

# **A TIME TO DANCE**

*Robyn Ashford-Martin*

Pay mobile phone bill

Collect prescription

Beads for Vanessa's tiara

Lipstick

Melissa ticked the last item on her shopping list and glanced at her watch. Ten minutes until she was due to meet Eleanor for coffee. Enough time to pop to the loo and neaten herself up. She hadn't seen Eleanor since they were in the ballet company more than twenty years ago. She mused on how they'd ended up marrying their pas de deux partners and having daughters who shared their passion for dance. Their reunion today was to discuss where to send Vanessa and Emily for the best professional dance training available.

They'd arranged to meet at a coffee shop in the Wintergarden, so she headed for the Ladies room there. While waiting in the queue, she recalled the first time she saw Alex in class. She'd admired his clean technique, and his tight bum. She giggled at the memory and received some curious glances from the ladies in the queue. After she emerged from the cubicle, she checked her make-up in the full-length mirror. Eleanor's words before each class echoed in her memory.

'A girl is never completely dressed without her lipstick.'

Melissa unwrapped her new lipstick and applied it with the same ritual she used every time she did her stage make-up. Centre of the top lip out to the edge

on the right side, same on the left, then a sweep across her bottom lip from left to right, press both lips together, pout into a kiss and a wink for luck.

As she pouted and winked, she was pushed from behind and felt herself surging towards the mirror. Her body pressed against the glass and for a moment she saw her eyes reflected, in a horrified stare.

She stepped out onto a red carpet with gold fleur-de-lis patterns. She looked down at the patent black leather shoes on her feet and turned around to gaze at her reflection in the mirror. The child who looked back was wearing her best box pleated green dress with a red overcoat and matching pill box hat. The height of 1960's fashion.

'Come on! Mummy wants to buy a programme!' her sister Bridget tugged her hand. A surge of voices surrounded her as the crowd of people moved through the foyer.

'Programmes \$1, programmes \$1,'

One voice penetrated the air, strident above the chorus of conversations. Bridget kept dragging her towards the woman with the harsh monotone who was holding the programme aloft. While her mother paid the money, Melissa stared up at the huge marble statue of an eagle perched on the ornate rail at the foot of the staircase. Then they moved with the crowd around the sweeping golden walls of the foyer and past opulent candelabras set onto bronze shields. When she stepped into the auditorium, Melissa stared at the magnificent gold and blue proscenium which framed the deep blue velvet curtain. At that moment, she was overcome with a feeling of destiny. She knew she would be back.

The usherette showed them to their seats which had to be flipped down to sit on.

'What's this place called mummy?' she heard herself ask.

'Her Majesty's Theatre.'

'What are we going to see?'

'A ballet called *Le Papillon* it means the butterfly. Bridget, let your sister have a look at the programme.'

Melissa flicked through the pages of the programme seeing only the photos of the dancers. She had never heard a live orchestra before and the cacophony of all the instruments tuning up and playing snatches of melodies stirred a feeling of excitement. Anticipation surged through her body as the auditorium lights dimmed and a spotlight followed the conductor to the centre front of the pit. She joined in with the polite applause from the audience, as though she knew it was the proper thing to do. The conductor raised his baton and the entire theatre held its breath before the baton came down and the strings began the fluttering themes. Melissa was captivated. When the curtain rose vertically to reveal a myriad of butterflies frolicking and dancing in dappled sunlight, she became enveloped in a magical world where she knew, one day, she would belong.

'Hurry up, we have to get backstage to thank Lynette for the tickets.'

Melissa, still dazed by what she had just seen was jolted back to reality. The performance was over, the lights were on in the auditorium and they were pushing through the crowd.

'Melissa, keep hold of Bridget's hand. I don't want you getting lost.'

They made their way through the Grand Central Arcade to Elizabeth Street and the Stage Door.

It was down a small alleyway, not at all what Melissa expected, dirty and dingy, so far removed from the magical world she had just seen. Once

inside, they came to a tiny room with Dutch doors. The bottom section of the door was closed, the top was open to reveal the doorman, Lance a jolly looking gentleman with a round face and grey bushy eyebrows that raised high on his forehead when he looked down at Melissa and Bridget.

