

## Rudolf Nureyev (1938-1993)

by Michelle Potter

Rudolf Nureyev was a dominant figure in the Western dance world from 1961, when he asked for political asylum in Paris while on tour with the Kirov Ballet, until his death in 1993. He brought to the stage an extraordinary physical presence and a compelling theatricality. His early appearances were so exceptional, and brought such unexpected changes to perceptions about ballet as an art form, that they caused Dame Ninette de Valois, founder of Britain's Royal Ballet, to remark that it was as if "a bomb dropped into the ballet world" (Foy, 1991). His qualities as a dancer and partner, and his unwavering commitment to perfecting his art, profoundly influenced his peers in America and across the world, and the persona that he developed and the star status that grew up around him brought new accessibility to ballet and gave it wide public reach.

Born during a journey across Russia on the Trans-Siberian Railway, Nureyev spent his childhood in Ufa in the Soviet Republic of Bashkir before entering the Leningrad Choreographic School at the late age of 17. He was a soloist with the Kirov Ballet before seeking asylum in the West. He made his American debut partnering Maria Tallchief on a Bell Telephone Hour telecast in January, 1962, for which they danced the pas de deux from August Bournonville's *Flower Festival in Genzano*. That early telecast showed many of the qualities that would define Nureyev's future career as an artist. His technique had clarity and precision and his partnering conveyed the graciousness that is inherent in the Bournonville style. He had been working during 1961 in Copenhagen with Danish dancer Erik Bruhn, and when Nureyev's dancing on footage from Russia is compared with that of the first Bell telecast, Bruhn's influence is apparent on the development of Nureyev's technique and his understanding of style.

Shortly afterwards, in March 1962, Nureyev made his American stage debut at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, dancing the grand pas de deux from *Don Quixote*. He partnered Sonia Arova on a program by Ruth Page's Chicago Opera Ballet.

But it was Nureyev's next Bell telecast in September, 1962, that showed the American public his powerful, sensual stage presence. Nureyev partnered Lupe Serrano in the pas de deux from *Le Corsaire*, and it is all but impossible not to be enticed by his performance, from the moment he steps on stage and provocatively lifts his two hands to his shoulders, to the coda with its explosive jumps and turns. This pas de deux became a standard gala item for him over the next several years of his career and he performed it with many partners in many countries across the globe.

Nureyev was never a permanent member of a ballet company after his defection in 1961. He admired [George Balanchine](#) and made a number of overtures to Balanchine hoping to join [New York City Ballet](#). It never came about. Nureyev did achieve his aim of dancing Balanchine's choreography, although it was always with other companies, notably [American Ballet Theatre](#) and companies in Europe. Balanchine, in collaboration with [Jerome Robbins](#), created a version of *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* for Nureyev in 1979, and his co-stars were New York City Ballet principals Patricia McBride and Jean-Pierre Bonnefous. But it was performed on a New York City Opera double bill program and accompanied a production of *Dido and Aeneas*. It was, said *New York Times* critic Anna Kisselgoff, simply a "pièce d'occasion ostensibly allowing Mr. Nureyev to work in Balanchine choreography created especially for him" (Kisselgoff, C16).

Nureyev was, however, permanent guest

artist with the Royal Ballet, London, from 1962 until the mid-1970s, and it was there that he developed his acclaimed and long-standing partnership with Dame Margot Fonteyn, a partnership that has been referred to as a “celestial accident” (Kavanagh, 225). It infused new life into Fonteyn’s career and resulted in fresh interpretations of the well known classics of the ballet repertoire. The partnership also inspired new choreography, including Fredrick Ashton’s *Marguerite and Armand* (1963) and Roland Petit’s *Paradise Lost* (1967), both made for the Royal Ballet. Fonteyn and Nureyev toured the world together as guest artists with a status approaching that of pop stars.

Nureyev used his time between guest seasons with the Royal Ballet to appear as an international guest artist and choreographer. He was, as the British critic Clement Crisp has remarked, “intellectually curious” (Houseal, 74). As such, he was particularly interested in expanding his horizons by dancing works created in a contemporary idiom. He especially admired Glen Tetley’s ability to fuse the classical and the contemporary, and Tetley’s *Pierrot Lunaire* became a favorite role. **Paul Taylor** inspired him with new ways of moving, and he gave particularly strong performances in Taylor’s *Aureole*. Throughout the 1970s he also danced the choreography of Jerome Robbins, **José Limón**, Murray Louis, and a number of European choreographers including Rudi van Dantzig, Maurice Béjart, and Birgit Cullberg.

In the 1970s Nureyev also made several appearances with the **Martha Graham** Company. As a dancer, his first exposure to Graham’s choreography was in *Lucifer*, which Graham created for him and Fonteyn in 1975 for a New York gala. *Lucifer* was followed by performances in *Appalachian Spring*, in which his male co-star was **Mikhail Baryshnikov**, *Night Journey*, *The*

*Scarlet Letter*, *El Penitente*, and *Ecuatorial*. Others activities during the 1970s included an appearance on the television series *The Muppet Show* and performances throughout the United States as the King in the musical *The King and I*.

Nureyev had also been mounting his own productions of evening length classics through out the 1970s. They included *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Raymonda*, and *Don Quixote*, which he originally made for the Vienna State Opera Ballet and then mounted on the Australian Ballet and American Ballet Theatre. *Don Quixote* was also filmed in 1972, with Nureyev both taking the leading role and acting as film director. From the beginning of his career in the West, Nureyev worked to ensure that the male roles in the classics were given the importance he felt had been lacking in the past. His versions of the classics often included newly choreographed male solos and sometimes a reworking of the narrative to give added significance to the male lead, although Crisp has commented that one of his aims was “to make bloody good roles for himself” (Houseal, 72).

Many of his new, distinctive, and sometimes idiosyncratic productions of the classics emerged as a result of his directorship of the Paris Opera Ballet between 1983 and 1989. He also danced with the Paris Opera Ballet during these years, and was influential in nurturing young artists. Ballerina Sylvie Guillem, whom Nureyev promoted to principal while in Paris, has noted that Nureyev often ignored the company’s long-standing hierarchical system of promotion. He rewarded artists with a promotion when he thought they were ready and moved them to whatever rank he thought they deserved.

In the 1990s Nureyev turned his hand to orchestral conducting and made his first appearance as a conductor in 1991 during

an American tour by his touring group, Nureyev and Friends, which he assembled and reassembled sporadically from 1974 onwards. He subsequently made an official debut as a conductor in Vienna in June, 1991, conducted *Romeo and Juliet* at an American Ballet Theatre Gala in May, 1992, and gave a final concert in San Francisco in July, 1992.

In the final years of his life Nureyev lived with AIDS, and the slow and insidious deterioration of his health was accompanied by deterioration of the quality of his dancing. His final tour with Nureyev and Friends was in November, 1991, in Australia, and many of those who attended knew that what they saw was not the image of Nureyev that they wanted to keep. "He is no longer the performer of our memories or video archives," wrote the critic for *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Sykes, 20). He made only a handful of stage appearances after that tour.

Nureyev's career was distinguished by extraordinary achievements and his life was lived in an independent, perhaps at times willful manner. It was Fonteyn who said, in relation to the often controversial publicity that surrounded many of his offstage activities: "He wanted to be judged as a dancer" (Foy, 2008). And if the judgments were sometimes harsh, even before the final deterioration to his performances, it was because he was a star, the "virtuoso showman" (Kisselgoff, C16) who danced the way he wanted to dance.

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

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