973, 4.

⁷⁰ See Carolyn Philpott, 'The Master and the Media: Malcolm Williamson in the Press,' *Musical Islands: Exploring Connections between Music, Place and Research*, ed. Elizabeth Mackinlay, Brydie-Leigh Bartleet and Katelyn Barney (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 157–88.

⁷¹ Williamson, 'Conversation with Malcolm Williamson.'

⁷² Malcolm Williamson, quoted in Phillip Sommerich, 'The Music Master,' *National Times*, 28 June–4 July 1981, 36.

⁷³ Malcolm Williamson quoted in *Radio Times*, 4 June 1964. *English Eccentrics* is published by Campion Press.

⁷⁴ *Sun Into Darkness* and *The Violins of Saint-Jacques* are both published by Josef Weinberger.

⁷⁵ Sidney Nolan quoted in Clark, *Sidney Nolan*, 149.

was frequently linked with alcohol abuse and brawling.⁷⁶ These were the aspects of Australian culture that these creative artists had rejected, and perhaps they felt that their exclusion from mainstream society because of their 'arty' difference led to the attacks that they all weathered from the press and fellow Australian creative artists, where jealousy of their success was possibly the key motivator.

Reception

The response to the premiere of *The Display* in March 1964 was decidedly mixed. While the first performance reportedly received 'twenty curtain calls from the wildly enthusiastic audience',⁷⁷ the media response that followed showed that aspects of the ballet's scenario had aroused considerable controversy and the opinions of the critics were polarised.⁷⁸ Australian newspaper headlines varied from 'The Display Is A Triumph'⁷⁹ to 'New Ballet is a Shocker.'⁸⁰ Some critics viewed the ballet's iconic imagery as out of step with modern Australia, due to 'heavy handed' social criticism and 'clichés both in its scenario and its choreography.'⁸¹ Helpmann defended the work by announcing that it provided 'a comment on the national characteristics of a young country; it is a violent ballet in many ways, but then I felt that the terrain and bush country of [Australia] is a violent thing. I have tried as much as I can to keep the whole atmosphere of it absolutely and completely Australian.'⁸² Most reviewers agreed with Helpmann that *The Display* provided a realistic representation of the Australian environment and Australian society, and praised it for being a 'wholly Australian ballet.'⁸³ As Amanda Card notes, 'with the premiere of *The Display*, Helpmann offered Australians a glimpse of themselves.'⁸⁴

Ultimately, *The Display* was an important early success for the Australian Ballet, as it demonstrated to local and international audiences alike that the company was capable of producing a national ballet. It became a staple of the company's repertoire and was toured extensively, both locally and internationally, during the mid to late 1960s. The year following its premiere, the Australian Ballet took *The Display* to Britain, where it was performed as part of the Commonwealth Festival of the Arts.⁸⁵ In 1967, it was presented in Baalback, Liverpool, Paris and Berlin as part of the Australian Ballet's first major overseas tour, and the following year, it was performed in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Manila, Hong Kong, Taipei,

⁷⁶ Raymond Evans, 'A Gun in the Oven: Masculinism and Gendered Violence,' *Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation*, ed. Kay Saunders and Raymond Evans (Sydney: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 206.

⁷⁷ 'Ballet Triumph New Boost for Festival,' *Advertiser*, Adelaide, 16 Mar. 1964: 1.

⁷⁸ Joel Crotty, 'Choreographic Music in Australia,' 125.

⁷⁹ Harold Tidemann, 'The Display is a Triumph,' *Advertiser*, 16 Mar. 1964. In this review, Harold Tidemann hailed *The Display* as 'a theatrical triumph of Australian creativity.' Similarly, Sally Trethowan, in her review in the *West Australian* described *The Display* as 'a major break-through in Australian creativity and co-operation among different arts.' Sally Trethowan, 'Ballet Breaks New Ground,' *West Australian*, 28 May 1964, 15.

⁸⁰ 'New Ballet is a Shocker,' *Herald Sun*, no date, Josef Weinberger archive, London.