‘We’re here to see Lynette. The Hammond family from Mackay. She is expecting us.’

‘Ah yes, and you must be Melissa and Bridget.’ He lent over the top of the door, ‘Did you enjoy the ballet?’

‘It was beautiful,’ sighed Melissa.

‘Another little butterfly in the making,’ he smiled and nodded them through, ‘Lynette will meet you at the top of the stairs.’

Melissa gasped when she saw the enormous gilt edged mirror on the wall at the top of the narrow wooden staircase. On the floor, beneath the mirror was a flat wooden box which contained yellowish powder with larger orange fragments in it.

‘That’s the rosin box,’ explained her Mummy, ‘before the performance, the dancers put rosin on their pointe shoes to stop them slipping on the stage.’

‘Ahhtchoo!’

The rosin dust had tickled Melissa’s nose.

‘If you want to be a dancer you’ll have to get used to that,’ she warned.

‘Daphne Hammond, look at you!’ exclaimed an exuberant voice from along the corridor. Lynette came running towards them, ‘and this must be little Bridget and Melissa,’ she knelt down and hugged the girls close to her enveloping them in a cloud of strong floral perfume.

‘Let me guess, Melissa is the little ballerina?’

Melissa nodded and stared at Lynette who, out of costume and make-up looked quite ordinary.

‘Slip off those lovely shiny shoes and point your toe for me.’

Melissa obeyed as though Lynette was her own ballet teacher. Lynette inspected Melissa’s legs and feet closely.

‘Not much of an instep, she’ll have to work at that, but she has god legs. Take your coat off and show me 5<sup>th</sup> position of the arms.’

Melissa slipped her coat and hat off and curved her arms above her head.

‘Nice soft fingers now, and tuck your thumb in, see like this,’ she demonstrated how her thumb was in alignment with her middle finger and Melissa copied her exactly.

‘Oh yes, good, very pretty. If you work very hard, one day you might be a butterfly on the stage.’

While Lynette and Mummy continued catching up on gossip, Melissa gazed at herself in the large gilt edged mirror and imagined she was a butterfly. She began doing ‘arm waves’ as she’d been taught in class and then little bourrés on her demi pointes. She couldn’t wait until she could go up on tippy toes like the big girls. She became more daring, twirling and then jumping as she had just seen in the performance. As she turned and leapt, she lost her balance and fell, crashing into the mirror.

‘Melissa....’ the voice faded into an distant echo as she swirled amongst a kaleidoscope of light, surrounded by a pandemonium of sounds. Musicians warming up, technicians hammering sets, orders being shouted across the stage. ‘Bring up 22. Take that out. Now circuit 25.’

‘Ladies and Gentlemen of the Queensland Ballet, this is your one hour call, your one hour call, warm up is about to commence on stage. Full company to the stage please.’

Melissa emerged from the mirror dressed in her ballet practice clothes. Her hair was swept up in an elegant twisted style and her face was heavily made up with long false eyelashes accentuating her enormous blue eyes.

‘Melissa, stop hogging the rosin box, we’ll be late for warm up.’ Eleanor scolded her.

‘You can talk, you’re always in there,’ she teased.

Together they made their way to the stage where Stephen and Alex were already at the ballet barre stretching and warming up.

‘Where did you get to Melissa?’ asked Alex

‘We were getting worried. Thought the ghost might have got you’, joked Stephen.

‘Very funny, you know he only haunts the bio box,’ she retorted.

‘I found her by the rosin box. I think she wants to take over as rosin queen,’ joked Eleanor.

‘Oh no, you can keep that title. Just leave enough to get me through those piqué turns up the rake at the end. Anyway, where’s Herbert, I thought he was taking warm up tonight?’

‘I think he’s doing a press interview, you know about this being our last performance in the Maj before it’s pulled down and all that,’ replied Alex.

