

Meryl Tankard's French Connection: Régis Lansac

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Walking down the gangplank of the *Kota Singapura* in Perth at the start of an around-the-world travel adventure in early 1972, Régis Lansac had no inkling that he would stay in Australia to become the chief collaborator of one of the country's most celebrated creative artists. His meeting with Meryl Tankard in Sydney over a decade later was to be a turning point in both their lives. A choreographer and director of international repute, Tankard's large body of work across dance, film, opera, television, and commercial theatre includes commissions from the Australian Ballet, the Australian Opera, Nederlands Dans Theatre, Lyon Opera Ballet, and the Berlin State Ballet. Tankard's connections—through Pina Bausch—with the ethos of German Expressionist dance, and her unique choreographic process, have meant that she has exerted a great influence on the development of contemporary dance and dance theatre in Australia. Since meeting in Sydney in 1984, Tankard and Lansac have been both romantic and professional partners, together creating works in which movement and music are fused with such rich visual design elements that they speak to the Wagnerian notion of 'total theatre' or *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Not only would Lansac become Tankard's chief collaborator during his sojourn in Australia, but he would also become a noted photographer in his own right, with numerous solo and joint shows of his work both here and in Europe (Thomas 1995). His work is now held by the National Gallery in Canberra, the National Library of Australia and the Art Gallery of South Australia, and has drawn high praise from some very eminent critics. Max Dupain, reviewing one of his earliest shows, wrote:

This self-taught photographer has got something, and it's wrapped in a distinct European flavour. It springs from a clear cut and polished technique and a deep subjective input. Lansac's keen observing mind, which has an affinity to mystery and pictorial intrigue, comes alive in the most ordinary of everyday happenings.¹

However, Lansac's independent photographic practice is outside the scope of this article, which seeks to uncover the specifically French cultural influences he has brought to Tankard's œuvre. Although usually credited as her chief collaborator, the full extent of Lansac's contribution has seldom been recognised, with the exception of Michelle Potter's discussion in her book on Tankard: *Meryl Tankard: an Original Voice* (2012). Best known for the projections he has designed for many of her works, Lansac's input extends far beyond the camera to encompass research, lighting and visual design, music selection, and the design of programs, posters and other ephemera. Beyond these specific contributions, however, he has also introduced aspects of French culture to Tankard that suffuse a number of her works. Drawing on interviews with Lansac and Tankard, and archival research in Tankard's papers in the National Library of Australia as well as Lansac's private papers, this article will explore Tankard's connections with French culture, which have partly, although not wholly, been facilitated by Lansac.

Prior to arriving in Australia, the Lyon-born Lansac had no specific career path mapped out. Although he came from a family of keen photographers—his maternal grandfather was a professional, and his paternal grandfather and father were both enthusiastic, skilled amateurs—at this point he had no thought of following that path himself. At university in Aix-en-Provence and Nice, he had studied English and German 'civilisation and literature' courses. A strong attraction to popular English culture—the Beatles, fashion, 'swinging' London—led him to work in Britain for several years in the late 1960s, where he taught French in a Grammar School in Bournemouth, an experience he now recalls with a shudder. On visits to London, he recalls seeing tourism advertisements featuring alluring Australian beaches, which convinced him to throw in teaching and head down under.

¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 November 1981, Max Dupain, 'An Eye Alive to the Simple Language of Everyday Events', Régis Lansac Photographs, Gag Art Gallery, Bondi Junction.

Lansac travelled with a friend and both were planning to move on to South America after their Australian sojourn. But an epic trip around the continent in a Kombi van, working along the way as a gardener, in the snowfields and at various other odd jobs, was a revelation. Like many Europeans before him, he was captivated by the sense of space, the vastness of the sky and the intensity of the light. Washing up in Melbourne, where he taught in a French immersion school, he moved into a share house with some photographers, with a fully fitted out darkroom. Although he had always had a camera and taken an interest in photography, this was the first time he had immersed himself in the printing process, and the next three years were devoted to teaching himself the craft.

What started as a hobby became a vocation. On returning to Europe, he saw it with new eyes, and the resultant photographs from that trip formed the basis of his first exhibitions in Lyon, Aix-en-Provence and London. Good sales encouraged him to continue. On his return to Australia in 1981 he moved to Sydney, where he was inspired by the performing arts scene. Despite the difficulties of theatre photography, such as the lack of control over lighting and the quick turnarounds required by the industry, Lansac was intrigued by the possibilities of working within a medium that demanded a large degree of spontaneity. The experience of capturing the evolution of a work in rehearsal, as opposed to photographing the finished production, he found especially compelling. Based at the Blackwater Studios in Glebe, home to a range of artists and craftspeople, he specialized in commercial portraits for magazines including *Vogue*, *Follow Me* and *Express*, as well as photographing fashion, record covers and the film stills for Jane Campion's first feature film, *Sweetie*. He simultaneously pursued work in the theatre, with clients including Nigel Kellaway, Kai Tai Chan's One Extra Dance Company, Entr'acte, Belvoir Street Theatre, Seymour Centre and Robyn Archer.²

Visiting Adelaide for the 1982 Festival, he was captivated by the performances of Pina Bausch's Tanztheater Wuppertal, and especially by those of Australian dancer Meryl Tankard, a leading soloist with the company whose performances in 1980, *Blaubart* and *Kontakthof* were singled out for a great deal of positive critical attention.

² *Chants de Mariage I and II*, Adelaide Festival 1992 program notes.

