

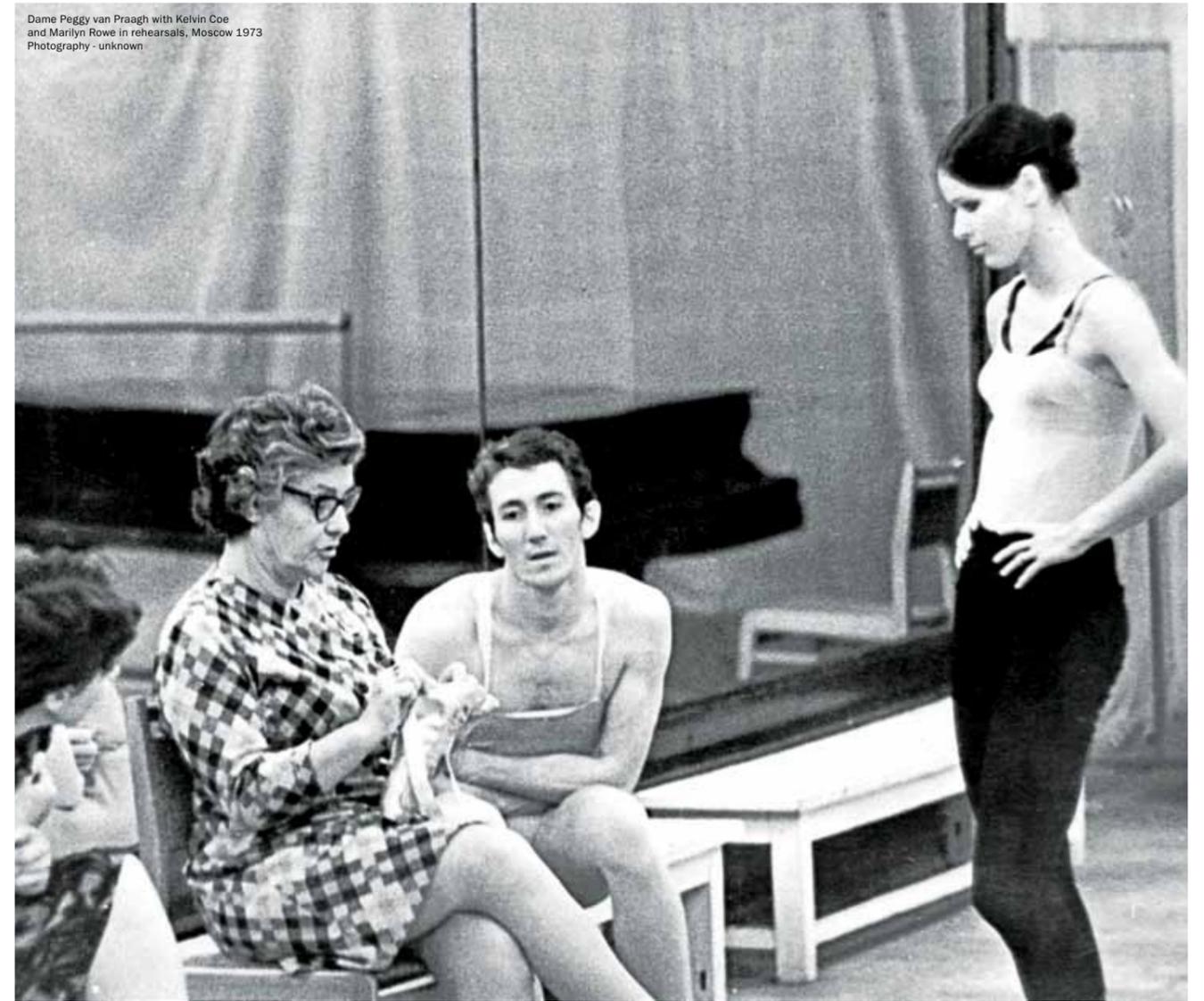
THE LADY, THE LEGEND

Dame Peggy van Praagh possessed the qualities a great leader should: tenacity, compassion, a discerning eye and quick wit. Valerie Lawson writes about the life and times of an extraordinary woman.