‘Yeah, it’s so sad. Fancy reducing this lovely old theatre to a pile of rubble,’ said Eleanor. ‘I know it’s primitive backstage, and the new one they’re building across the river will be so much better, but I have lots of fond memories of this place. I wonder what will happen to the crew. Some of them have been working here for years.’

Albert, one of the male principal dancers called them all to attention.

‘I think Herbert has been delayed with the press so we’d better start. Face the barre and tendue close, then plié, repeat with the other foot and then do to

the front, side and back and rise and balance. Ready, and 1 and 2 and plié up..' He continued counting for the exercise as the dancers moved in unison articulating their feet on the floor, maintaining their erect posture and concentrating intently on their balance and placement.

The warm up class progressed through the familiar sequences they did each day before every performance. Melissa could feel the heaviness in her thighs from the exertion of the pas de deux she had danced with Alex in the matinee a few hours earlier. She was thankful that this evening she only had one ballet *Le Papillon* to do. Tonight it was Eleanor and Stephen's turn to perform the pas de deux from *Spartacus*.

When they completed the warm up, Janet the stage manager walked onstage and announced,

'Half hour call everyone, this is your half hour call. You have 30 minutes until beginners. Could you please clear the stage as soon as possible for the crew to mop and do final focusing. Thank you, and have a good one everyone.'

The dancers collected their shoes, leg warmers and items of clothing they had shed during the warm up and made their way to their dressing rooms. Warren, who was opening the programme with a solo, pushed his way past them and ran upstairs to the gents loo.

'Hope that's his final chuck before he goes on,' said Stephen, 'poor bloke, I'd hate to get that nervous before every show.'

In the ladies dressing room, the female dancers put the final touches to their make-up, took out their pin curls, sprayed them hard with hair spray, checked their costumes and lined up their pointe shoes in the order they were to be worn.

'Has anyone got any chocolate?' came a request from the gents room next door.

'Yeah, coming over,' replied one of the girls who threw a block of chocolate over the top of the low dividing wall.

'Ow you clocked me then!'

'Well learn to duck next time.'

There were no private conversations in the dressing rooms, but after living and working together for months on tour, the company was more like an enlarged family.

'Is Warren OK?' one of the girls asked.

'Yeah he's just getting changed, you're right now aren't you Wazza?' replied Alex.

'Ladies and Gentlemen of the Queensland Ballet this is your beginners call, beginners on stage please. Ladies and Gentlemen of the Queensland Theatre Orchestra, this is your first call, your first call, thank you.' Janet's voice crackled over the tannoy.

'Chookas Wazza!' they all chorused to him.

'Have a good one mate, last one in the Maj.'

Melissa gazed at her pensive reflection in the mirror and sighed. She recalled Eleanor's reaction when she had wished her good luck for her debut performance.

'Don't you know that it's bad luck to wish a dancer good luck?' she asked with a horrified look on her face. 'In professional theatre we always say "chookas".'

Melissa was sad that this would be her last performance in the lovely old theatre.

*Oh well, it's show time*, she told herself and picked up her lipstick applying it according to her ritual, centre of the top lip out to the edge on the right side, same on the left, then a sweep across her bottom lip from left to right, press both lips together, pout into a kiss and a wink for luck. She wrapped a shawl around her shoulders, pulled on a tracksuit to keep

warm and headed downstairs to watch the first half from the wings. She didn't want to miss a moment.

Warren was onstage practising his most difficult series of jumps and turns as the orchestra was tuning up.

'Maestro de Lacey, this is your call to the pit,' announced Janet, 'Places please Warren, standby for house lights out, standby dome for the conductor, standby front of house curtain. LX cue one, go.'

The maestro tugged his waistcoat and with an extra jaunty spring in his step, strode out into the pit under the glare of the spotlight as the audience politely applauded his entrance. He raised his baton and as the orchestra hit the 1<sup>st</sup> strong chord. Janet called,

'House curtain out go, LX cue two, go.'

Warren ran out on stage to commence his virtuoso non-stop solo.