Shortly after the Adelaide season, Tankard left the Bausch company and based herself in Sydney, where she freelanced, choreographing and directing for NIDA and the Australian Opera, as well as acting in film and television productions. She was also starting to craft her own dance theatre works, and hired Lansac to do the publicity shots for *Echo Point*, her first full-length independent work. Tankard was impressed by his willingness to brave the treacherous rocks at Ben Buckler, towards one end of Bondi Beach, where he shot her in a Romantic tutu as the sea sprayed over them both. Lansac had been entranced by her performance across the footlights in Adelaide two years previously, where he said, 'I felt I was the only person in the audience and that she was flirting with me' (Potter 2012, 59); now up close, he recalls, 'she blew my head off!'³ Very quickly a relationship developed that has now endured more than thirty years. It was probably inevitable that they would also become creative partners, and it is within this long-standing collaboration that Lansac's French background has been so influential.

It must be said though that Tankard's primary, and indeed formative, exposure to French culture predated her meeting with Lansac. Tankard's schooling in ballet—that quintessentially French classical art form—means that she has been in dialogue with an aspect of French culture all her professional life. Born in Darwin in 1955, she had commenced ballet training when the family relocated to Melbourne in the late 1950s. Her father Mick was a mechanic in the Royal Australian Air Force, and his postings meant that the family relocated several times, from Melbourne to the RAAF base at Butterworth in Malaysia, then finally to Raymond Terrace outside Newcastle. Throughout these moves the young Meryl kept up her ballet training, gradually becoming more serious. Despite coming dux, Tankard left school after fourth year High School to pursue her ballet career, being accepted into the Australian Ballet School in 1973, and the Australian Ballet in 1975.⁴

But on making it into the rarefied world of professional ballet, Tankard harboured qualms about the discipline. The repertoire she found antiquated, the obsession with bodily perfection stultifying, and the opportunities for personal expression limited.

³ Interview with Tankard, 8 December 2018.

⁴ All Tankard's biographical information obtained in interview with author, 8 December 2018.

Initially she found some release through other creative outlets, such as designing jumpers with characters intricately knitted into them, and making extravagantly decorated cakes, but the definitive outlet for her creativity came through her emergence as a choreographer in 1977. Her first foray into choreography was for a fashion show, *French Injection*, which showcased five French designers, including Hermès, with whom she would later work extensively. Tankard's first professional dance work, *Birds Behind Bars*, made for an Australian Ballet choreographic workshop in July 1977, received a number of excellent reviews, with dance critics including Neil Jillett and John Cargher urging the company to program it as part of a triple bill for the main repertoire.⁵

More significantly, it led to Tankard being awarded a cash prize, which she used to travel to Europe to observe the dance scene and the work of other choreographers. Initially she studied mime at the Le Coq School in Paris. Then, on the recommendation of a friend, she went to Wuppertal to audition for the German choreographer and theatrical paradigm-shifter Pina Bausch, and her sense of what was possible in dance shifted irrevocably. In response to a question about how she chose her dancers, Bausch had famously said, 'I'm not so interested in how they move as in what moves them' (Schmidt 1984, 15–16), and her interest in the motivation behind movement rather than in its formal qualities was for Tankard a longed-for 'miracle' (Potter 1997, 108). In an interview with David Galloway, she described the audition process itself as a revelation:

It was the first time a director had encouraged me to project my own personality on the stage, and it opened a whole new world. I had nothing against being a sylph in tutu and toe-shoes, but the whole classical repertoire suddenly seemed like a museum (Galloway 1984, 41).

⁵ *The Age*, 23/7/77, Leonard Radic, '*Birds Behind Bars* ... ought to find a ready place in the company's normal repertoire'; *The Australian*, 25 July 1977, John Cargher '*Birds Behind Bars*, was a delight' which ... 'would enhance any of the triple bills the Australian Ballet disdains at present.'; *The Herald Review*, July 22 1977, Neil Jillett, 'It is a surreal spoof of the classical tradition and contemporary "meaningfulness" ... that should go straight into the Australian Ballet's Repertoire as a sure-fire crowd-pleaser.'

It is noteworthy that it is the repertoire, rather than the technique, of ballet, that Tankard rejected. Since Bausch's dancers did a classical class every morning, Tankard continued honing her classical technique for her seven years with the company, during which she became one of its leading performers, creating roles in Bausch's seminal early works including *Kontakthof*, *Café Müller*, *Arien*, *Keuschheitslegende*, *1980*, *Bandonen* and *Walzer*.

Unlike other significant contemporary dance choreographers, such as Martha Graham or José Limón, Bausch never developed a technique of her own. Indeed, her approach was fundamentally inimical to the very idea of codifying movement because she regarded ordinary, pedestrian movement and experience as the well-spring of her work. This is in line with the German Expressionist tradition of Rudolf Laban, Mary Wigman and Kurt Jooss in which she had been trained (Müller 2013). Wigman had developed the idea of the *ausdrucke-gebärde* or expressive gesture, 'an evocative "everyday" movement, developed and stylised to recontextualise and heighten its original intent' (Climenhaga 2009, 5), hence giving name to the form of *Ausdruckstanz*, or Expressive Dance, the forerunner of Bausch's Tanztheater. Through Bausch, Tankard's choreographic lineage can be traced directly to *Ausdruckstanz*: according to Jordan Beth Vincent and Lee Christofis, she is 'a direct artistic descendant of *Ausdruckstanz* and Kurt Jooss' (2012, 22).

