

Shirley Andrews (1915–2001)



Shirley Andrews (1915-2001), playing a lagerphone. Photographer unknown. From Shirley's own Collection, NLA.

ANDREWS, Shirley Aldythea Marshall Seymour, biochemist, Aboriginal-rights activist, dancer and researcher, was born on 5 November 1915 in Melbourne, only child of Dora (or Doris) Andrews, nee Gray. Shirley was educated at Miss Montfort's school in Sandringham and later a boarder at St Michael's Grammar School, St Kilda. Shirley did a Bachelor of Science at the University of Melbourne from 1934 to 1937. She lived most of her adult life in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, notably building a house in North Melbourne (now demolished).

At the end of her studies she won a Caroline Kay Scholarship and worked for six years at the Veterinary School of the University of Melbourne. In 1947 she joined the CSIR, later CSIRO, as a Research Officer and worked there until 1951. She came to the attention of ASIO in 1949 because of her membership of the Communist Party of Australia. ASIO alerted CSIRO as to her political affiliations and it was difficult for her to remain at work there. She had been asked to join the Unity Dance Group in their trip to Berlin for a World Youth Festival in 1951. She spent six months overseas at the festival in East Berlin and visited several communist countries in Eastern Europe.



1951 Peace Festival, Berlin: Members of the Unity Dancers perform on their return from the 1951 Peace Festival. Their costumes were given to some members of the dance group who had visited Hungary after the festival.

When she returned she eventually found work in 1953 at the Royal Park Psychiatric Hospital with Dr John Cade. She was the Senior Biochemist and managed the laboratory, undertaking the blood serum and urine tests that complemented Dr Cade's work on the use of lithium for the treatment of manic depression. She also published papers on the abuse of bromureides by patients and eventually had the drugs removed from over-the-counter sale. She retired from Royal Park in May 1977.

Shirley began to learn ballet when she was at university, eventually taking lessons with Edouard Borovansky where she learned about 'character' dancing. She also performed in some of Borovansky's earliest works with the company that gave birth to the Australian Ballet Company.



Shirley 'en pointe', late 1930s. (Courtesy Arthur Turnbull.)

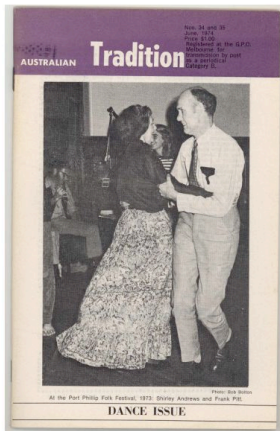
She joined Margaret Frey, another pupil of Borovansky's, in her classes and the Unity Dance Group, which performed at events of the Australian Communist Party and deepened her appreciation of Australian folk dance.



Unity Dance Group – Shirley, seated on left - taken at the first public function of the Folklore Society of Victoria, launched in 1956, at the Athenaeum Gallery, in June of that year.

Shirley played a part in establishing the Folk Song and Dance Society and the Victorian Folk Music Club, the latter encouraging her to begin researching how Australians used to dance in the nineteenth century.

Her research led to her seminal book, *Take Your Partners**, and the production of three videos, with Lucy Stockdale, entitled 'How Australia danced last century'. She was an inspired teacher and leader of dance classes and organised formal balls and regular dances for dance groups for the Traditional Social Dance Association of Victoria. Her research into dance and dance styles continued with the Victorian Dance Assembly, until two weeks before her death.



Shirley and Frank Pitt on the cover of one of Australian Tradition's dance issues. (Nos. 34 and 35, June 1974).

Shirley wrote many articles for the *Australian Tradition* to promulgate her views on what constituted good dancing: her role as arbiter became very strong within the folk community. During her research she met the dancers and musicians from Nariel – the Klippel family in particular. She helped to make the dancing at Nariel extremely popular and it is now a firm New Year fixture in the dance calendar.



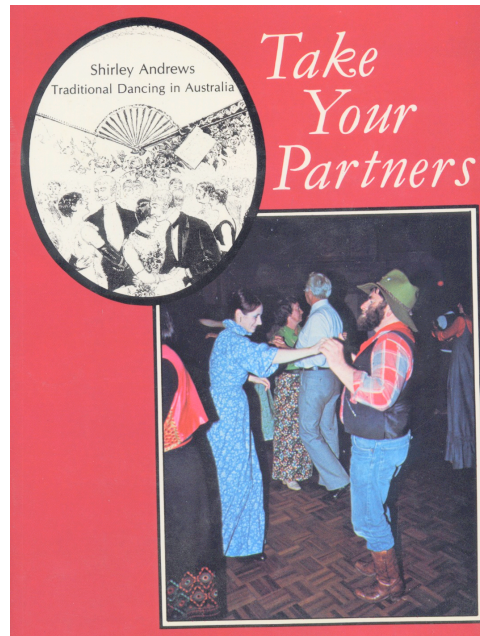
Dancers practising a quadrille in the Nariel caravan park. Shirley on left of set in floral dress, 1980s. (Courtesy Peter Ellis)

Although from a solidly middle-class background, privileged in many ways, Shirley was enterprising, independent and sympathetic to progressive causes to which she joined her beliefs about social justice. The united front activities of the Communist Party (CPA) dovetailed with Shirley's increasing interest in the left of politics and she was involved in the activities of several organisations run under the auspices of the CPA, including: the Movement Against War and Fascism, the Left Book Club, Union of Australian Women, Eureka

Youth League, Australian Book Society, Friends of the Soviet Union and the New Theatre.

During 1951, Shirley was a founding member of the Council for Aboriginal Rights in Victoria (CAR) and upon her return from Europe became its Secretary. The CAR was instrumental in establishing a national body to seek economic and civil rights for Indigenous Australians. Her excellent research abilities and hard work made this one of her foremost contributions to Australian society.

Shirley is remembered by those who knew her best, as a highly intelligent, uncompromising individual who had strong beliefs and a vision for Australian life, plus a remarkable energy, which she brought to bear on its realisation. Shirley's combination of interests and the depth of her engagement in them were unusual. They were united by her belief in them and how they might contribute to a more just society.



* Available from the TSDAV.

Cover from 1976.

For more details go to: <http://oa.anu.edu.au/obituary/andrews-shirley-aldythea-14936>

and *Politics, Peace and Pointe Shoes, Hindsight*, Radio National, 18 May 2008.

By: Jenny Hibben