Melissa watched intently, her muscles tightening in sympathy with his when he executed his ménage around the stage. During his difficult turning sequence the other dancers gave him encouraging 'Tish, tish,' noises from the wings imitating the clang of cymbals in time with the music. He finished with a triple turn at the end and dropped to his knee with a flourish of his arms to hit the final pose.

The applause surged from the auditorium.

'Bravo!' called Herbert their artistic director. The dancers knew they'd performed well when he cheered, and he never missed a performance. The clapping continued and Warren took several curtain calls.

Eleanor tapped Melissa on her shoulder,

'Can you check my back please, am I all tucked in?' Melissa made sure that the waistband of Eleanor's tights wasn't showing above the plunging back line of her costume.

'You're fine.' She squeezed Eleanor's hands, 'Chookas, be wonderful.'

Warren exited the stage and the lights dimmed.

The orchestra began playing the lilting string introduction to the famous *Spartacus* pas de deux, the flute trilling above as the lights gradually came up to reveal Stephen and Eleanor on opposite sides of the stage moving towards each other. Melissa knew every pitfall. At each difficult spot she held her breath and exhaled with relief when it all happened smoothly. For the final grand crescendo, Eleanor ran to Stephen from the opposite side of the stage and threw herself horizontally at full speed. He caught her in his arms at waist height and then she was airborne for a split second while he changed his grip to raise her above his head in a full arm lift. As the solo violin carried the melody, he lowered her onto his shoulder and she slid down his body to gently land on the tip of her pointe shoe for *Spartacus* and *Flavia's* final passionate moments before he leaves her to go into battle.

The audience erupted in enthusiastic applause which startled Melissa. She was caught up with the passion of the moment, living the role off stage as much as she did onstage. She felt an instant of *déjà vu*, and was taken back to the first performance she saw in the theatre. She recalled the excitement that surged through her and how she had wanted to be a part of that magical world on the stage. In that moment, as she watched from the wings, Melissa became aware that now she really did belong. She had fulfilled part of her destiny.

During interval, they rosined their pointe shoes, and just before the beginners call put on their silver lycra butterfly costumes with full circle primitive pleated silk wings and took their kimonos and pointe shoes to preset in their designated spots side stage.

There were several scenes in *Le Papillon* and they had to change from courtiers to butterflies so quickly there was no time to get to the dressing room and back. Janet used to joke that during the quick changes she could be assured that all of the crew would be present on stage.

After presetting their costumes and shoes, they waited side stage to be given clearance by Janet to go onstage. The set consisted of a massive fractured mirror wall which was so heavy that even on the counter weighted system, it took 4 mechanists to fly it in.

'Heads upstage, heads upstage,' announced the head mechanist as he gave the order for the four burly men to take the brakes off and slowly lower the wall in to the stage level. While that was happening, the floor electricians were changing the coloured gels in the side lights which were mounted on steel vertical booms in the wings.

'More smoke, we need more smoke downstage,' called the head electrician. One of the crew picked up a portable smoke machine which made a loud whooshing sound as it blasted smoke across the front of the stage just behind the lush blue velvet curtain.

'Clear please,' instructed Janet, 'the maestro is in position, beginners onstage please, beginners onstage thank you, we are ready to go.'

The dancers did a last minute check of each other's golden butterfly wings to make sure they were all popped onto their backs correctly and moved into their positions ready for curtain up. There was a hush after the applause for the orchestra died down and the dancers looked for their cue light. They had to begin on the first note of the music as the curtain went up, so they were airborne when the audience first glimpsed them.

The corps de ballet flitted through the dappled light to the famous Offenbach waltz and Melissa ceased to feel the heaviness and soreness in her muscles. She became a butterfly leaping, soaring, her silken wings fluttering, creating patterns in the smoke as she felt the utter exhilaration of performing.

At the end of the scene, the corps de ballet dancers exited to change into their black, yellow and red courtiers' costumes as the three principal performers played out the drama between Papillon, (the maiden) the Prince and Hamsa the evil one who turns Papillon into a butterfly. Melissa puffed and heaved as she untied her pointe shoe ribbons and dragged off her sweaty lycra all-over. She'd unpoppered the wings just enough to get out of her costume and after putting on her courtier pointe shoes and kimono, set her butterfly costume and shoes where she needed them for her next quick change. She grabbed a tissue from the box on the props table, dabbed down her face, binned the tissue and ran on for her next entrance.