Bausch's creative methodology sprang not from a technique, but from the improvisatory tasks she set her dancers, who provided the raw data from which she would craft the work. The language of each piece was thus unique, created to articulate the emotions and situations Bausch was exploring. Why then retain the French classical form as the basis of her dancers' training? As Tankard was to follow Bausch's lead, developing her own task-based method of creating movement, as well as giving both her companies daily classical class, it is worth examining this question in some detail.

Although it originated in the Italian courts of the Renaissance, it was the transplantation of ballet to the French court, with the marriage of Catherine de Medici to Henri II in 1533, that caused it to develop into the form we know today. Catherine's son, Charles IX, established the Academy of Poetry and Music in 1570, which sought to develop all the arts, including the art of dancing. Subsequent development occurred at the courts of Louis XIII and Louis XIV. As Jennifer Homans observes, the latter was responsible for the notion that expertise in dance was intrinsic to an aristocratic identity:

‘Under Louis XIV, dance became much more than a blunt instrument with which to display royal opulence and power. He made it integral to life at court, a symbol and requirement of aristocratic identity so deeply ingrained and internalized that the art of ballet would be forever linked to his reign.’ (Homans 2010, 13) Dance was considered one of the three principal exercises of the nobility; to dance well in front of the King could secure social advancement, whereas to dance badly led to social ostracism and disgrace. When Louis XIV signed the letters of patent for the founding of the *Académie Royale de Danse* in 1661, he set in train the codification of ballet (Needham 1997). Under ballet master Pierre Beauchamps, the five basic positions were established and the movements regulated and named: henceforth the language of ballet was definitively French (Noll Hammond 2007, 66). Ballet underwent significant developments in subsequent centuries, and arguably became a pan-European art form, yet its nomenclature, its privileging of symmetry, elegance and proportion, and its inherently aristocratic comportment of the torso, link it indelibly to its origins in the *ancien régime*.

As Bausch had done before her, Tankard rejected the balletic form as a fossilised artefact that could not serve her desire to craft work that reflected contemporary experience and concerns. Yet while she rejected the form as a performance practice, Tankard retained her respect for the technique as a training instrument. Regarding her practice of giving her dancers a daily classical class, Tankard says: ‘I felt the classical class was neutral. Class is like taking daily medicine and the classical technique is not influenced by any particular choreographer’s style ... I also liked using jumps in the work and there aren’t many contemporary techniques that work on elevation.’⁶ For Tankard, ballet technique provides an enabling foundation: its rigorous training of the body develops the flexibility and strength necessary to the demands of an improvisatory practice. Ballet had been formative for her as a dancer, and even as she rejected the balletic repertoire, she has repeatedly interrogated its iconography in her own choreographic practice.

It is perhaps serendipitous that her first major work as a choreographer, *Two Feet*, which is a *Künstlerdrama* of a ballerina’s development, was also

⁶ Personal communication with author, 29 April 2019.

her first major collaboration with Lansac.⁷ He had contributed in a minor way to Tankard's second independent work, *Travelling Light* (1986), by supplying photos, but during the making of *Two Feet* the pattern of their collaboration was bedded down. Commissioned by Anthony Steel for the 1988 World Expo in Brisbane, *Two Feet* was a full-length solo for Tankard in which she drew both on her own experiences as a young dancer and on the life story of the superlative Russian ballerina, Olga Spessivtseva, which had intrigued her ever since she had read Anton Dolin's short biography, *The Sleeping Ballerina*.

Spessivtseva (1895–1991) was a contemporary of Pavlova, danced with the Diaghilev Company and the Paris Opera, and was the most celebrated Giselle of her day. A perfectionistic practitioner of ballet technique, she is reported to have had her first breakdown during a Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo tour of Australia in 1934, and she subsequently spent decades in mental institutions in the USA (Dolin 1966). In *Two Feet*, Tankard interwove scenes of Spessivtseva's practice at the *barre*, performance of the 'mad scene' in *Giselle* and personal descent into madness, with hilarious scenes depicting Mepsie, a fictionalized version of her younger self, masochistically boasting of her capacity to endure the pain of the ballet 'torture barre', learning dances out of instruction manuals, desperately trying to get her hair right for an Eisteddfod performance, and becoming immersed in ballet's culture of dieting and body dysmorphia.

Much of the poignancy of *Two Feet* stems from the ironic contrast between the aspirations of Mepsie, who will do seemingly anything to realise her dream of becoming a ballerina, and the tragic fate of Spessivtseva, who, after achieving great success, eventually lost everything in pursuit of that same quest. *Giselle, ou les Wilis*—the pinnacle of the French Romantic ballet—sits at the heart of the work, functioning both as a specific allegory for the fate of Spessivtseva and a generic allegory of the masochistic nature of the ballerina's vocation. With libretto by Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges and Théophile Gautier, music by Adolphe Adam and choreography

⁷ The term *Künstlerdrama* derives from the literary term, *Künstlerroman*, itself a sub-type of the *Bildungsroman* or novel of development. The *Künstlerroman* is a narrative that traces the development of an artist, the most famous example being James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. A *Künstlerdrama* is a drama or theatrical production that enacts or traces the maturation of an artist.

