

Harold George Robinson

A MEMOIR

9 January 1919 – 9 March 2012

By Elena Philp



HAROLD ROBINSON, 2008
PHOTO: OTAGO DAILY TIMES

After I heard the news of Harold's death I deeply regretted not seeing him in his last years. I spent the rest of the day pondering alone over the remarkable life of this man, who had made an impact on so many people in his long life. Some of us lead monochromatic lives, or perhaps ones of gentle pastels, but Harold's life was full of dramatic colour applied with great flourish.

After serving in WWII, he was successfully accepted into the Sadler's Wells Ballet at the age of 26, remarkably late according to conventional thinking. But Harold was always destined to flout the rules of 'convention'. After performing with Sadler's Wells, he went on to perform with the Vienna State Ballet then joined the International Ballet in London, and his flamboyance was able to shine when he joined the Windmill Follies in 1952. New Zealand was privileged to benefit from his talents and his teaching when he returned here to live in Auckland, where he spent many years teaching dance drama.

Amongst former students and friends paying tribute at his funeral were the artist/dancer Rosina Kamphuis and Belly dancer Monique Feron. Unsurprisingly, Harold had planned his farewell with the celebrant some years earlier and ever the director, had specified no red or blue flowers and also that tributes were to be no longer than three minutes, 'Any longer than that and they're off!' We had a giggle over that.

I was one of many who took classes with Harold at the Vivien Leigh Theatre under the Adult Education system. I tentatively began classes in 1969 at the (I thought) advanced age of 21! The last time I had attended a class was nine years prior when my parents could no longer afford to send me to ballet classes at the Nettleton-Edwards school. I was the only Polynesian in Harold's class, as I was at the ballet school. I was timid and unsure.

Class began at the barre to the rousing strains of 'O Fortuna' from 'Carmina Burana'. This was my first experience of dance-drama based on dancer/choreographer Margaret Barr's technique. Harold commanded us in his inimitable way to 'ripple through' our torsos and to 'flick out' our fingers as we threw an arm out to the side. The music was stirring and I forgot my inhibitions as Harold led by example - strong, committed, and dramatic. I shyly thanked him afterwards and confessed that I was 'just a housewife and mother' and it was wonderful to be moving again. Some weeks later I was thrilled when he said to me 'You are not *just* a housewife, you are a *dancer*'. And under his tutelage and guidance I rediscovered my passion and

HAROLD ROBINSON, 1946



became one.

Almost two years passed and we all blossomed, whether aspiring to perform or to simply savour the joy of movement. Harold's passion was infectious and inspirational. A very young Kilda Northcott came to classes, sixteen and still attending classical ballet. Her exceptional gifts were evident from the start. How many New Zealand dancers did Harold's artistic fervour touch? I would venture very, very many carry his imprint upon them. His discerning eye and rigorous training unleashed

the latent talents of every individual who would allow it, so that not only did they dance, they danced as themselves. Harold valued individuality and he never stifled the essence of his students or dancers.

We became friends. I visited his tiny but stylish apartment in Parliament Street and would sometimes drop into 'Maree du Maru', the bridal shop where Harold worked with typical flair and verve. As well as being a great teacher, Harold was a generous friend and had an empathetic understanding of the itinerant life of performers.



HAROLD ROBINSON, 1949

Early in 1971 he began choreographing a

major work 'The Seven Deadly Sins'. I have forgotten which sin was allocated to Kilda but he decided that I would be *Lust*. Me, the Sunday School girl! Then the musical 'Hair' burst into Auckland in March to a mixed reception. I auditioned and to my surprise, was accepted. I was thrilled, and torn by this, as it would mean withdrawing from Harold's production.

He was graciousness itself, 'Dear, this is a wonderful opportunity. You must go'. I went to Christchurch to join the show. A little later we caught up there when Harold took me and my small son out to dinner, keen to know how things were going. Harold was very kind to my son Sebastian whenever I had to bring him along to class. When I planned to marry during a break before the Australian tour, Harold gifted me my wedding dress. He suggested the design (very demure), purchased the fabric from 'Maree du Maru' and had it made. That was incredibly special.

When I reflected on the fullness of his life, from performing as a ten year old, to his years as a layperson in the Anglican Church, to his time serving in the army and then in his mid twenties becoming a classical ballet dancer, I realised how much his life experiences informed his teaching. However his insight was innate as was his love of life.

Harold recognised people's longing to dance and brought it into the light. He whipped bodies (and his own) into shape but class was leavened with his wicked humour. Harold demanded commitment, discipline, passion and daring. Qualities that he himself lived by. He gave us the guts to aspire, to surpass our expectations, but he was always kind. Forty-three years on his legacy remains forever - live fully, share generously and love passionately. Farewell Harold and thank you. ■