The courtiers' scene involved several freezes where the corps de ballet were made into statues by the power of Hamsa's spell. During each freeze, Melissa tried to absorb as much as she could of the atmosphere of the theatre; the feel of the hot lights on her skin, the glare of the boom lights, the warm blackness of the auditorium and the notes of the orchestra wafting from the pit. For a moment, she caught the maestro's eye and he smiled at her. Melissa was one of the most musical dancers in the company and Maestro de Lacey had a soft spot for her. The freeze braking strident chord put her back on auto pilot and she moved into her next position. Two more position changes and then it was the chaotic scene where Papillon was condemned to be a butterfly for ever and the ladies of the corps had 32

bars of music for their quick change back into butterflies.

As soon as the lights went down, everybody ran to their assigned places in the wings and breathlessly fumbled with their pointe shoe ribbons, peeling the silk kimonos off their even more sweaty backs, all the while counting the bars of the music, knowing where they had to be up to in the change if they were going to make it back on stage in time. Their male partners onstage had to help with the quick change, making sure to hand their lycra all-overs to them the right way around. Then, while the girls tied their pointe shoe ribbons, the guys had to popper their wings onto their backs. Alex gave Melissa's shoulder a quick squeeze for reassurance. The ladies joined hands and walked onstage in the blackout, found their marks and settled in their positions on the floor, with their silken wings draped around them like cocoons. As the gauze front cloth flew out and each butterfly was revealed in her own spotlight, the dancers heard the audible gasp of wonderment from the audience. It happened every night at that moment.

The poignant music swelled as the dancers moved in a subdued way around Papillon and her Prince who could not save her.

Just those nasty piqué turns to do and it's almost all over, thought Melissa.

In her peripheral vision she saw something unusual in the wings and realized that all of the electricians were moving closer to the stage pointing every available smoke machine towards the dancers onstage.

Great, they're going to do last night high jinx now, she thought.

Sure enough, they all turned on the machines at the same time and the stage filled with smoke. Where

the boom lights hit the smoke, the dancers were blinded.

Here goes nothing, thought Melissa as she launched into her piqué turns up the slope of the rake, unable to see where she was going through the clouds of smoke. Somehow she managed to keep her balance, but became disorientated at the end of the sequence. The music changed to the final flurry where the butterflies repeatedly hurled themselves against the fractured mirrored wall. The girls had a technique where they would contract their bodies so that it appeared from the audience that they made contact with the wall, but they were actually several centimetres away from it.

Each time Melissa approached the wall it seemed to be in a different place, as though the mirrored surface was warping. She hurled herself against it and, as the lights began to dim at the end of the scene, a shard of mirror pierced her heart. She was a butterfly impaled on a collectors pin. The pain in her heart seared through her body and she quivered and fluttered. Her body fell limp and the mirror warped around her, creating a fractured cocoon.

She was in a silver evening dress of a most distinctive and different design. The fabric melded to her body as though it was a second skin. Two doors slid open and she stepped out into a stainless steel walled foyer with a high skylight. A surge of people carried her into an auditorium with stark concrete walls and functional grey seating. She knew something or someone was missing. The front of house curtain was moss green trimmed with gold, the only colours in the Spartan space. The lights dimmed and lettering appeared above the proscenium arch.

*Please stand for the president of the Republic of Australia Mr Kelvin Rudduck.*

Obediently the audience stood, a drum rolled and spotlights from all over the theatre chased around until they focused on one spot at the centre of the curtain and Mr Rudduck appeared.

‘Good evening everyone. Now I’ve been known for a long time as the media tart and I have to say that it gives me great pleasure to be here this evening in front of you, the audience here, and the rest of the world who are with us on webcast, but I can assure you that tonight I will not be making a long speech. I’d just like to say that I am most proud of this wonderful new theatre built on the same site, if a few floors higher than the old Her Majesty’s Theatre. As a boy born in Brisbane, it gives me great pride to declare the Republican Theatre open!’

