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**THE BYRON BAY** region on the North Coast of NSW is known to boast a musician on every hill. What is barely known is that on one particularly glorious ridge above a quilt of pastoral green is a prima ballerina who once performed on the most illustrious stages of the world, at one time 100 cities in four electrifying months.

Ask her today about her extraordinary life and 86-year-old Irina Baronova can scarcely believe it herself – that as one of the three so-called “Baby Ballerinas” with the legendary Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, she danced in London for King George V and Queen Mary (and then their successors, King George VI and Queen Elizabeth); that Adolf Hitler and Josef Goebbels

visited her backstage in Berlin; that the greatest choreographers of the 20th century – Leonard Massine, George Balanchine, Bronislava Nijinska and Michel Fokine – chose to work with her; and that artists such as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Joan Miró, Marc Chagall and Salvador Dali designed her costumes and stage sets.

The memories swirl and sprinkle her days with gold dust. “All of them [Picasso, Matisse, Chagall, Dali] came to all of the fittings,” she says, “choosing the fabric. It was a collaboration ... The most temperamental of them and the one that made us giggle was Picasso [whereas] Joan Miró and Matisse – they were the peaceful ones. Dali was always amusing. You would

never know what to expect next ... All those artists were such colourful personalities. They were great and, yes, it was a golden age for us ... but it never made the head grow too big for one’s hat. When I think of them, I think, ‘Gosh’. But then you take it in your stride. So it was Salvador [Dali] who was pinning my skirt. So what?”

*So what?* The mind cartwheels with the thought of those with whom Irina once kept company. A first marriage to Jerry Sevastianov (nephew of the famous Russian actor and producer, Konstantin Stanislavsky); a wild affair with the young Yul Brynner; an 18-year marriage to the great love of her life, Cecil Tennant, London’s leading theatrical agent of the ’50s >>>

# the dance of life

Kings and queens, dictators, film stars and giants of the art world have all worshipped at the feet of legendary Russian ballerina Irina Baronova. Here, she tells **David Leser** about her extraordinary and colourful life.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIM BAUER STYLED BY JANE DE TELIGA



and '60s; an abiding friendship with Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh; mother-in-law at one time to actor Steve Martin [husband of her daughter, Victoria Tennant] plus a society of friends and acquaintances that now reads like the Who's Who of a dazzling bygone era – actors such as Charlie Chaplin, Marlene Dietrich, Shirley Temple, Clark Gable, Grace Kelly, Cary Grant, Noel Coward and Marilyn Monroe; and, of course, the pre-eminent dancers of their time, Rudolf Nureyev, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Tamara Karsavina and Margot Fonteyn.

We could drop names forever here, but it would hardly penetrate the surface of a remarkable life story. Far better – and more pertinent – to recall that, were it not for a few cubes of sugar, there would have been no life, no glittering career, at all.

That's what it came down to one perilous night 85 years ago, on the border of Soviet Russia and Romania. It was the end of November 1920 and Irina's father, Michael Baronov, a former lieutenant in the Tsar's navy, together with his wife, Lydia, were fleeing the bloody carnage of the Bolshevik Revolution with their one-year-old daughter.

Already their home had been requisitioned and Irina's maternal grandfather shot in the head at point blank range. On her father's side, the entire extended family was soon to disappear.

So here the three of them were on the frigid banks of the Dniester River, trying to get into Romania with the help of a man who had just managed to spirit his own family across. "I have to warn you," he told Irina's parents. "If your child cries or makes any noise, I'll have to throw her overboard. My life comes first."

Irina's father was prepared to kill himself and his family to avoid such a fate, but an old peasant woman came to their rescue first. Among her meagre possessions was a box of sugar cubes, the remains of which she decided to offer them. "Stuff them piece by piece into [the baby's] mouth as you

cross the river," she told Irina's mother. "It will keep her quiet."

And it did . . . Irina Baronova has been sucking on sugar cubes since. "I prefer it to chocolate," she says now merrily.

For the next eight years, Irina Baronova and her parents lived in near destitution in Romania – her father, a designer of enormous talent, forced into factory work; her mother, a once aristocratic beauty, compelled to accept the squalor of a refugee's life.

Lydia Baronova took her bitterness and sense of loss out on her daughter. She also planted in Irina the seed of her own magnificent and unrealised obsession – to become a ballerina.

"Ballerina?" her daughter asked her one day, nonplussed. "What is that?"