⁸¹ Martin Long, 'New Australian Ballet Effective Piece of Theatre,' *Daily Telegraph*, 16 Mar. 1964. Similarly, Geoffrey Hutton wrote in the *Age*: 'the Australian symbolism of lyrebirds, beer cans and football looks no less artificial than it sounds.' Geoffrey Hutton, 'Helpmann Wins Great Welcome: Ballet's 1964 Trump Card,' *Age*, Mar. 1964, 5.

⁸² Helpmann, 'Conversation with Robert Helpmann.'

⁸³ Roland Robinson, 'Premiere of Ballet by Helpmann,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 Mar. 1964, 6.

⁸⁴ Card, 'Violence, Vengeance and Violation,' 84.

⁸⁵ John Cargher, *Opera and Ballet in Australia* (Melbourne: Cassell, 1977), 263.

Seoul, Tokyo, Phnom Penh and Jakarta.⁸⁶ In late 1968 and early 1969, the ballet was taken on a tour of regional Australia, and it was revived in 1983 and again in 2012 to mark the Australian Ballet's fiftieth anniversary year. In fact, according to the Australian Ballet's current repertoire records, the company has performed *The Display* more than 350 times,⁸⁷ which further indicates how valuable this particular work has been to the Australian Ballet and its audiences over the past fifty years.

Generally, the reviews of the international performances of *The Display* in the 1960s were overwhelmingly positive, praising the work for being 'strikingly original,'⁸⁸ and with headlines such as 'Ballet from Down Under is way up there.'⁸⁹ In Tokyo, *The Display* received 'thunderous applause' and drew 'almost unprecedented shouts for an encore ... from the notoriously difficult Japanese audience.'⁹⁰ For many overseas spectators, *The Display* provided a comment on Australia's cultural and social climate, with critics identifying the action of the ballet as portraying typical 'Australian social games' and the lyrebird as symbolic of the 'Australian male, inclined to mate rather passionately, but then to leave abruptly.'⁹¹ In contrast, after the ballet's New York debut in February 1971, a reviewer recognised in the ballet's 'gang' an 'untypical lack of Australian sportsmanship.'⁹²

Perhaps the most damning critique of the ballet occurred in Glasgow, where its overtly sexual scenes were frowned upon to the point where the Glasgow Presbyterian Church considered banning all performances of the work.⁹³ One British critic commented that as a 'reflection of Australian mores [the scenario of *The Display*] is distinctly unflattering,'⁹⁴ while another found the ballet's themes 'shocking,' especially in light of the fact that Helpmann had been trained in Britain, reporting:

Although the lyrebird is the central figure in Helpmann's work it is sex that rears its rather ugly head in no uncertain fashion ... Why, one wonders, should Helpmann have dragged in sex by the short hairs for any other reason than to shock ... It is surprising ... that his first creations for the ballet company of his native country have little of the particular quality that has stood him in good stead in the past ... of all the various creators seen during the Commonwealth Festival, Helpmann was the one who has served his apprenticeship in Britain and one who should have been able to impose a sense of European culture on to that of his native country.⁹⁵

⁸⁶ 'Southern Lights: Great Australian Choreographers,' *Australian Ballet*, 2 Nov. 2007 <www.australianballet.com.au/uploads/southernlights.pdf>.

⁸⁷ The Australian Ballet's repertoire records are updated annually at the end of each year, and the current records (from the end of 2014) show that the company has performed *The Display* 352 times, including 307 performances with the Sidney Nolan sets and costumes and 45 performances with the Sidney Nolan sets and Adele Weiss costumes. Yvonne Gates, Director of Special Projects, Australian Ballet, email to Carolyn Philpott, 28 July 2015.

⁸⁸ Leonor Orosa Goqingco, 'Wings and the Australian Ballet,' *Manila Bulletin*, 12 Mar. 1968.

⁸⁹ Exequiel S. Molina, 'Australian Ballet: Dynamic Artists,' *Manila Times*, 12 Mar. 1968.

⁹⁰ 'Banzai for Ballet,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 Apr. 1968.

⁹¹ Donna Graham, 'Australian Ballet: Dance of Lyrebird gave Inspiration for "Display,"' *The Mainichi Daily News*, no date, Josef Weinberger archive, London.