by Jean Coralli and Jules Perrot, *Giselle* was an instant success when it premièred in 1841 at the *Salle Le Peletier* in Paris, and has been a mainstay of the ballet repertoire ever since. To this day it is considered the greatest test of a ballerina's abilities, requiring a supreme level of skill in both acting and dancing. The central motif of the peasant girl who, in a fit of madness, dances herself to death after discovering her lover is an aristocratic playboy in disguise, is echoed in the second act when *Giselle* rises from the grave as one of the Wilis—spirits of women who have died before their wedding day—who haunt the forest at night seeking revenge on any man they encounter, forcing him to dance until he dies of exhaustion. Spessivtseva's rendering of the Act 1 'mad scene' was revolutionary due to its level of naturalistic detail, in contrast to the mannered miming of most of her contemporaries. Her performance was based on first-hand observations of inmates in mental hospitals, a further irony, since she would eventually become an in-patient in an asylum herself.⁸

Despite her repudiation of ballet as a performance practice, *Two Feet* is suffused with Tankard's deep knowledge of ballet history, and her complicated feelings about the discipline that formed her as a dancer, simultaneously critiquing the crippling aestheticisation of the ballerina and encoding the exquisite beauty of the images she creates. It was a landmark work in her evolution as a choreographer, and one that she recreated with Royal Ballet ballerina, Natalia Osipova, for the 2019 Adelaide Festival.

Moreover, *Two Feet* established the model for a collaborative practice in which Tankard would take the lead, usually coming up with the original idea, directing and choreographing, and often also designing costumes and sets. Lansac's input, although of a lesser order, was nonetheless crucial; indeed, in the program for the original season he is credited as 'Assistant to the Director' and 'Dramaturg'. His contribution was two-fold: a range of creative inputs into each work, and documentation of its creation through photography and video. Edward Pask, Australian dance historian and archivist, aided in the research for the show,⁹ and film director Jane Campion,

⁸ 'The role of *Giselle* haunted her. ... On several occasions she visited the patients in a mental home to observe and watch them, their movements, their eyes, their gestures. Little did she know that years later... she would be one of these poor creatures.' (Dolin 17–18)

⁹ Papers of Meryl Tankard NLA MS Acc16.058 Box 1/File 2.

with whom Tankard had worked on the ABC television series *Dancing Daze*, encouraged her to include some of her own experiences as a trainee dancer (Potter 2012, 52). These sources of guidance and encouragement notwithstanding, it was Lansac who was almost invariably present in the studio during the making of the work, where he was tasked with giving Tankard feedback and taking notes, as well as documenting the process by taking photos and filming. As the work started to take shape, he assumed responsibility for its visual design: crafting and sourcing photographic images that could be projected onto the backdrop, including still images and rare film footage of Spessivtseva and images of various American popular dance forms; and devising back projections of a red-brick wall and topiary in front of which the deranged dancer walks repeatedly.

The success of this initial collaboration was immediately apparent in the very positive reception given *Two Feet* in Brisbane, and for a subsequent season in Japan. Tankard and Lansac became known as a creative team of striking originality, which led to commercial commissions in Sydney and elsewhere in the late 1980s. Moreover, Lansac's connections in the local French community helped open the door to commissions from a number of Sydney-based French firms, such as a commission to produce the launch of a new model photocopier by French firm Kis. In an unnamed, undated newspaper article in Tankard's NLA archive, the event is depicted in breathless tones: 'With a Gallic flair that made it stand out from more run-of-the-mill product launches, Kis Australia last week treated media, clients, and Sydney's French community to a party at the French trade commissioner's residence to unveil its Colour-Kis colour copying system.' Apparently, 'liberal quantities of French champagne and delicacies warmed guests with a spirit of *joie de vivre* and Ravel's *Boléro* was played live as Tankard danced down the staircase in a 'shimmering shawl and necklace' that were immaculately copied by the new copier when she placed them on its screen.¹⁰

One of the members of the French community present at the Kis launch was Patricia Galloway, director of Hermès Australia, who immediately commissioned Tankard and Lansac to create a series of publicity events, setting in train a working relationship that would endure until 1994.

¹⁰ Papers of Meryl Tankard NLA MS 9940 Folio Box 3.

Having choreographed a number of fashion shows for the Queen Victoria Building in Sydney in the 1980s, Tankard had experience working with fashion houses, and entered into this relationship with gusto. A keen knitter and sewer since adolescence, Tankard's early notebooks, dating from her time at the Australian Ballet School, are full of sketches of fashionable clothes and theatrical costumes.¹¹ She was known as a flamboyant dresser during her Australian Ballet days, and her penchant for wearing makeup and bright clothes had initially irked the more austere Bausch (Potter 1997, 110). Working with fashion houses allowed her to combine this passion for clothes with her choreographic skills.

Galloway's first commission was for Tankard and Lansac to produce a huge event to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Hermès at the Sydney Hilton; this was followed by a series of commissions for fashion shows and product launches. Tankard was also invited to decorate Hermès's Sydney shop window, as well as produce a large-scale event at the Powerhouse Museum which featured enactments of episodes from French history centred around the live printing of an Hermès scarf. In addition to providing a source of income, these commissions enabled Tankard to develop her skills in crafting site-specific works, which would be invaluable later when she created other large-scale public events, including 'Deep Sea Dreaming', the opening sequence to the Sydney Olympic Games Opening Ceremony, and major event commissions from Tiffany in the USA.

Another consequence of the success of *Two Feet* was an invitation for Tankard to take over the Human Veins Dance Company in Canberra, which was then renamed the Meryl Tankard Company. For the first time, Tankard had her own company, and the luxury of time to develop her work. She had many ambitions for the new company: that it should become an international touring company, that it should become an integral part of the Canberra community, and perhaps as a result of her relationship with Lansac, that its dancers should be able to speak French. In an interview with *The Australian*, just before she moved to Canberra, she said to reporter William Wilcox that she 'is going to teach her troupe another language—naturally French, with or without tears, to begin with—so that when they tour overseas, the dancers can exchange ideas'.¹²

¹¹ Papers of Meryl Tankard NLA: MS 9940/1/2 Sketchbooks Australian Ballet.