She was to learn soon enough. At the age of seven-and-a-half, she was sent to study ballet after school in a dishevelled one-room flat in Bucharest. Her rich potential

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was soon obvious. She had the balance, the discipline, the ability to get up on her toes, stretch her knees and make her upper body sing to the music.

"Irishka, you must have a chance in life," her father was to eventually tell her. "We shall go to Paris."

And they did, in 1928, just when the French capital was drawing into its sensual embrace the best writers, painters, photographers, designers and dancers of their generation.

Irina began ballet classes under the eagle eye of the Russian dancer Olga Preobrajenska and within a year had become the star pupil, along with another child prodigy, Tamara Toumanova.

Soon the two girls were dancing at tea parties for high society baronesses, appearing in children's plays on the Champs Elysees and performing as



Top: Irina, 21, as Lise in Nijinska's ballet, *La Fille Mal Gardée*, in 1940. Above: Irina Baronova, aged four, and her mother, Lydia, in 1923. Left: Her father, Michael, in his imperial navy uniform in 1919.

MAURICE SEYMORE, CHICAGO. COURTESY OF IRINA BARANOVA. PREVIOUS PAGE: HAIR AND MAKEUP BY LIZ JONES.



“Goebbels kept sending me and Tania cards and bouquets of beautiful lilacs ... at least two or three times a week.”



Top: Irina, 30, on her wedding day with her adored husband, theatrical agent Cecil Tennant, in 1949. Above: Irina (right) at the theatre with (from left) Laurence Olivier, his wife, Vivien Leigh and Cecil. Left: With daughters Irina (left) and Victoria in 1978.

who had worked for Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, the major ballet company in the Western world, until Diaghilev’s death in Paris in 1929.

What these men were proposing was to form a new ballet company in the image of Diaghilev, the Russian nobleman who had revolutionised 20th century music, theatre and dance. It had been Diaghilev who had brought together the genius talents of composers, artists and choreographers – men such as Igor Stravinsky, Pablo Picasso, Jean Cocteau and George Balanchine – for the stage.

And now Balanchine and de Basil, plus a third man, René Blum – who was to eventually perish at Auschwitz – were to revive Diaghilev’s company by introducing to the world young dancers fresh out of ballet school. The three dancers they chose were Tamara Tourmanova, Tatiana Riabouchinska and Irina Baronova, and they were to

eventually be dubbed The Three Baby Ballerinas, by a London dance critic.

**IRINA BARONOVA IS ONE** of life’s delicious characters. A diminutive figure with feet turned out like Charlie Chaplin’s, she greets me at the front door with a kiss on either cheek and then leads me into a living room washed bright by sunlight and birdsong. She appears as perishable as porcelain, except that her voice is gutsy and her manner full of dramatic flourishes, as one might expect from a former White Russian prima ballerina.

We take a seat opposite each other and I comment on the beauty and blueness of her eyes. “I don’t know what my eyes look like,” she replies with a still thick Russian accent, “because I can’t see myself in the mirror. That’s why I don’t put make-up on, because I can’t see where the skin finishes and

the lips start, where are the eyelashes, if there are any left. Maybe it’s good. I can’t see any wrinkles, hooray [laughter].”

And then, fixing me in her beguiling but near-blind gaze, she says, “I see you have something light on top, but you have no head, no face [laughing more], so if I want to see what you look like, I have to come nose to nose really to inspect your face.”

Would you like to do that?

“Yes, please,” and with that she pulls my face towards her, grabs both cheeks and gives them a squeeze. “Yes, nice,” she coos. “Good. Now I can see you.”

Well, that’s one way to disarm your guest. Another is to offer him fine food and wine – and then to speak from the heart about the joys and sorrows of her life, joys which she now spreads out in photo form on the table before us.

“That’s me in *Swan Lake*,” she says. “I played Odile ... and that’s me in *Bluebeard*. I was the last of the six wives ... who got the better of the husband. And that’s Aurora’s Wedding, part of *Sleeping Beauty*, and I was Princess Aurora ... and here I am as the Queen of Shemakhan ...”

So many roles over a 17-year period as the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo – and all its subsequent namesakes – played to captivated audiences around the world, including one memorable performance in Berlin in 1936, when she danced for the Chancellor of the Third Reich, Adolf Hitler, and his Minister for Propaganda, Josef Goebbels. They both came backstage after the performance to meet the dancers.

“Goebbels kept sending me and Tania [Tatiana Riabouchinska] cards and bouquets of beautiful lilacs ... at least two or three times a week,” Irina muses. “But, after all, we had the King of England [George VI] and the Queen [Elizabeth] coming on stage and watching us perform at Covent Garden, so to have Herr Hitler and Goebbels and his wife, well ... no big deal.”