Gina Brescianini
Photography - Justin Smith

Dame Peggy van Praagh with Kelvin Coe
and Marilyn Rowe in rehearsals, Moscow 1973
Photography - unknown



The little girl had never seen a dance performance in her life. But when she was four, Peggy van Praagh decided the best way to push her doll's pram around her bedroom was to walk on her toes. When the tiptoe walk grew into a daily habit, Ethel van Praagh took her daughter to dance classes. At first, she was so shy she hid under her mother's chair but, in time, Peggy loved dancing "very, very much". To dance, she said, "has been everything to me all my life".

In her 70s, Peggy was still immersed in dance. But now as she coached young dancers, she walked with the help of a walking stick or callipers. Despite her pain, due to chronic arthritis and numerous hip operations, her face could still shine with the elation she felt as a young dancer.

As the founding artistic director of The Australian Ballet, her place in history is guaranteed. But Peggy's legacy is greater than just being first. She secured the company's future by setting its framework in 1962, then achieving all her goals within three years. The late Noël Pelly, former administrator of The Australian Ballet, talked of her Herculean strength. "Nothing", he said, "could deter her resolve to achieve the objectives entrusted to her".

Peggy, a beautiful woman, full of *joie de vivre* with her friends, never married so she dealt with her sadnesses alone. Her support came from a network of remarkable people who appeared in her life when she needed them most. Among them were the pioneer artistic directors Ninette de Valois and Marie Rambert, who laid the foundation stones of British ballet, the teacher Margaret Craske, who danced for Diaghilev and assisted Enrico Cecchetti, and the influential choreographer Antony Tudor.

As a child she had the unconditional support of her mother, a former governess, and her father, Harold, a doctor whose general practice was near the family home in London's Hampstead. At King Alfred School she was taught by the inspirational educationalist A.S. Neill who encouraged her to produce 'a play with dancing' when she was only nine years old. Dressed in pretty dresses and with her hair twisted into ringlets, she had begun to win talent competitions from the age of six.

Peggy grew into an attractive young woman, with alluring eyes and a wide, confident smile, but her body was not really made for ballet. At age 18, after she badly injured her back, a doctor advised her to give up her dream of dancing. It was too late. By then, Peggy had the ballet bug and decided to train with

Craske who taught her to respect the purity of classical technique.

Peggy made her debut at the London Coliseum in 1929, dancing with a small troupe assembled by Anton Dolin. Four years later, she joined Marie Rambert's company, the Ballet Club. Here, Peggy came into the orbit of Rambert's assistant Antony Tudor who saw the great potential in the pretty dancer. For Tudor, she created the roles of 'An Episode in His Past' in *Lilac Garden* (1936) and the 'First Song' in *Dark Elegies* (1937) and with his direction she learned there was "something beyond mere dancing steps. They had to have meaning, motivation and purpose."

Choreographer Peter Wright remembers her "brilliant technique as a dancer, her wonderful feet and terrific vitality on stage". When Antony Tudor formed his own company in 1938, Peggy was the first to dance the role of the outrageously arrogant Russian ballerina the Queen of the Dance in his comic ballet *Gala Performance*, and soon became his assistant and company teacher. She stepped into his shoes when he quit Britain for the United States at the outbreak of war. Alongside dancer Maude Lloyd, she pioneered lunchtime ballets at London's Arts Theatre and their shows, known as *Ballet for a Bob*, attracted a huge following.



Peggy van Praagh
in 'GALA PERFORMANCE'
1939



Garth Welch and Lucette Aldous
in *Giselle* 1973 • Photography - unknown



Rudolf Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn with artists of
The Australian Ballet in *Giselle*, 1964 • Photography - David Mist

In 1941, Peggy at last reached the realm of her dream company, the Sadler's Wells Ballet (now The Royal Ballet). It soon became clear that the director, Ninette de Valois, wanted her gifts as a teacher, not as a dancer, but the inevitable injuries and illnesses of others meant Peggy stepped into important roles, among them one of the Blue Girls in Frederick Ashton's *Les Patineurs* and as Swanilda in *Coppélia*. "She was a wonderful, vivacious Swanilda," said Peter Wright.

