

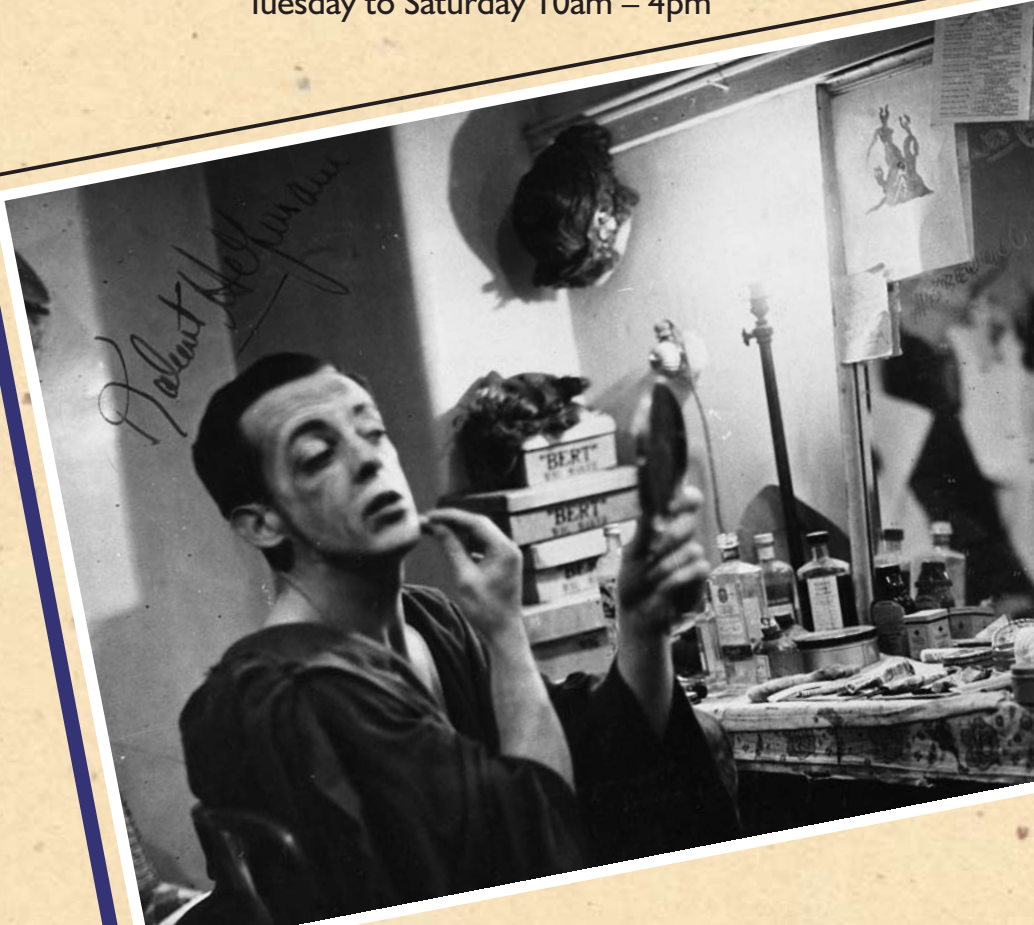
Queensland Performing Arts Centre
in association with the Adelaide Festival Centre
and the Arts Centre Melbourne presents

FREE EXHIBITION

BOBBY DAZZLER!

Helpmann Celebrating the
Centenary

QPAC'S TONY GOULD GALLERY South Bank
21 October 2008 – 8 March 2009
Tuesday to Saturday 10am – 4pm





Mr & Mrs Helpman
with son Robert, 1911
Mt Gambier Public
Library Collection



Studio portrait of the
young Robert Helpman
Mt Gambier Public
Library Collection

Beginnings

Sir Robert Helpmann was a dancer, actor, choreographer and mime as well as a director of plays, operas and musicals. Born on 9 April 1909 in Mount Gambier, South Australia, son of grazier James Murray Helpman and of Mary (née Gardiner), young Robert started dancing lessons in Adelaide where the family moved in 1914. When he was eleven he danced a solo in a white tutu at an Adelaide charity concert before Dame Nellie Melba at the end of which he received thunderous applause when he removed a wig with long curls.

Anna Pavlova accepted him as a student member in her company when she toured Australia and New Zealand in 1926. Too young to train overseas as Pavlova suggested, Helpmann signed a five-year contract with J.C. Williamson and was quickly promoted to specialist dancer in such shows as *Good News*, *Frasquita*, *The Merry Widow*, *The New Moon* and *This Year of Grace*. During their 1932 Australian tour, Margaret Rawlings and Gabriel Toyne were captivated by Helpmann's agility and presence in 'The Spider and the Fly' performed on a giant steel cobweb, and offered him a small role in *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*. Rawlings recommended her Australian discovery to Ninette de Valois, founder and director of the newly formed Vic-Wells Ballet (later Sadler's Wells/Royal Ballet).

