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## **Elaine Fifield**

### ***OBITUARIES***

*Valerie Lawson*

Elaine Fifield

Dancer

1930 - 1999

The first Australian to become a ballerina of England's Sadlers Wells Ballet (later the Royal Ballet), Elaine Fifield has died in Perth of a heart attack. Aged 68, she had been ill for some time with throat cancer.

In the arcane terminology of ballet, "ballerina" does not mean just any dancer but one of exceptional artistry and technical ability.

Fifield (shown as Titania in *The Dream*) was groomed as a successor to Dame Margot Fonteyn, but her own choices at critical moments in her life meant she never reached that pinnacle.

The petite dancer was the second child of Leonard and Elsie Fifield, born in Sydney's inner-west into a family of strict Seventh Day Adventists. In her 1967 autobiography, *In My Shoes*, she said her family thought people who went to dance halls or cinemas were "hoodlums or tarts".

With her friends from Guilford Public School, she attended a ballet school run in the back of a Merrylands cinema. The principal begged her mother to let her dance. As the family moved around Sydney, she took lessons from Frances Lett in Kogarah, then Sheila Whytock, the Frances Scully Ballet School and Leon Kellaway.

At 14, Kathleen Danetree awarded her the top examination of the Royal Academy of Dancing, Solo Seal, which led to a scholarship worth £250 to study in England.

From 1946, Fifield trained at Sadlers Wells Ballet School, but in 1947, at the suggestion of Dame Ninette de Valois, founder of the two Sadlers Wells ballet companies, she joined the Sadlers Wells Theatre Ballet. The ballet mistress, Dame Peggy Van Praagh, saw "a shy and rather beautiful young Australian girl . . . her first role was the Polka in [Sir Frederick] Ashton's *Facade*. Even in rehearsal, her remarkable talent was displayed, especially in her wonderful pirouettes, and we all sensed that in our midst was a star in the not too distant future."

Choreographer John Cranko created roles for her in *Tritsch-Tratsch* (1947) and *Pineapple Poll* (1951). The English press acclaimed Fifield as a new Pavlova. Her debut in *Coppelia* gave rise to the Manchester Guardian report: "Elaine Fifield shows she must be regarded as the heiress-apparent to Margot Fonteyn."

In 1953, on tour in the US, she married John Lanchbery, then conductor of the Sadlers Wells orchestra. They had one child, Margaret. Fifield wrote in her autobiography that she needed someone to look after her: "I really didn't know my own mind."

The following year, she moved to the main Sadlers Wells Ballet Company at Covent Garden (later the Royal Ballet) and was promoted to ballerina in 1956, the first Australian to reach that rank in the company.

In 1955, Ashton cast her in the title role of his *Madame Chrysantheme*. The dancer Anya Linden, quoted in Julie Kavanagh's Ashton biography, said: "Fred was intrigued by Elaine and she was almost in love with him." Kavanagh wrote: ". . . there is no doubt that when Ashton created *Madame Chrysantheme* for her she was badly in need of support. Her marriage to . . . John Lanchbery was in pieces, she had become anorexic and seemed to her colleagues to be on the verge of a breakdown."

Thrilled by her own performance once in *The Sleeping Beauty*, she told Ashton how much she had enjoyed it. He replied, "You mustn't enjoy it, because Margot doesn't." He cast her with six other ballerinas in his 1956 ballet *Birthday Offering*: Fonteyn, Svetlana Beriosova, Violetta Elvin, Beryl Grey, Rowena Jackson and Nadia Nerina.

In 1957, she was not chosen to tour Australia with some members of the Royal Ballet. Fifield resigned from the company to return to Australia where she made guest appearances with the Borovansky Ballet.

Fifield later asked de Valois to take her back into the Royal, but was refused. Feeling a failure as a dancer, wife and mother, Fifield met Les Farley on Manly Beach. She went to live with him on his coffee and rubber plantation at Cape Rodney, near Port Moresby, where they wed in 1960. Farley told reporters in 1961, "you can take it from me, Mrs Farley will never dance professionally again." They had two daughters, Louise and Joydie, but Fifield became morose and miserable in PNG; she wrote later of having attempted suicide there. She returned to Australia to dance from 1964 to 1966 as a principal artist with the Australian Ballet, led by van Praagh.

In 1968, she lived with Farley in Cairns, and taught children ballet in North Queensland. She danced professionally in 1969 with Ballet Victoria, from 1969 to 1971 with the Australian Ballet and in 1971 with the West Australian Ballet and retired to live in Perth. She is survived by her three daughters.