

Frederic Franklin

by Jack Anderson

An English-born dancer who achieved fame as a star of a New York-based touring company with a Franco-Russian name, Frederic Franklin in many ways exemplifies the internationalism of contemporary ballet and the versatility of contemporary ballet artists. A dancer of great theatrical flair, Franklin had a remarkable interpretative range: his roles extended from the noble Prince in *Swan Lake* and the dapper Baron in Léonide Massine's *Gaîté Parisienne* to a genial cowboy in Agnes de Mille's *Rodeo* and the loutish Stanley Kowalski in Valerie Bettis's balletic version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. A gifted partner, Franklin was frequently paired with the Russian ballerina [Alexandra Danilova](#), and theirs became one of the most celebrated partnerships in 20th-century ballet. As years passed, Franklin went on to perform mime and character roles until well into his nineties, among them Friar Laurence in *Romeo and Juliet*, the Witch in *La Sylphide*, the Tutor in *Swan Lake*, and the Charlatan in *Petrouchka*.

A quick learner with a sharp memory, Franklin soon attracted the attention of such important choreographers as Massine and [George Balanchine](#), who created major roles for him ranging from Massine's romantic Parisian Baron and the stately creation spirit in *Seventh Symphony* to the witty, sophisticated principal male dancer in Balanchine's plotless *Danses Concertantes* and the obsessed Poet in *Night Shadow* (later known as *La Sonnambula*).

The theater has always been a second home for Franklin. He founded the National Ballet of Washington in 1969, and directed it until it disbanded in 1975, and he has served as an artistic adviser to several companies, including [Dance Theatre of Harlem](#), the Oakland Ballet, the Cincinnati Ballet, and the Tulsa Ballet, among others. Unflappable when staging a ballet, Franklin moves quickly and efficiently about the rehearsal studio, and his ease of manner and lack of pretension help explain why generations of dancers and students have come

to refer to him simply and affectionately as "Freddie."

He once declared in an interview, "I'm not a hothouse product. I grew up in the vaudeville theater and in musical comedy. I'm not a hothouse product," he reiterated (Anderson, 204). And he most certainly is not.

The son of a Liverpool caterer, Franklin was born on June 13, 1914. He was taken to performances as a child, and soon developed a love of the stage. As a little boy, a production of *Peter Pan* inspired him to rush home, stand on his bed, and attempt to fly. He studied dance and acting with local teachers, becoming especially proficient in tap and, his great love, ballet. But there were few opportunities for British ballet dancers at the time. And so he performed in musical comedies, at the Casino de Paris with a tap-dance act called the Lancashire Lads, and in a supper-club partnership with Wendy Toyne, who went on to become a successful musical comedy choreographer and director. Yet, all the while, he sought opportunities in ballet.

In 1935, he joined the Markova-Dolin Ballet, a British troupe that had been founded that year by the English ballet stars Alicia Markova and Anton Dolin, and he began attracting attention as a young dancer worth watching. One night, Massine was in the audience, and invited him to join a new company he was helping to form, the [Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo](#). Although Franklin was still under contract to Markova-Dolin, Massine had one of the most compelling presences of the time, and as Franklin recalled their meeting years later in an interview, "I just looked into Massine's eyes – they were deep pools of brown – and he could have made me sign anything" (Anderson, 205).

Franklin danced with the Ballet Russe from its inception in 1938 until financial difficulties forced it to disband temporarily in 1951; when

the company was reorganized in 1954, he danced with it again until 1957, and choreographed for it in 1961. Year after year, he took part in its grueling transcontinental tours and he and Danilova became two of the most famous—and admired – personalities in American ballet.

When Franklin stepped onto the stage, the warmth of his presence immediately attracted attention. “There is no stage grin in the world to match that of Frederic Franklin,” the critic Walter Terry has pointed out, adding that Franklin “fairly grins with his whole body” (128). But Franklin’s performing involved more than personality. Another critic, Edwin Denby, summed up some of Franklin’s artistic gifts by saying, “Franklin’s dancing always makes perfect sense; like a true artist, he is completely at the service of the role he takes, and his straight delight in dancing, his forthright presence and openhearted nature give his version of the great classic roles a lyric grace that is fresh and sweet” (Denby, 1949, 166). Agnes de Mille in her autobiography *Dance to the Piper* (1952) paid tribute to his theatrical force by calling him “strong as a mustang, as sudden, as direct, and as inexhaustible” (286).

It was at the Ballet Russe that Franklin’s talents as a director and régisseur began to be recognized. Noticing that Franklin could act in a calm, well-organized fashion, Balanchine persuaded Sergei J. Denham, the company’s director, to appoint Franklin to the supervisory post of maître de ballet. One of Franklin’s first accomplishments was to develop a roster of understudies to make sure that all solo roles were covered by understudies, something that had not always been the case in the company.

Franklin’s familiarity with the world of musical comedy helped secure a job for both him and the Ballet Russe in the summer of 1944. He became a friend of the musical theater writers and producers Robert Wright and George Forrest, who had conceived a project for a show based on the life and music of Edvard Grieg.

They told him they had the idea for a novelty number for which they thought Franklin would be ideal. Although there was no summer dance season in the 1940s and the Ballet Russe was not scheduled to perform anywhere, Franklin still thought it wisest to ask Denham if he could accept the job offer. Denham thought for a moment and then replied, “I will not only let them have you, I’ll let them have the entire Ballet Russe.” Choreographed by Balanchine, *Song of Norway* – with the Ballet Russe – became a hit show and one of its popular numbers was “Freddie and His Fiddle,” with Franklin.

Franklin has choreographed ballets of his own, the most successful of them being *Tribute*, to César Franck, which he created in 1961 in honor of the Ballet Russe’s approaching 25th anniversary and which has since been produced by other groups; Walter Terry called it “pretty, peppy and pleasant to watch” (425).

During the Ballet Russes’s temporary hiatus, 1951-54, Franklin displayed his directorial gifts by organizing the Slavenska-Franklin Ballet with Mia Slavenska, a fiery Ballet Russe ballerina. With a repertory encompassing classical and contemporary pieces, the little touring company soon established itself as a model of its kind. Franklin later won praise as director of the National Ballet of Washington until financial problems forced its closure.

Franklin has continued to win praise for the choreographic accuracy and vividness of his revivals, for his ability to breathe new theatrical life into old works. Two productions for Dance Theatre of Harlem were especially admired for these reasons. Without altering the familiar steps, but investing them with fresh dramatic motivation, his staging of *Schéhérazade*, Michel Fokine’s 1910 dance-drama about unfaithful harem wives, gained new urgency. Franklin also preserved the traditional steps in his production of *Giselle*. Yet by changing the setting of this Romantic classic of 1841 from the German Rhineland to the Louisiana bayous (leading the

production to be known as the “Creole Giselle”), he inspired his cast to dance with unusual dramatic intensity.

Franklin has kept always busy and has received many awards and honors. He was named a Commander of the British Empire in 2004. Contemplating his long and productive life in ballet, he has marveled, “I still have something from the old days that people seem to want.”¹

NOTES

1. Judith Mackrell, *The Guardian*, March 8, 2009.

For full citations to works referenced in this essay, see [Selected Resources for Further Research](#).

Jack Anderson is a dance historian and poet who writes on dance for the *New York Times*, *The Dancing Times* of London, and online at www.nytheatre-wire.com. He has published seven books of dance history and criticism, including *The One and Only: The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo*, *Ballet and Modern Dance: a Concise History*, *Art Without Boundaries: The World of Modern Dance*, and *Choreography Observed*, as well as ten books of poetry.