Louise Larson's Troupe, 1920, with Robert, left, and sister Sheila, third from right
Performing Arts Collection of South Australia



Front Cover
Robert Helpmann prepares
Performing Arts Collection of South Australia



Helpmann as Oberon,
A Midsummer Night's Dream,
Sadler's Wells Ballet, 1937
*Performing Arts Collection
of South Australia*

Helpmann and Margot Fonteyn,
Giselle Act 2,
Sadler's Wells Ballet, 1934
*Performing Arts Collection
of South Australia*



Helpmann as Hamlet,
Sadler's Wells Ballet,
National Library of Australia,
nla.pic-an13209561

Away

Helpmann arrived in London in February 1933 and was accepted into the Vic-Wells.

He soon danced his way from the *corps de ballet* to leading roles. He created the role of Satan in Ninette de Valois' *Job*, partnered Alicia Markova in the first full-length production of *Swan Lake* in Britain and formed a seventeen-year partnership with Margot Fonteyn. In 1942 he choreographed his dance-drama *Hamlet*. *The Birds*, *Miracle in the Gorbals*, *Adam Zero* and *Elektra* followed. Recognising Helpmann's pantomimic gifts, de Valois created for him the Rake in *The Rake's Progress*, the Red King in *Checkmate* and Mr O'Reilly in *The Prospect Before Us*.

Helpmann played Oberon opposite Vivien Leigh in the Old Vic's 1937 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He directed Robert Donat in *Murder in the Cathedral* and Richard Burton in *The Tempest*. At Stratford (1948) he played Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* and the title roles in *Hamlet* and *King John* and at the same time travelled back and forth to London to dance at Covent Garden. For the Royal Opera he produced *Madam Butterfly*, followed by the hugely successful *Le Coq d'or*. He choreographed and danced with Moira Shearer in the 1948 film *The Red Shoes* and mimed multiple characters in a screen version of *The Tales of Hoffmann*. Other film roles included memorable characters in *Henry V*, *One of Our Aircraft is Missing*, *Caravan*, *The Big Money* and *55 Days in Peking*.

Helpmann and Moira Shearer sign autographs, 1948
National Library of Australia
nla.pic-vn3289842



Helpmann as the Bishop of Ely, *Henry V* [film], 1944
Performing Arts Collection
of South Australia



Visiting Home

In 1955, Helpmann returned to Australia leading the Old Vic Theatre Company with Katherine Hepburn in three Shakespeare plays. Given full star treatment by the media in each state capital, the opening night of *The Merchant of Venice* in Sydney was reported as 'the most glamorous theatrical opening night in history'. During the tour Helpmann emphasised that he felt it imperative that producers in Australia 'build their own stars and not depend on importations from overseas'.

Helpmann eventually danced in Australia as guest artist with the Royal Ballet in 1958-59 after finishing a season in Australia and New Zealand starring in Noël Coward's *Nude with Violin*. A front-page headline 'Helpmann, 50, Still a Power in Ballet' summed up the impact that Helpmann's appearances had on both the audience and the press.

In 1961-62, he directed the Old Vic Company's tour to Australia and New Zealand with Vivien Leigh as his leading lady.

Helpmann in J.C. Williamson production of *Nude with Violin*, 1958
National Library of Australia,
nla.pic-vn3720601





Marilyn Jones with artists of
The Australian Ballet,
The Merry Widow Act I, 1975
Photographer Walter Stringer,
National Library of Australia,
[nla.pic an24877679](#)

Returning Home

DANCE CREATOR

In 1964 The Australian Ballet commissioned Helpmann to create a ballet on an Australian theme. *The Display*, Helpmann's first work for The Australian Ballet, was hailed a triumph at the 1964 Adelaide Festival of Arts. It was the catalyst for his appointment as co-Artistic Director of the company with Peggy van Praagh, and for the company's invitation to participate in the 1965 Commonwealth Festival of Arts in Great Britain. He later directed tours in Europe, South America, Canada for Expo 67, and South-East Asia. Significant works he created for the Company included his Japanese themed ballet *Yügen* (1965), *Sun Music* (1968), described as a 'ballet which drenches the ears and eyes with sound and colour and movement' and his moon ballet *Perisynthyon* (1974). For this work Helpmann had ropes fixed to the flies above and engaged a Russian aerialist to train the dancers in acrobatics.

His contract with The Australian Ballet, to work for a total of six months a year, enabled him to keep in touch with former collaborators. He directed *Camelot* in London and directed Vivien Leigh in *La Contessa* in Newcastle upon Tyne. Helpmann's film career ranged from *The Quiller Memorandum* and *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland*, to the Childcatcher in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

The Merry Widow was Sir Robert's swan song for The Australian Ballet. He was in fact 'The Man Behind the Widow' and left his imprint on every detail.