⁹² Clive Barnes, 'Bird-Gets-Girl Ballet,' *Times* [New York], 3 Feb. 1971.

⁹³ Michelle Potter, 'A Dash of Helpmann,' *National Library of Australia News* 13.1 (Oct. 2002): 6.

⁹⁴ *Financial Times*, 2 Oct. 1965, Josef Weinberger archive, London.

⁹⁵ 'Adventure: Three Views of The Australian Ballet's First London Season at Covent Garden of the Commonwealth Festival,' *Dance & Dancers* (Dec. 1965): 13.

While this last point was, in many respects, an insult to the Australian creative arts scene and its audiences, Williamson believed that it was exactly this disregard for European 'taste' that made Australian artistic endeavours unique. He certainly identified this quality in his own character and creative output, as he once stated:

Australia has had a great influence on the character of my music; an extrovert character, an element of disregarding tradition and the time-honoured tenets of taste. I am quite incapable of imposing European tastefulness on my character or personality.⁹⁶

Indeed, it is fitting that at least one British critic described Williamson's score for *The Display* as 'incredibly brash',⁹⁷ given that 'brashness' was a trait that the composer had previously recognised as peculiar to the Australian character and a feature of his compositional style, which he claimed was 'characteristically Australian.'⁹⁸ In the mid 1960s he declared, 'Most of my music is Australian in origin ... not [influenced by] the bush or the deserts, but the brashness of the cities, the sort of brashness that makes Australians go through life pushing doors marked "pull."⁹⁹

Overall, the Australian elements of *The Display*, with its balletic impressions of a picnic in the bush with beer drinking, football and fighting, seem to have translated well to foreign audiences who were familiar with Australian life. This suggests that the ballet's dramatic theme, based on the lyrebird, was uniquely Australian, without being too 'remotely Australian' to be understood by foreign audiences, as Helpmann had originally envisaged.¹⁰⁰ In spite of the ballet's controversial aspects, there was widespread praise for the sets, the choreography, the dancing and particularly the music.

Williamson's score was applauded for being 'strong, clear and dramatic',¹⁰¹ as well as 'melodic and eminently danceable.'¹⁰² Roger Covell's review in the *Sydney Morning Herald* was particularly complimentary:

[Williamson's score] has the distinction of intrinsic qualities of technical resource combined with theatrical fluency and sense of gesture to a degree probably unprecedented in any music specially commissioned for ballet use in this country. It is a highly melodic, rhythmically supple score, eclectic in its derivation, difficult to play well but always in deft alliance with the mood of the stage action and never in the

⁹⁶ Malcolm Williamson, quoted in Michael Oliver, 'Here and There,' no source or date, 1012, Josef Weinberger archive, London.

⁹⁷ R. Buckle, *Sunday Times*, no date, Josef Weinberger archive, London.

⁹⁸ Malcolm Williamson, 'A Composer's Heritage,' *Composer* (Spring 1966): 71. Williamson regularly spoke about the concept of an Australian musical identity, which he believed derived from 'a certain extrovert aggressiveness in the Australian personality which manifests itself in the music.' Malcolm Williamson, quoted in Jill Sykes, 'Music Ambassador,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 Aug. 1973, 7.

⁹⁹ Malcolm Williamson, quoted in 'Success for Australian Composer,' *West Australian*, 11 Nov. 1966.

¹⁰⁰ Helpmann, 'Choreography,' 120.

¹⁰¹ Long, 'New Australian Ballet.'

¹⁰² Roland Robinson, 'Premiere of Ballet by Helpmann,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 Mar. 1964, 6. Williamson later stated that the training he received in Australia had given him the skills to be able to send his score for *The Display* from London to Australia without ever having heard it. He also declared that when he did hear the score for the first time, two years later, 'not a note needed changing.' Malcolm Williamson, quoted in Sykes, 'Music Ambassador,' 7.

slightest respect perplexing for its listeners. [Williamson is] at the beginning of what promises to be a highly successful career of writing for the theatre.¹⁰³