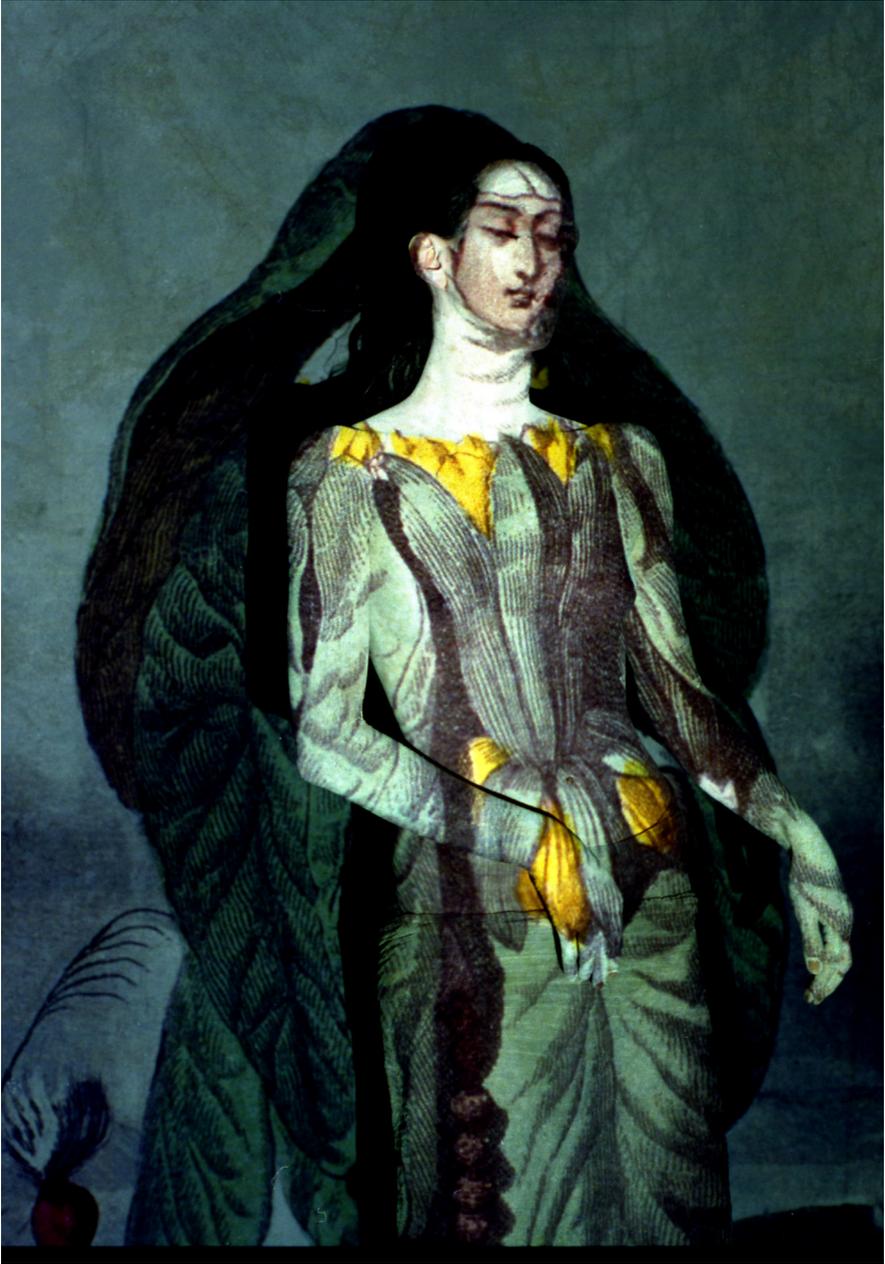
¹² *The Australian*, 16 November 1988, William Wilcox.

However, although the company did indeed embark on a number of successful international tours, her plan for developing bilingual dancers never got off the ground.

During her four-year tenure at the company, Tankard created some of her best-known works, including *VX18504*, *Songs with Mara*, *Inuk*, *Kikimora*, *Chants de Mariage I & II* and *Nuti*, and her collaboration with Lansac evolved further. He became increasingly occupied in background research for each work; for instance, sourcing a variety of folk songs for *Chants de Mariage*, and poems and images for the program of *VX18504*. Perhaps more significantly, Lansac's projections became the dominant element of the visual design to the works. His projections for *Banshee*, *Nuti* and *Kikimora* were particularly innovative: all three are notable for their use of images projected onto the cyclorama and the bodies of the dancers. The technique of projecting silhouettes onto the backdrop is one that he had already used in *Two Feet*, but the idea of projecting images onto the bodies of the dancers themselves derives from Lansac's photographic practice. In the early 1980s in his independent art photography practice Lansac had experimented with projecting images of famous portraits onto the faces of his sitter, usually Tankard herself, crafting a complex amalgam of images in flux. In these three dance theatre works, Lansac projects images from the front of stage onto the bodies of the dancers, so that the dancers effectively become a moving screen for images. This technique creates a sense of visual layering, of image being piled on image, or of an image being modified by the moving body/screen that it is projected onto. Often the body moved in and out of the projection, seeming to emerge from it, which created uncanny effects of a still life coming to life.