Left: Artists of The Australian Ballet in *Perisynthyon*, 1974
National Library of Australia,
nla.pic-an24732866



Kathleen Gorham
and Barry Kitcher
in *The Display*
The Australian Ballet, 1964
National Archives of Australia:
AI200, L47086

Helpmann as Dr Coppelius in the
Australian Ballet's *Coppélia*, 1969
National Archives of Australia:
A1500, K20989

Helpmann as Sgt Pepper in
Fool on the Hill,
The Australian Ballet/ABC, 1975
John McKinnon photographer,
National Library of Australia,
nla.pic vn3305755



Dance / Performer

Helpmann continued to perform with The Australian Ballet. Helpmann appearances always lifted the Company's profile.

He portrayed Dr Coppélius in *Coppélia* in 1969 and during his direction of the 1970 Adelaide Festival of Arts he was the Don in Rudolf Nureyev's *Don Quixote*.

In 1972 he danced the 'Tango' in an Australian Ballet revival of Frederick Ashton's *Façade* and in the same year he and Frederick Ashton danced the Ugly Sisters in Ashton's *Cinderella*. In 1974 he shared his commitment as the newly crowned King of Melbourne's Moomba Festival with his Ugly Sister interpretation in *Cinderella*—this time with Ray Powell.

Helpmann was Sergeant Pepper in Gillian Lynne's *Fool on the Hill* which was choreographed for television in 1976. The following April he was guest artist with the Royal Ballet appearing in *Coppélia* and *Checkmate*. Sir Robert returned to London to dance the Tango from *Façade* with his original partner, Dame Margot Fonteyn, in a special Tribute to her at the Royal Opera House in May 1979. In July 1986, just weeks before his demise, Helpmann gave his last performance on the stage of Melbourne's State Theatre as the Red King in *Checkmate*.

Helpmann with Carolyn Rappel
in *Façade*,
The Australian Ballet, 1972
Walter Stringer photographer,
National Library of Australia,
nla.pic an214111267

Helpmann and Ray Powell in The Australian Ballet's *Cinderella*, 1972
Walter Stringer photographer,
National Library of Australia,
nla.pic an24732584





Helpmann with Geraldine Fitzgerald,
The Mango Tree, 1977
Courtesy Michael Pate

Not Just Dancing

In 1977 Helpmann played a down-and-out Professor preaching nationalism in Michael Pate's film *The Mango Tree*, and the following year was cast as Dr Roget in the science-fiction film *Patrick* directed by Richard Franklin. He directed the Australian production of *Dracula* with John Waters, and later, in partnership with Michael Edgley, recruited and directed *Stars of World Ballet* for two Australian tours led by Margot Fonteyn in 1978 and Maya Plisetskaya in 1979.

