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# BALLET IN AUSTRALIA

SEVERAL times in recent months, both in interviews with overseas visitors and in reports received from abroad, the pages of *The Listener* have carried evidence of the almost muscular enthusiasm with which post-war Australia has embraced the arts. The work of CEMA is already well known, the prospect of developing orchestral music by State interest in cultural activities seems promising, and even such determined non-conformists as the Angry Penguins must be almost embarrassed by the swelling ranks of their admirers.

Latest cause for enthusiasm on the part of Australians is the healthy growth of ballet, as a result of pioneering work done by the ballerina Hélène Kirsova, who settled in Sydney, and opened a school of ballet there in 1940. Until lately, ballet in the Commonwealth was

known only through the visits of British and Continental companies, but within 12 months of the opening of Kirsova's school her pupils made their first public appearance at the Conservatorium in Sydney. That was in June, 1941. Four months later they created a record at the Minerva Theatre, Sydney, when Kirsova's own ballet, *Faust*, ran for 25 consecutive performances to full houses—the longest known run for an individual ballet.

## Star Pupils

Even with the standards set by overseas ballet troupes to go by, the critics have been impressed by the polished performances of the young Australian dancers, and have been quick to appreciate the technical brilliance of many of the soloists. Among the latter, Peggy Sagar, Rachael Cameron, Strelsa Heckelman and Henry Legerton have been singled out for particular attention, and of these Kirsova herself is most confident of the future of Legerton. So far Robert Helpmann is the only Australian to gain an international reputation in ballet, but Kirsova believes that Legerton will eventually surpass his gifted countryman. As soon as the shipping position allows it, the Kirsova ballet plans to tour both the United States

and Great Britain, but Kirsova herself is determined that they must not be lost to Australia.

"Too many Australians," she said recently, "let tempting overseas offers lure them away. My dancers must return and teach what they have learned to other Australians."

## "Waltzing Matilda"

Original ballets which Kirsova, in her role as choreographer, has presented in the last five years include *Faust* (mentioned above), *Hansel and Gretel*, *Revolution of the Umbrellas*, and *Harlequin*. But the one which is being awaited with more interest than any of the others is *Waltzing Matilda*. The war made this old song Australia's unofficial National Anthem, and it was also sung with enthusiasm (if with little understanding of its idiom) by other Allied soldiers in the Pacific theatre. Kirsova's ballet draws all its characters from the song—the swagman, the jumbuck, the squatter, the troopers (one, two, three!) are all there. The musical score is in the hands of the Hawaiian composer Dai-Keong-Lee, who was in Australia with the United States Forces, but for character portrayals and décor, Kirsova is relying on Australian dancers and local artists.



**STRELSA HECKELMAN**, a leading ballerina of the Kirsova Company, in "*A Dream and a Fairy Tale*," a ballet with choreography by Hélène Kirsova



**RACHEL CAMERON** and **HENRY LEGERTON**, two leading members of Australia's first ballet company, in "*Les Sylphides*." Legerton, the leading male dancer of the company, has been particularly praised by Australian critics.

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