Along with the strengthening of their collaborative practice during their stay in Canberra, Tankard and Lansac also developed wide relationships within diplomatic and government circles, most notably with the wife of Prime Minister Paul Keating, Annita Keating, who became the company's official patron and, through Lansac, with the French Ambassador to Australia, Philippe Baude. Baude became one of the company's most enthusiastic supporters, often turning up on opening nights, as Tankard recalls, 'with a backpack full of vintage champagne';¹³ he also invited the company to perform at functions at the French Embassy on several occasions.

¹³ Interview with Tankard, 8 December 2018.



One of Anthony Phillip's designs for *Court of Flora* inspired by Grandville's *Les Fleurs animées*.



Court of Flora, Canberra.

Of the works she made in Canberra, *Court of Flora*, made for Canberra's annual floral festival, Floriade, shows the greatest French influence. This is one of several works that had its origins in the couple's travels in France. The idea came from a book they had purchased in Paris, Parisian cartoonist J. J. Grandville's *Les Fleurs animées* (1847), which features watercolours of anthropomorphized flowers. The visual images immediately inspired Tankard to create a sumptuously costumed dance work. Working from Grandville's images, Sydney couturier Anthony Phillips created exquisitely decorated silk gowns for Rose, Forget-me-not, Lily, Pansy, Carnation, and Thistle, with hats by milliner Betty Wizam.

Tankard constructed a stylised mini-drama in which the flowers appeared like apparitions from behind shrubs and trees in the Gardens, with the shy, coy flowers discomfited by the assertive, bossy Thistle. While the movement was minimal—mincing steps, gentle swaying, demure gestures of the arms, head and upper body—according to reviewers, the effect was great. In *The Canberra Times*, Larry Ruffell described it as ‘a poem of movement, as delicate and ethereal as a butterfly’s wing’,¹⁴ and Michelle Potter enthused that Tankard’s use of classical ballet elements was infused with ‘delicious sensuality’ and a ‘feeling of conspiracy and secrecy’ that was highly subtle and suggestive.¹⁵

Although this was among Tankard’s slighter works, it enjoyed great popularity, not only having repeat Floriade seasons in 1991 and 1992, but being performed on many other occasions, including at a function at the Prime Minister’s Lodge, at Government House in Sydney, at Hawker Primary School’s French Day and on a double program with Molière’s *Le Médecin malgré lui* at the French Embassy.¹⁶ Hermès selected it as the centrepiece of their ‘Year of Outdoors’, a lavish party in Sydney’s Botanical Gardens attended by members of the Hermès family, at which the dancers performed on an outsized Hermès scarf spread over the grass, and cameos were also performed in the Sydney store’s windows.¹⁷ According to reporter Kim Langley, the Chairman of Hermès, Jean-Louis Dumas, visiting from Paris for the event exclaimed ‘I had to come to Australia to find taste’.¹⁸

Court of Flora was also the first work Tankard showed in Adelaide when she took over the reins of Australian Dance Theatre (ADT) in March 1993. Her sojourn in Canberra had been enormously successful, but the limited resources available to the company and the small Canberra audiences posed insurmountable difficulties, and when Tankard was approached to take on the role of Artistic Director at ADT, she was seduced by its larger budget and resources. Another deciding factor was the failure of the Canberra board

¹⁴ *The Canberra Times*, 6 November 1990, Larry Ruffell, ‘Inspiration from Nature’.

¹⁵ Michelle Potter, ‘Court of Flora’, *MUSE*, November 1990.

¹⁶ *The Canberra Times*, 27 April 1992, Ann Nugent ‘Australian and French Artists Share the Bill’.

¹⁷ *Wentworth Courier*, 21 November 1990, ‘French connection with Star ’n Roses’.

¹⁸ Kim Langley, ‘A Rose is a Rose is a Dancer in the Floriade’, print source unknown, NLA Papers of Meryl Tankard, MS 9940.

to give Lansac an official role, despite his multi-faceted input into the company which, in addition to designing projections and doing research, had included designing lighting, creating publicity materials and programs, and even occasionally catering for company events. In Adelaide he was appointed as Assistant to the Director, in which role his diverse contributions would be recognised and remunerated. To capitalise on Tankard's burgeoning international reputation, the ADT board renamed the company Meryl Tankard Australian Dance Theatre (MTADT). In Adelaide Tankard reprised several of the Canberra works, including her most celebrated work, the aerial *Furioso* (1994), expanded to accommodate a bigger cast, and created a number of new works that the company toured internationally to great acclaim .

Furioso was the only work MTADT showed in France. After a sell-out season at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1996, MTADT was invited to show *Furioso* in the south of France in late 1997, culminating with a season at the Cannes Dance Festival. Tankard and Lansac were jubilant at securing the French dates because, with 232 subsidised dance companies of its own, France was an extremely difficult market to access. Reviews were highly positive. Writing in *Libération*, Marie Christine Vernay enthused, 'The Australian choreographer Meryl Tankard succeeded in winning the audience over with her poetic flights projected in a vertiginous manner into space... This incandescent, effective and deeply humanistic piece should conquer the French audiences'.¹⁹ *Nice-Matin*'s Aurore Busser was similarly effusive: 'With fury, sex and storm the Australian Dance Theatre made a spectacular entrance at the Festival with *Furioso* ...What a performance! They sowed the wind, they reaped a storm... a storm of ovations'.²⁰ The *Furioso* tour lifted Tankard's name recognition in France, thus helping her secure commissions after her acrimonious dismissal from MTADT in 1999.

