

## SHIRLEY ANNETTE CH'ANG

### ROYAL ACADEMY OF DANCE - LIFE MEMBER 114061

20 July 1938 – 2 September 2018

#### In Memoriam

By Shirley's daughters, Sharyn Ch'ang and Kerryn Abagi

We are deeply saddened by the loss of RAD Life Member Shirley Annette Ch'ang (nee Wong Poy) aged 80. She died peacefully in Sydney, Australia at hospital on 2 September 2018. Shirley became an RAD member in 1950.

Among many achievements during Shirley's life, ballet is her first and lasting love. She passed the RAD Solo Seal examination in 1956 - at the time, the first New Zealand born Chinese to do so. Soon after, she was invited to join the Sadler's Wells Ballet Company in London. Unfortunately Shirley could not take up the offer because there was no chaperone to travel with her from New Zealand as her parents passed away when she was only nine. However, Shirley's enjoyment of dance was life-long; as a dancer, teacher and devotee of the arts. Here is part of her story.

Shirley was born on 20 July 1938 in the rural town of Pahiatua, in the Wairarapa District of New Zealand. Being the youngest in a family already endowed with girls – Dorothy then 17, Florrie 13, and Elsie 11, Shirley's babyhood was a precious addition to the female ensemble. None of Shirley's sisters had the opportunity to learn ballet as they were either at school or working in Pahiatua's Main Street fruit shop and the local market-gardens owned by their parents. Her ancestral home of Gualiang, near Guangzhou, in southern China was also rural, so there was nothing in her family background that foreshadowed her love and dedication to dance.

Life wasn't easy without her parents. Shirley's sisters needed to manage the fruit shop and market-gardens, and sadly Dorothy died young. Shirley lived with her sisters, who also had their own growing families to look after. However throughout all this, ballet was her constant. As a determined and passionate student, Shirley would think nothing of bicycling for miles to ballet classes, then dance, and cycle all the way home in the dark. Her sisters were wonderfully supportive too, accompanying her to special ballet lessons or competitions where Shirley would often win an award. She showed early promise dancing en pointe when girls her age were still on demi-pointe, and her performing prowess included classical, tap, character dance and singing performances, in those days at weddings throughout New Zealand, or the local Pahiatua shops.

One delightful World War II story of Shirley as a child was when the local Pahiatua cake shop owner Hr Hicks taught Shirley the 1920s song, "Nellie Kelly, I Love you". Shirley would sit on top of the piano, or dance round, and Shirley Temple-like would perform to raise the spirits of the Friday night crowds, or fund-raise for the town.

Another childhood memory was Shirley's first classical ballet solo. She danced this to Johann Strauss' "Voices of Spring", a composer whose music she enjoyed throughout her life. She also had a special skipping dance, where she tapped away to the marching beat of Abe Holzmänn's "Blaze Away". In more recent years, both pieces were often performed by Andre Rieu, whose

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performances brought her much joy. Whatever her age, Shirley's eyes would light up and her feet would dance to the music whenever she heard it.

Shirley was inspired by ballet heroes she met including Edouard Borovansky, the Czech born founder of the Borovansky Ballet (precursor to the Australian Ballet), taking dance lessons in New Zealand with renowned Danish dancer Poul Gnatt (who founded the New Zealand Ballet), and in 1962, being introduced to Dame Margot Fonteyn by Musical Director Dudley Simpson, having watched her perform with David Blair and the touring Royal Ballet in two back to back performances in Wellington. Wonderful memories Shirley would vividly recount.

In 1961 her passion for ballet extended to establishing her own "Shirley Ch'ang Ballet School" at the Milverton Kindergarten Hall in Palmerston North. Ballet barres were hard to come by so Shirley's husband, Dr T.S. Ch'ang, a lecturer in Animal Genetics at Massey University, turned his hand to making some to equip the studio.

Her students included primary to high school age girls, and at one time, even the aptly named "Hairy Fairy Male Squash Club Team" from the Palmerston North Linton Street Squash Club. They retained Shirley as their "coach" to do a Swan Lake tribute for landmark club celebrations. Not surprisingly they were better at forehand drives than plies and pirouettes! But this reflected Shirley's sense of fun and enjoyment of dance whoever the performers.

When Shirley, her husband, and two daughters, moved to Sydney in 1968, Shirley no longer had her own school, but continued to assist teaching ballet from time to time by running RAD syllabus ballet clinics for students from local ballet studios, in particular the Helene France School of Ballet and Tanya Pearson Ballet School in Forestville, Sydney. Shirley's artistic talents also extended to costume design and dress-making. She was a beautiful seamstress and clever designer, always willing to make tutus and teach ballet mums how to make costumes for their daughters for local concerts, or just stitch on shoe ribbons and prepare toe shoes for beginners en pointe.

Throughout her life, Shirley was an enthusiastic supporter of the dance arts. From cheering on generations of Australian Ballet stars including some favourites, David McAllister, Li Cunxin, Steven Heathcote, Fiona Tonkin and Lucinda Dunn, attending international classical ballet scholarships, ballroom dance competitions and Olympic ice dancing, to assisting ballet teachers and budding ballerinas, dance in all its forms, was part of Shirley's DNA. She will be forever missed.