Part of what made Williamson's score so accessible to the audience was his use of recurring musical material to represent particular characters, emotions and stereotypes in the ballet, as has been recognised by Joel Crotty and Amanda Card.¹⁰⁴ Williamson's use of different musical themes and instrumental combinations for specific characters aurally supported Helpmann's scenario and was particularly effective in conveying the relationships between various characters, such as the segregation of the sexes at the opening of the picnic scene. The recurrence of musical motives also created a sense of unity in the work. This is particularly true of the use of birdcalls to represent the lyrebird in the ballet, and to establish a strong link between the behaviour of the bird in the opening and closing scenes, and that of the human males in the central picnic scene. As Covell and other critics noted following the premiere of the ballet, Williamson's bird calls (see Ex. 1 and Ex. 2) created some of the most effective and 'immediately memorable' moments of *The Display*.¹⁰⁵ In Example 2, the lyrebird can be heard mimicking the sounds of a Laughing Kookaburra through descending chromatic passages played by the oboes.¹⁰⁶ The mimicking of this call by 'The Male' in *The Display* helps to

Example 1. Excerpt from Williamson, *The Display* © 1964 by Josef Weinberger Ltd, London; first movement, bb. 1–6 (piano reduction); typeset by Carolyn Philpott, with permission.

¹⁰³ Roger Covell, 'Highly Melodic,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 Mar. 1964: 11. Williamson's score for *The Display* is still considered one of the masterpieces of twentieth-century Australian music; musicologist Joel Crotty included the work in his 2011 'Australian Art-Music Canon.' See Joel Crotty, 'Towards an Australian Art-Music Canon,' *Quadrant Magazine* (Oct. 2011): 91–7.

¹⁰⁴ Crotty, 'Choreographic Music in Australia'; Card, 'Violence, Vengeance and Violation,' 87.

¹⁰⁵ Covell, 'Highly melodic.'

¹⁰⁶ The Laughing Kookaburra (*Dacelo novaeguineae*) is a large terrestrial species of kingfisher native to Australia and New Guinea. Its distinctive call, which bears an uncanny resemblance to hysterical human laughter, has earned the species its status as one of the best-known birds in Australia.

Example 2. Excerpt from Williamson, *The Display* © 1964 by Josef Weinberger Ltd, London; first movement, bb. 12–13 (piano reduction); typeset by Carolyn Philpott, with permission.

reinforce the Australian setting of the ballet.¹⁰⁷ In addition to supporting Helpmann's dramatic themes, Williamson's score for *The Display* provided the perfect backdrop for the ballet's modern choreography, especially in the fight scenes, and aided in the integration of all aspects of the production into a realistic dramatic whole.

Conclusion

The success of *The Display* opened many doors for its three collaborators. The praise Williamson received for his score for *The Display* encouraged him to arrange a shortened, twenty-five minute *Concert Suite* (1964) that could be performed independently of the ballet,¹⁰⁸ and to compose a series of scores for other ballets.¹⁰⁹ He also was inspired to complete numerous other works based on Australian subjects, including the cassation *The Glitter Gang* (1973), in which he projected his views on Aboriginal rights;¹¹⁰ *Symphony No. 7* (1984), which was inspired by the history and landscape of Victoria, including the story of Ned Kelly; and two large-scale works for the Australian Bicentenary which again explore Aboriginal rights: *The True Endeavour* (1988), with texts by Manning Clark; and *The Dawn is at Hand* (1989), based on poetry by Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker). Helpmann choreographed a number of other ballets for the Australian Ballet, including *Elektra* (1966), with designs by Arthur Boyd, and *Sun Music* (1968), with music by Peter Sculthorpe and décor by Kenneth Rowell. Nolan

¹⁰⁷ Bird calls and other natural bush sounds have been employed by a number of Australian composers, such as Henry Tate and Peter Sculthorpe, to encourage associations with the Australian landscape in their works and to strengthen the nexus between their music and a sense of Australia. In a similar way, Williamson employed a variety of Australian bird calls and other natural sounds in *The Display* to represent Australia symbolically.