Irina bubbles with throaty laughter and then continues. “You know at least with

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JENNIE SUTTON. COURTESY IRINA BARONOVA

**Irina Baronova** continued

Queen Elizabeth [the late Queen Mother], we were friends and that meant something to us. But Herr Hitler and the others ... well, jolly nice of them to send the lilacs, but so what? At that time we were not really impressed.

"Goebbels as a man, physically, was an ugly little shrimp to look at ... whereas Hitler had personality ... and a beautiful, old-fashioned manner – kissing the hand and so cavalier – and there was charm in those eyes ... but that's about all. One didn't talk. They were just presented to the members of the company, clicked the heels, kissed the hand ... and they were gone."

I suggest to Irina that it must seem slightly surreal sitting here now, perched above the most easterly point of Australia, discussing her association with the monarchs of Europe. (She also danced for King Carol II of Romania and former King Alphonse XIII of Spain.) "Yes that was really me," she says dreamily. "Amazing." And it prompts another recollection, this time of dancing for King George VI and Queen Elizabeth at London's Royal Opera House Covent Garden.

"When Edward VIII abdicated and went off with his Mrs Simpson, King George [VI] and Queen Elizabeth's first outing was to Covent Garden ... so we had to be presented to them all over again because that was the protocol.

"So there we all stood thinking, 'Isn't this ridiculous? We know them so well, but now we have to be introduced again', and as they came down the line Tania [Tatiana Riabouchinska] grabbed the Queen's hand and said, 'Hello, Queen' and it was great ... Queen Elizabeth had a big smile on her face and even King George had a suppressed giggle.

"But it was so spontaneous, so full of affection. 'Hello, Queen. Good to see you. Well done. You're on the throne now. [Laughing] We're all for you. We love you ...' That feeling about them, whereas we had no feeling about Hitler or his gang ... Until we realised, 'Oh my God, what horrible people they were.'"

On the eve of World War II, Irina toured Australia with Colonel de Basil's Ballet Russe, known at the time as the Covent Garden Russian Ballet. Australian audiences were mesmerised. "They went for it," Irina recalls now. "They were hungry for something like that. It was something new, something so spectacular and beautiful. You imagine all the sceneries and costumes by those great painters. They'd never seen anything like that before."

There was now not only an appreciable market for ballet in Australia, but also the opportunity for its development. By the end of the 1938 tour, a number of dancers decided to remain in Australia instead of returning to Europe. At least four new ballet companies emerged as a result, including the West Australian Ballet under the guidance of Irina's good friend, Kyra Abrikosova.

Irina loved Australia – the big blue skies, the people, the koalas – but her future for the moment belonged in the northern hemisphere and her continuing collaboration with the choreographers and artists who had helped define 20th century culture.

When she departed, however, she left behind a coterie of new friends ... and a new line of lipsticks, which an Australian cosmetics company had named in her honour. It was called Irina Baronova.

**IN 1936, AT THE TENDER AGE** of 16, Irina had married Russian-born

ballet director Jerry Sevastianov, as much out of youthful infatuation as out of a desperate need to escape the tyranny and cloying demands of her mother.

The marriage stumbled its way to a Mexican divorce seven years later and then, after a vain attempt at reconciliation, died a natural death in 1947.

The following year, Irina fell in love with Cecil Tennant, the London theatrical agent, who had served with the Coldstream Guards during World War II. Tennant was a tall, dashing figure ... disinclined to mince words.

"How would you like to be married to me," he asked not long after the two had met. "Oh, I'd like it very much," Irina replied breezily, thinking Cecil might be joking.

The couple were married in May 1949, but only after Irina agreed to stop dancing. "I want you to know what I'm expecting of you," he told his fiancée. "I expect you to give up your ballet career for good and any other form of work. I also don't want you for five years to see anyone from, or have anything to do with, the ballet world."

Irina protested. These were her best friends. How could she turn her back on them? "I will not discuss this any further," he replied. "I'll give you 48 hours to think about it and give me an answer."

Cecil Tennant was a traditional Englishman, but Irina was besotted. She chose love over art and, within a few years, the couple had produced three children, Victoria, Irina and Robert. (Victoria Tennant was to become an actor, marrying Steve Martin in 1986 and divorcing him nearly a decade later.)