The audience applauded and the orchestra launched into a rousing rendition of *Waltzing Matilda*. The green and gold curtain rose to reveal a massed choir. Melissa groaned inwardly, it was going to be a long and tedious night. The first half of the programme was devoted to music and the second to drama and dance which she enjoyed much more. The next item flashed up on the screen above the proscenium,

*Final pas de deux from Le Papillon performed by Vanessa Davenport and Blair McDowell.*

Melissa was stunned. My Vanessa, my own daughter!

She watched in amazement as the familiar choreography unfurled. Every step was the same but it was her daughter dancing exquisitely with a handsome young man partnering her.

We obviously chose the best training for her, she thought, but as the pas de deux progressed, the ache in her heart grew and tears poured down her face. Her darling husband Alex wasn’t there to share Vanessa’s triumph.

The rest of the gala was a blur for Melissa and after the final curtain, she made her way backstage somehow knowing how to find the stage door. There was a long queue and one young harassed security officer who was trying to pacify the crowd demanding to be let in.

‘I’m sorry ladies and gentlemen, we have to take extra security precautions this evening with the Presidential tour backstage. Please be patient as we are experiencing delays with our retinal scanner. Yes, your name please.’

‘Melissa Davenport.’

‘Stand in front of the scanner and do not blink for two seconds,’ he instructed.

She stepped up to the machine and stared into the eerie light.

‘You have blue security clearance, which gives you entry to the first restricted zone only.’

He fastened a blue bracelet around her right wrist.

‘If you enter a zone you do not have clearance for, this band will tighten around your wrist and our security staff will be alerted. If you do not leave the zone within 30 seconds you will be detained. Do you understand?’

‘I think so, I mean yes I do,’ she stuttered. How different it all was to when good-natured Lance was the doorman.

Melissa entered the Green Room and saw Vanessa up the far end chatting to a group of dancers.

‘Mum!’ Vanessa ran the full length of the room to embrace her.

‘Did you have a good seat, did you see everything?’

‘Yes darling I did and you were absolutely superb, we’re, I mean I’m very proud of you my beautiful butterfly, if only..’

‘I know, I wish Dad could be here too. But hey, did you see where the cameras were?’

‘No, I didn’t see any at all.’

‘They’re tiny and they’re hidden all over the theatre. I’ll bet Eleanor and Emily were watching the webcast. I hope there weren’t too many cameras on my feet!’

Melissa laughed and hugged her daughter.

‘Dancers never change do they, always worried about how good their feet look.’

Vanessa took her mother’s hand.

‘Come on Mum, I’ve got something really special to show you.’

She led her along a stark grey corridor and up a flight of stairs. Beside the door which led to the stage, was the original enormous gilt edged mirror from the Maj.

The blue band tightened around Melissa’s wrist.

‘I don’t think I’m meant to be here Vanessa’

‘Yes you are, just touch it Mum.’

She let go her daughter’s hand and approached the mirror. The band tightened even more around her wrist which began to ache. She reached out to touch the surface of the mirror. It became liquid, her hand, and then her body melded with the mirror.

The pain hit her as though she had smashed into a wall. There was a heavy weight on her chest.

‘Be careful lifting that off her.’ The voice sounded familiar

‘I think she’s coming around.’

The ache in her chest eased as she felt the weight lift. Melissa opened her eyes and realized she was lying on the floor of the Ladies in the Wintergarden. There was a sea of faces around her.

‘It’s amazing, there’s not a scratch on her!’

‘What happened?’ she asked.

‘The mirror smashed and fell on top of you,’ that familiar voice again.

'Eleanor? Is that you?'

'Yes Melissa it's me, I came in here and found you on the floor. Are you OK?'

'I think so.'

She sat up slowly and felt a gripping pain around her right wrist.

'It's just my...'

As she drew it closer to her, she saw a tinge of blue bruising and an imprint, as though a band had squeezed into her flesh.