After the war, when Ninette established a splinter company, known eventually as the Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet, she asked Peggy to become ballet mistress. Although this ended Peggy's dancing career, it was the start of a happy and creatively productive time as she developed the young company, nurturing both the dancers and the choreographers John Cranko and Kenneth MacMillan. From 1951, she was assistant director of the company, but always working under the supervision of de Valois.

As Jann Parry wrote in her recent biography of MacMillan, by 1955 there were suspicions that de Valois was jealous of Peggy as the 'junior' company had produced such notable choreographers and had a more impressive creative record than the main company, due to Peggy's nurturing.

That year, her time at Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet came to an abrupt end when de Valois decided Peggy must now work on secondment with various international companies, starting with Norway's national ballet. After three years of freelancing and a spell as dance director of the short-lived Edinburgh International Ballet, Peggy took her future into her own hands, moving halfway around the world to become artistic director of Australia's Borovansky Ballet after Edouard Borovansky's death in 1959, then artistic director of The Australian Ballet in 1962.

She leapt at the challenge, deciding "it would be so fascinating to try and see what one could do in a country where ballet was a new art

form". From the very first day, The Australian Ballet dancers knew that Peggy's word was law. Steely determination, a sharp eye for detail, an aristocratic English accent, a habit of licking her lips, and a fondness for calling them by their surnames were among their first impressions.

Noël Pelly, whose association with The Australian Ballet began in 1961, recalled her "asperity when the occasion required" and equally her "irrepressible and often wicked sense of humour". "I think the thing that was noticeable at that time was the absolute firmness of her objectives. And she was always quite clear as to what these were: annual contracts for the dancer, the best of the classical and contemporary repertoire, the best possible guest artists for the company, overseas touring, and the establishment of a national ballet school ... It was indicative of her firmness of resolve that she established these things, all of those five things, by 1965."



"There was something about her that loved the Australian larrikinism. She would laugh hysterically at some of the antics then really clamp down, but she always said she wanted us to have our own style."

MARILYN ROWE

Marilyn Rowe in *Giselle*
Photography - unknown

Marilyn Rowe, who joined the company in 1965, was in awe of her director. "She frightened me up to a point, and depending on her tone of voice, you could shrink into a little ball. She could be waspish at times, but then there was that other side of her that exuded great warmth and understanding," Marilyn says. "Even though she was an Englishwoman steeped in the British tradition, she didn't try to impose that so much on us. We were different and she liked the difference. There was something about her that loved the Australian larrikinism. She would laugh hysterically at some of the antics then really clamp down, but she always said she wanted us to have our own style".

Peggy took a great interest in the management of dancers' careers, commissioned Australian works, such as Robert (Bobby) Helpmann's *The Display*, and knew the importance of developing a strong Australian repertoire. She was an early supporter of the designer

Kristian Fredrikson and mentored young choreographers from within the company, particularly Graeme Murphy. Yet she also took a world view, inviting guest artists such as Margot Fonteyn, Rudolf Nureyev and Erik Bruhn, and international choreographers such as Antony Tudor, Frederick Ashton and Glen Tetley, to Australia.

When Bobby Helpmann became co-artistic director of the company in 1965 he told the press that Peggy was "the one who does all the hard work, the groundwork, the basic work. She has ploughed the furrow". While Bobby, the Australian, never really settled back in Australia, Peggy, the Englishwoman, made Australia her true home.

After her retirement as co-artistic director in 1974, Peggy found herself "with no sense of mission," said her friend Shirley McKechnie. "Peggy's commitment to dance was total ... she was married to the dance." And she did,

indeed, return to The Australian Ballet as artistic director for one year in 1978. In her later years, Peggy seemed to many a solitary figure. "There was a part of her that was very alone", said Marilyn, who knew of her maternal instincts, how she developed the dance partnership of Marilyn and Kelvin Coe, regarding them as her "artistic children" and how she regretted never having children of her own.

Until she became ill in the mid-1980s, Peggy retained her great natural curiosity and her hunger for dance in all its forms. Her lifelong persistence and passion for dance turned out to be Australia's great gain.

Valerie Lawson is an author and dance historian