¹⁰⁸ *The Display: Concert Suite from the Ballet* consists of seven movements: 'The Forest—The People,' 'The Picnic,' 'The Girl,' 'The Youngsters,' 'The Stranger,' 'The Stranger and the Girl' and 'The Lyre Bird.' The *Concert Suite* has been performed and recorded a number of times, including by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra under the direction of both John Hopkins and Stuart Challender. The score is published by Josef Weinberger. Campion, 'Draft of Malcolm Williamson,' 20–21.

¹⁰⁹ These include *Sinfonietta* (1965), *Sun into Darkness* (1966), *Spectrum* (1967), *BigfellaTootsSquoodgeandNora* (1967), *Heritage* (1985) and *Have Steps Will Travel* (1988), as well as an uncompleted project with Helpmann, *Perisynthion* (1973–74).

¹¹⁰ See Carolyn Philpott and James Humberstone, 'The Glitter Gang (1973–74): A Microcosm of Malcolm Williamson's Views on Social Inclusivity and his Australian Identity,' *Musicology Australia* 38.1 (2016): 1–28.

also capitalised on the success of *The Display* by releasing a series of small paintings based on the production.¹¹¹ Following on from this work, Nolan created his masterpieces *Riverbend I* (1964–65) and *Riverbend II* (1965–66), which include the figure of Ned Kelly against backdrops similar to the bush-like scene he captured in *The Display*.¹¹² These works demonstrate Nolan's ongoing preoccupation with myth, as well as the Australian landscape.

For Helpmann, Nolan and Williamson, removed from the environment and culture of Australia as expatriates, their collaboration gave them the opportunity to evaluate Australian culture from a distance—from the outside. The construct of the character of 'The Outsider' channelled their frustration with the predominately macho and anti-intellectual culture of Australia, as they had experienced it both in Australia and from critics and their fellow expatriates. 'The Outsider' is the personification of the artist in a landscape of macho aggression: he is bullied, taunted and derided, just as they had been. The lyrebird may well represent their view of Australian artistic culture at the time: ungainly and barely able to take wing. This is a ballet that really could not have been written from within the culture, for it needed knowledge of the culture and the perspective of the outsider to sharpen the parody. In combining their talents they were able to make a controversial and powerful contribution to the artistic endeavours of their homeland, and as outsiders they had the combined courage to challenge Australians and their view of the arts.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the helpful assistance of Valerie Lawson, as well as Yvonne Gates and Gala Hingston (from the Australian Ballet), for supplying details relating to the collaboration behind and performances of *The Display*. Anne-Marie Forbes gratefully acknowledges the permission of Warwick Ross, General Manager of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, to access relevant historical records of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust held at the National Library of Australia. Carolyn Philpott would like to thank Lewis Mitchell of Josef Weinberger Ltd for access to, and permission to publish extracts from, the published versions of Malcolm Williamson's score of *The Display*, and Simon Campion for providing access to his complete catalogue of Malcolm Williamson's works.

About the Authors

Carolyn Philpott is Research Coordinator and Lecturer in Musicology at the University of Tasmania's Conservatorium of Music, within the Tasmanian College of the Arts. Her research interests include twentieth-century music and intersections between music, place and the environment, and she has published book chapters and numerous articles in leading scholarly journals, including *Organised Sound*, *Popular Music* and *Musicology Australia*.

Anne-Marie Forbes is the Graduate Research Coordinator and Coordinator of Musicology at the University of Tasmania Conservatorium of Music. As a musicologist and performer, her current research includes aspects of performativity and arts and health. She continues to work on music of early twentieth-century Britain and Australia, and her book *Joseph Holbrooke: Composer, Critic and Musical Patriot*, co-edited with Paul Watt (Monash University), was published by Rowman & Littlefield in 2015.

¹¹¹ Clark, *Sidney Nolan*, 149. These paintings include *The Display I* (mixed media on paper signed and dated 2 December 1963), *The Display II* (mixed media on paper, signed and dated 6 December 1963), and *Display* (mixed media, date unknown). See *Australian Art Sales Digest*, accessed 26 Nov. 2015, <www.aasd.com.au>; *Wagner Art Gallery*, accessed 26 Nov. 2015, <www.wagnerartgallery.com.au>.

¹¹² Sayers, *Australian Art*, 169.