Cecil and Irina were blissfully happy and enjoyed the company of many of Cecil's actor clients, among them Grace Kelly, Clark Gable and, perhaps the >>>

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Irina Baronova continued

most glamorous duo of the day, Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh. Olivier was to become elder daughter Victoria's adoring godfather, while Leigh was to assume the role of godmother to younger daughter Irina.

Vivien Leigh's life was a tragedy of Greek proportions and it was to leave its mark on Irina's family forever. As the world would later discover, Vivien suffered from tuberculosis and mental illness, and was often prone to hysterical fits. One day, at the Oliviers' country estate in England, Vivien turned her wrath on Cecil, her agent and friend. "When I die," she hissed in a low, scraping voice, "I'll take you with me."

Today, nearly 40 years later, this comment still chills Irina to the core. "Oh my God," she says. "It will never leave me. I think it shook us all. She was very sick and it was like something else was inhabiting her body, her mind. I shouldn't use this word, but it felt like evil was present ... she would be the kindest, sweetest person and then she'd be suddenly possessed by something horrible."

Two years after this event, Vivien Leigh died, in July 1967. Her funeral was held at St Mary's in London. Cecil informed Irina she was not to come to the church, claiming funerals "were no place for a woman". Her protests fell on deaf ears and Irina couldn't understand his opposition. That evening, Cecil was returning home with their daughter Irina and son Robert, when he crashed and rolled his E-type jaguar on a sharp bend.

Irina senior was waiting nervously at home and immediately intuited that something was wrong. "It was as if a dagger had been struck into my chest," she recalls now quietly ... "I had a moment of knowledge,

of certainty that something terrible had happened." She ran out of the house over the hill and saw the carnage below.

Cecil died in his 15-year-old daughter's arms.

**ALMOST 62 YEARS AFTER HER** first visit to Australia, Irina Baronova moved into the sap-green hills of northern NSW. It was just after the 2000 Olympics and she had decided to live near her daughter, Irina, and first grandchild, Natasha. (She also has a great-granddaughter by Natasha, Zoe, as well as five other grandchildren.)

For 45 years, ever since the death of Irina's beloved father, Michael Baronov, her mother, Lydia, had lived with her. If truth be known, Irina had been scared of her mother until the day she died in 1992, after falling down the stairs of their London cottage. Now she was free to do what she pleased. No more reproof, no more jealousy, no more being accountable. So little tenderness. It seemed it had to wait till the end.

"I was leaning over her at the hospital and she grabbed my hair, and started twiddling and said, 'When you were little you were blonde, blonde, blonde, and now you're white', and I felt how much she loved me ... which I sometimes questioned."

Irina allows the tears to collect. There've been enough of them over the past four years, as she's reminisced about the first 48 years of her life, calling forth voices from the past to help her write her autobiography, *Irina: Ballet, Life and Love*. The process has been both joyful and painful, costing her what little sight she had left and causing her to rail at her withering frame.

"Oh, bastard," she says, gesturing towards her body. "I'm angry with it. Whoever said that old age is golden should be shot. That's the frustrating thing

– that mentally, in your head, in your soul, in your heart, you don't get old. But your body doesn't want to function that way. It's a bloody curse [laughing]. I want to dive into that beautiful sea. I want to run, I want to dance, I want to fool around with my little grandchildren, but my daughter says, 'Mum, don't do it. You'll break your hip'. And she's right."

Nonetheless, Irina feels blessed. To have had the career she has had – and there was more to come in the 1990s, when the legendary Dame Margot Fonteyn lured her into the Royal Academy of Dance in London, to give mime and master classes around the world ... And then to find herself living at her "final destination", among the Bangalow palms and mango trees, back under the big blue skies of the Australia she fell in love with more than six decades ago ... This is a blessing and Irina knows it.

"It's the best decision I've ever made, to come over here," she says. "Because I've found peace here. And beauty around me. I sit on my deck and any time of morning or evening, it's peace and beauty. What more do you want in your old age?"

Does the idea of death confront her I ask? "No, I'm not afraid of death. It's a natural thing. Everybody dies. Make friends with the idea."

So what do you think happens when you die, I ask her finally. "I don't know," she says, her fading, brilliant eyes shining with laughter. "Maybe beyond the pearly gates they're all rehearsing and waiting for me. Or maybe there is nothing."

Your preference would be another performance? "Well, it would be fun, wouldn't it?" ■

*Irina: Ballet, Life and Love*, by Irina Baronova is published by Viking. Available October 5, 2005, rrp \$35.

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