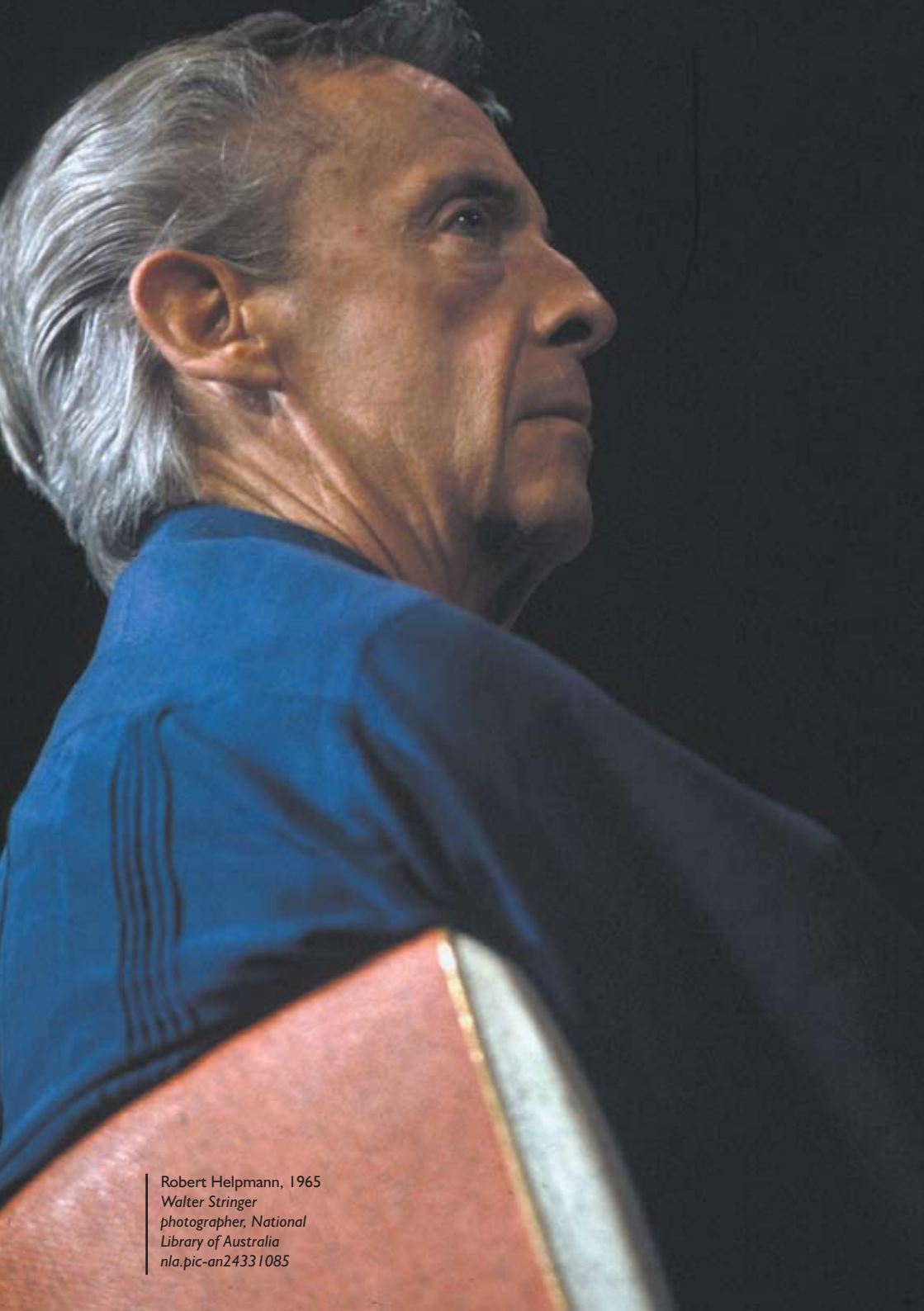
Now in his seventies Helpmann returned to London to rehearse Anthony Dowell at the Royal Ballet in the title role of *Hamlet*. He directed Lili Palmer in Ruth Wolff's *Sarah in America* in Washington DC, sang four numbers in *Colette* in Seattle and Denver, then played the glamorously sinister Cardinal Pirelli in Sandy Wilson's *Valmouth* at the Chichester Festival Theatre.

For The Australian Opera he directed *Alcina* in 1981 and 1983, *Romeo et Juliette* (1983) and *I Puritani* (1984). In 1984 he played with Googie Withers and John McCallum in Ted Willis' *Stardust* at the same time as making guest appearances in *A Country Practice*.

As Lord Alfred Douglas in the Sydney Theatre Company's 1983 production of Justin Fleming's *The Cobra* directed by Richard Wherrett, his performance was lauded as 'great theatre and not to be missed'.

Helpmann with Frederick Parslow in *The Cobra*, Sydney Theatre Company, 1983
Don McMurdo
photographer, National Library of Australia
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Robert Helpmann, 1965
Walter Stringer
photographer, National
Library of Australia
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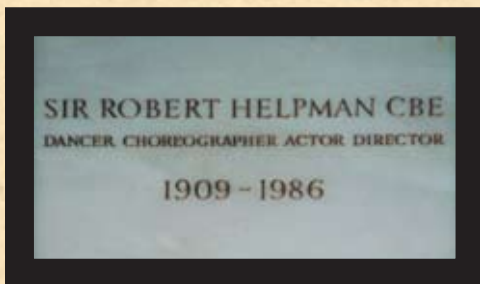
A Servant To Art

Dancers, actors, writers, singers, directors, entrepreneurs, politicians and sportspeople were among the congregation in St Andrews Cathedral to farewell the boy from Mount Gambier at his State funeral on 2 October 1986. The occasion was both theatrical and dignified. One tribute in the press to Sir Robert suggested that 'perhaps his only regret might have been that he would almost certainly have choreographed it all *that* much better if he'd been there to do it'.

Helpmann's name is commemorated across the performing arts. Judy Cassab's portrait of Sir Robert hangs in the Opera Theatre Foyer, Sydney Opera House; John Dowie's bronze sculpture of him graces Adelaide's Festival Theatre foyer; Mount Gambier's 528-seat Sir Robert Helpmann Theatre was named in his honour in 1984; the Government of New South Wales sponsors a biennial Robert Helpmann Dance Scholarship, and since its inauguration in 2001, the Helpmann Awards are presented annually for excellence in performing arts in Australia.

Sir Robert Helpmann was truly a 'theatrical wizard who wove magic to the last'.

Helpmann with
Joan Sutherland and
Margot Fonteyn, 1978
Don McMurdo
photographer, National
Library of Australia
nla.pic-an23397792



Memorial Plaque,
St Paul's Covent Garden,
the Actors' Church, London
Courtesy Dr Anna Bemrose

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