

Mary Heath

83, West End,
Ex-ballerina/teacher

Interview JANE ARMITSTEAD

I was born at the end of World War II and times were tough. Dad (Arthur) worked on our family fruit farm in Port Macquarie, where I grew up, and together my mum (Elsie) and siblings (William, Joan and Margaret), we helped where we could.

Tragedy hit our family early when my baby sister, Frances, died when she was about six months old. I was about two or three at the time. Mum never liked to talk about it much but she did want to be closer to her family who were living in Queensland.

We moved to Queensland when I was about six.

Dad got a job bricklaying and did what he could but we never had much money.

We could never afford to do anything like ballet or music lessons. We also never had a television but I remember my friend, Lynette Craig, was learning ballet and I was so jealous of her. I used to watch her do classes and thought I'd love to try it one day.

Growing up, I'd help the local fruiter deliver fruit and vegies to households to get pocket money. I spent that money buying tickets to see my first ballet.

It was the Scheherazade by the Borovansky Ballet (now known as the Queensland Ballet Company) and Martin Rubinstein was the principal dancer. I'd go on to become great friends with Martin. He was wonderful.

When I saw that ballet, I was about 13 or 14, I was mesmerised by it all; the sets, scenery and music. It was all incredible. It was the first time I'd seen live theatre and it was magic.

I was 14 when I left school to work. I wanted to bring in money for the family and got a job at a newsagent kiosk in Albert St in Brisbane.

A couple of years later, I saw an advertisement in the newspaper that Charles Lisner (founder of Queensland

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Ballet) was taking ballet classes in Fortitude Valley. I had to go. I was hooked. I went to class practically every afternoon after work and practised incredibly hard. I loved it. Charles was a wonderful teacher.

Most dancers start when they're very young but I was passionate and hardworking so I quickly made up for lost time.

I went to Melbourne when I was 19 and worked part time as a costing clerk while doing ballet classes at the Borovansky Ballet School. I auditioned to perform with the Ballet Guild which the late Lauren Martyn was running at the time, and I did my first performance with them. Of course, at that time, it wasn't paid but it was exciting.

I was about 19 when I came back to Queensland for a holiday and I caught up with Charles. He was thinking about starting the Queensland Ballet Company and wanted me to join the group. I became the company's first principal ballerina in 1961. It was an incredible time.

We toured regionally taking ballet to country towns and performed on



MUCH LOVED: Former ballerina Mary Heath at home at Blue Care Tangara; and dancing on stage in the 1970s. Picture: Mark Cranitch



television for Channel 9 and the ABC.

I will never forget one particular performance. I was doing a solo to Valse Triste with music by (Jean) Sibelius and had a lilac costume on. The spotlight was on me and when the curtain went up, the audience erupted in applause. They loved me. That was one of the highlights of my time performing. To know people loved

me and my dancing was something special.

Times were very different back then. I wasn't paid for a long time. I had to buy my own shoes, make my own costumes and tutus but it was a wonderful time.

I stayed dancing with the company for about 12 years before I stopped at 34 to become a teacher and an examiner.

Valerie, Charles' wife, and I ran the Queensland Ballet School together. I was a very good teacher and remained teaching until the beginning of COVID-19 last year.

I taught people dance but also how to be wonderful people with discipline and values. Ballet was my life. I never married or had any children but I'm lucky I've had the fulfilling life I've had. I still love going to watch the ballet as often as I can. I moved to Blue Care Tangara in West End about four years ago and loved it because of its proximity to art galleries and theatre.

It's a beautiful place to be and I have million dollar views.

I will keep going to watch performances for as long as I can.

I miss dancing but I'm grateful to run into past students of mine, who still call me 'Miss Heath'. They remind me of what I've contributed to dance and the magic of ballet.