Two works from the MTADT period are particularly marked by French cultural influences: *Aurora* (1994) and *Seulle* (1997). With *Aurora*, Tankard realized her long-standing interest in re-imagining fairy tales from a feminist perspective, and in her hands the iconic ballet *The Sleeping Beauty* was reconfigured into a tale of female agency. Marius Petipa's 1890 ballet was based on a hybrid of Charles Perrault's 'La Belle au Bois Dormant' (1697),

¹⁹ *Libération*, December 1997, Christine Vernay.

²⁰ *Nice-Matin*, December 1997, Aurore Busser.

and the Brothers Grimm's re-telling 'Dornröschen', in which the King and the Queen survive the 100-year sleep to celebrate the Princess's wedding to the Prince. In her two act version, Tankard omitted the King and Queen, whilst retaining the ballet's incorporation of a miscellany of exotic and fairy tale character divertissements in the second act, as well as using part of the Tchaikovsky score. Tankard's Princess Aurora up-ended the traditional rendition of a passive young woman—encoded most famously in the Rose Adagio, in which the motionless Princess, standing in attitude *en pointe*, is rotated like a music box ballerina by the four princes seeking her hand—in favour of the portrayal of a young woman actively exploring her awakening sexuality.

Aurora exemplifies the rich, multi-layered visual language that Tankard and Lansac create for each of their works, with an attention to design that is possibly unparalleled in Australian contemporary dance. The set for Act 1, jointly designed by Tankard and Lansac, was inspired by a recent visit to the Loire Valley, where they had been enchanted by the Love Gardens at the Château de Villandry. The backdrop was a painted version of the Château, but the stage itself was decorated with garden beds composed of real vegetables, sourced from Adelaide's Central Market, which was adjacent to the company studios. Tankard's NLA papers contain a design sketch for the vegetable beds, which specifies a pattern of Savoy cabbages, butter and mignonette lettuces, cauliflower, radicchio and red cabbages, with an approximate total of fifty-five cabbages and seventy-seven lettuces needed.²¹ Towards the end of the first season, the vegetables started to decay, so Tankard had the auditorium sprayed with rosewater to mask the smell, adding to the richness of the audience's sensory experience, another example of the total theatre that she and Lansac were attempting to forge.²²

In his design for the second act, Lansac introduced a new technique of projections directed from behind the dancers instead of from front of house. A gauze screen covered the front of the stage, onto which the dancers' shadows were projected, so they could only be seen in silhouette, changing in size as they moved in relation to the beams of light. This shadow play technique would be developed further in subsequent works. Lansac's creation

²¹ Papers of Meryl Tankard NLA: MS Acc16.058/Box 25.

²² Interview with Tankard, 8 December 2018.

of an exquisite tabloid-sized program, featuring his photography, invitations to befriend the company and literary allusions, is further evidence of the attention to design that made this work so memorable. A quote from *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* about the link of dancing to social advancement in the *ancien régime* underpinned the work's satire of aristocratic pretensions, embodied in the antics of the somewhat ludicrous princes:

Il n'y a rien qui soit si nécessaire aux hommes, que la danse... Sans la danse, un homme ne saurait rien faire... Tous les malheurs des hommes, tous les revers funestes dont les histoires sont remplies, les bevues des politiques, et les manquements des grands capitaines, tout cela n'est venu que faute de savoir danser (Molière *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* Sc. 2 acte 1).²³

Aurora was a critical and commercial success, and was picked up by Hermès for their major fundraiser for the Sydney Children's Hospital, at which MTADT performed Act 1 in front of a specially painted backdrop of Château Villandry.

Seulle, created for the 1997 Barossa Music Festival, with whom MTADT developed an ongoing relation, was another work inspired by a trip to France. On a visit to L'Hôtel Dieu de Beaune in Burgundy, built by the Chancellor of Burgundy Nicolas Rolin and his wife Guigone de Salins in 1443 for the poor, Tankard and Lansac had been struck by a tapestry. The word 'Seulle' old French for 'only', was embroidered on it many times, as a tribute to the undying love Nicolas Rolin had for his wife. Set to Baroque music performed by harpist and counter-tenor Otto Thiel, *Seulle* featured the rear projection technique Lansac had developed with *Aurora*, with the dancers' bodies seen only in silhouette. While the seamless fusion of design and dance was praised by critics, Otto Thiel's singing drew a negative response; however, when the work was revived for Dance North in July 2006 as part of the Australian Festival of Chamber Music, with different musicians, it drew high praise.

²³ 'There is nothing so necessary for men as dancing. [...] Without dancing, a man can do nothing [...] All the disasters of mankind, all the fatal misfortunes that histories are so full of, the blunders of politicians, the miscarriages of great commanders, all this comes from want of skill in dancing.' (Trans. Régis Lansac)



Seulle, 1997.

Tankard's dismissal by the Board of MTADT saw the pair embark on a peripatetic existence as freelancers, with most of their commissions coming from European dance companies. Even before she officially left ADT in April 1999, Tankard made a new work for Ballet de l'Opéra de Lyon, *Boléro*, which premièred in December 1998. Tankard had been previously approached by the Artistic Director at Lyon, Yorgos Loukos, to choreograph a new version of *Petroushka* but had declined, due to her MTADT commitments. Lorgos later approached her to make a work for a triple bill celebrating the music of Ravel, and offered her a choice of score to work with. The other works on the program were Jiri Kylian's *Un Ballo* (1991) and Tero Saarinen's *Gaspard*. Tankard listened intently to Ravel's repertoire and despite feeling that it had been somewhat over-exposed already, settled on *Boléro*, because its resemblance to film music inspired a cinematic treatment. The entire work was done in projection, with Lansac

reprising the method used in *Aurora* of placing a gauze across the front of the stage, and projecting beams of light from behind the dancers, thus creating silhouettes on the scrim.

Boléro epitomizes the symbiotic nature of Tankard and Lansac's collaborative practice. In the program, Tankard is credited with choreography, while Lansac is credited with design. Yet on viewing the work it is evident that the choreography and the projections are so enmeshed that they must have been created with continual cross fertilisation of ideas. Lansac's use of back projection allows for play with proximity and distance, and with perceptions of size: as the dancers move up or down stage their size diminishes or increases, creating a shadow play of Spanish dancers, tango duennas, among other figures. The placement, spacing, angling and power of the projectors is critical to creating the kinesthetic effects, hence the movement design is inextricable from the technical aspects of the visual design.

Boléro was successful, having seasons during 1998–2003 in France (including dates at Paris's prestigious Théâtre du Châtelet), London, and the USA, and being remounted by the Göteborg Ballet in Sweden in 2003. Reviews were highly positive, with *The Guardian's* Judith Mackrell describing it as 'a triumph' and 'a magic lantern show ... that becomes a frenzied dance macabre';²⁴ *Le Figaro's* Renée Servin praising it as 'a superbly original creation';²⁵ and *Svenska Dagbladet's* Gunilla Jensen pronouncing that it was 'a dream play with Asian and African roots ... A life cycle of affirmation and grief'.²⁶ A number of reviewers picked up on the psychological underpinnings of the work, most notably the anonymous reviewer for *Bohuslänginen*, who described it as 'a brilliant picture of inner chaos, a psychological realism in a dream format that goes straight to your subconscious and takes over your mind'.²⁷

²⁴ *The Guardian*, 24 February 2003, Judith Mackrell, 'Lyon Opera Ballet: Sadler's Wells'.

²⁵ *Le Figaro*, 29 December 1998, Renée Servin, 'Le Boléro des Ombres: Ravel à L'Opéra de Lyon'.

²⁶ *Svenska Dagbladet*, 25 September 2003, Gunilla Jensen, 'Triple Evening Brings Hope to the Ballet'.

²⁷ *Bohuslänginen*, 23 September 2003, Unattributed Review, 'A Magnificent Evening at the Opera'.

Such reviews astutely identify the undercurrent of crisis that informs this fifteen-minute work. Made at a time of distress for both Tankard and Lansac, when they were mourning the imminent loss of their Adelaide company, it also encodes their experiences in Lyon at the time of creation. This was the first time they had been commissioned to create a new work in France, serendipitously in Lansac's home town. Lansac took innumerable photos as they re-familiarized themselves with Lyon, and these formed the background of the projections, coalescing around a series of images of classical columns, red graffiti on old stonework and a striking black cactus seen in a garden. Tankard recalls that one day she stood for a long time on one of the Rhône bridges, overwhelmed with grief. Several days later, a former dancer from the Lyon Opera Ballet, whom they had met, tragically leaped into the river from that very spot, after having eaten cactus. His blood splattered over the pillars of the bridge as his head hit them on the way down. The awful coincidence of this tragic suicide affected them both deeply, especially since it uncannily echoed the visual language of red on stonework and cactus they had already created for *Boléro*.²⁸

Like most of the works Tankard has created in Europe, *Boléro* has not been shown in Australia, and the same fate seems likely to befall the most recent work she choreographed in France, *Claudiel*. Written and directed by Australian playwright Wendy Beckett (niece of Samuel Beckett), this play premiered at the Athénée Théâtre Louis-Jouvet, Paris, in March 2018, and explored the career and lengthy incarceration of the sculptor Camille Claudel. Tankard's choreography of vivified statues drew high praise, with reviewer Corinne Marion effusing, 'Thanks to the sensual choreography of Meryl Tankard, who gives life in a marvellous way to the sculptures of Camille Claudel, we touch the deepest feelings of this strong-willed young woman whose destiny was destroyed'.²⁹ Indeed, it is likely that Australians will not see many future works by Tankard and Lansac, since the pair are finding it increasingly difficult to create work in Australia, despite a strong desire to do so. While development funding has been obtained for some works,

²⁸ Interview with Tankard, 8 December 2018.

²⁹ 'Grâce aux chorégraphies sensuelles de Meryl Tankard, qui donnent merveilleusement vie aux sculptures de Camille Claudel, nous touchons les sentiments les plus profonds de cette jeune femme indocile au destin saccagé.' Trans. Régis Lansac, Corinne Marion in *La Rue du Bac*, 8 March 2018.

including a piece on Toulouse-Lautrec in collaboration with composer Elena Kats-Chernin, without a company of her own Tankard has found it almost impossible to secure sufficient funding or resources to bring projects to the performance stage. As a result, she and Lansac are contemplating moving to France permanently, where their opportunities for creating work are greater.

Should this move come to pass, Australian audiences will be the losers. In their time together in Australia Tankard and Lansac have created a large body of compelling dance theatre works that have made an indelible impression on audiences. In this paper, I have explored some of the lesser known fruits of their collaboration, and traced some of the ways in which Lansac has brought Tankard into contact with French sources of inspiration and opportunity, whether it be through travels in France or through connections with the Australian French community. In their thirty year partnership, Lansac has not only been Tankard's chief collaborator, but has also brought a rich thread of French culture into the work of an artist who is, according to Jim Sharman (2008), one of the few truly original voices in Australian theatre.

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