

# NUREYEV TAKES HIS FINAL BOW

By Valerie Lawson

Rudolf Nureyev's eyes could mesmerise an audience with a single sweep of the auditorium. They seduced, they shone, or they glared, always demanding total attention. But they also explored his world with forensic skill, detecting the good, the bad, the ugly and the beautiful. Or simply the detail.

As a young member of the Kirov Ballet in St. Petersburg, Nureyev was "all eyes and nothing else. I just looked at every step, at every member of the company moving whether to the right or to the left, which way they would make a bow or which way they would take off their hat...I took mental notes of everything. I loved those productions which I saw. So they stayed in my memory. And they became rather useful".

When Nureyev, the dancer, became Nureyev, the choreographer, he could easily recapture those memories - kinesthetic and aesthetic - but he could also adapt and recreate, as he did when he decided to tackle the 19th century works of Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov.

In the 1960s and '70s, Nureyev produced his own versions of the great classics, *Don Quixote*, *Swan Lake*, *The Nutcracker*, *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Raymonda*. But it was not until 1992, as principal choreographer at the Paris Opera Ballet, that he came at last to the full length *La Bayadère*, one of Petipa's earliest successes and one that Nureyev regarded as a masterpiece.

Epic in scale, operatic in form, Nureyev's production was, in the minds of many, a poignant but fitting swansong to his extraordinary career both at the Kirov and in Paris where he had been director of dance at the Paris Opera Ballet in the 1980s.

During the final preparations for the production, Nureyev was close to death, growing weaker by the day from the symptoms of AIDS.

"He knew he was very ill...he wanted to make this [La Bayadère] at the very last moment", said Brigitte Lefèvre, the director of dance at the Paris Opera Ballet.

Some could see the parallels between the end of Nureyev's life and the melancholy of the third act of

*La Bayadère*, in which the hero, Solor, sees Nikiya, his beloved, in heaven and ultimately joins her there.

Acknowledging the company's debt to Nureyev, the Paris Opera Ballet spent a fortune on the production. Much of the budget was allocated to the set, depicting 5th century India. Nureyev commissioned the Italian architect and opera designer, Ezio Frigerio, to create the décor and Frigerio's wife, Franca Squarciapino, to design the costumes.

Frigerio aimed for the essence of "India through European eyes...the Taj Mahal gave me the idea, for this ballet, of a mausoleum dedicated to a past love (it could apply to the tragic love-story of Solor and Nikiya): it looks first of all like a temple, then like a palace...to retain all the desirable dimensions and give the impression of vastness, I used materials which are translucent, like stained glass as it was made in the last century".\*

Nureyev knew *La Bayadère* from the inside out. When he was 21, he first danced the role of Solor in the Soviet production created by the virtuoso dancer and choreographer, Vakhtang Chabukiani and the teacher, Vladimir Ponomarev.

This 1941 production was one of a number of Russian versions that stayed close to Petipa's original ballet of 1877, but whose producers amended the choreography in minor or major ways, the most drastic being the elimination in 1919 of the fourth act, *The God's Wrath*, in which the temple where Solor is to marry the Princess Gamzatti collapses in an earthquake.

But *La Bayadère* had always remained a secret gem, hidden behind the Iron Curtain, until the Kirov Ballet's international tour in 1961, when the company revealed to the West the transcendent third act of the ballet, *The Kingdom of the Shades*.

During the Paris season of that tour, Nureyev astonished audiences with his virtuosity and charisma. On opening night, in *The Kingdom of the Shades*, he substituted his electrifying solo from *Le Corsaire* for Solor's variation. Purists might have winced but the audience went wild. From then on, *La Bayadère* followed Nureyev like a ghostly presence.

Immediately after the Kirov completed its Paris season, Nureyev defected to the West and within two years, produced *The Kingdom of the Shades* for the Royal Ballet in London.

Some questioned whether a 25 year old, as he was at the time, was mature enough to produce the ballet. Yet with Nureyev himself dancing as Solor; Margot Fonteyn as Nikiya, and Monica Mason, Merle Park and Lynn Seymour as the solo Shades, the production was a triumph.

In 1974, he went to on to stage *The Kingdom of the Shades* for the Paris Opera Ballet but Paris had to wait a further 18 years for Nureyev's full-length *La Bayadère*. This time, he said, the ballet was truly coming home. It had, after all, been created by a Frenchman, Petipa, and was based partly on a libretto by another Frenchman, Théophile Gautier.



Photo © Colette Masson

To prepare for this final production, Nureyev studied the Soviet version of *La Bayadère* on videotape and asked Ninel Kurgapkina, his former ballet partner, to travel from Russia to Paris to help him in the studio. They were joined by the Paris Opera Ballet's ballet mistress, Patricia Ruanne and the deputy director of dance, Patrice Bart.

As Nureyev was then so ill, "it was a very difficult situation," said Bart. "He sat on a big bench in the studio. Ninel would demonstrate something and ask Rudolf 'is this what you want?' He would say... 'mmmm a bit more'."

Despite his failing health, Nureyev was particular about the way the dancers interpreted the Shades's choreography, asking not for extreme height of the leg in arabesque, but for maximum length and extension.

He added new passages for the corps de ballet men at the beginning of the second scene of act one, and in act three, changed the order of the three Shades variations and revised Nikiya's variation. Nureyev did not reinstate the fourth act as planned, as costs were already too high to adjust the set to show it collapsing, as if in an earthquake.

Despite all the tinkering over the decades, *La Bayadère* has always remained "one of the best ballets for telling a story", said Bart. "It was very much in fashion in 19th century to have all these exotic numbers with all the sets and props especially in the second act, the big défilé with the elephant and a tiger, like a mise-en-scène for an opera rather than a ballet. That's why Rudolf kept it; he thought it very important."

The production premiered at the Palais Garnier on October 8, 1992. Nureyev watched the ballet propped up on a divan in a box at the side of the stage.

"It was going very, very well, a big reception, a triumph," said Bart. "At the end, he was helped on stage. It was extraordinary because he couldn't move at all and then, when he decided he would go to take his bow, suddenly he managed to walk by himself."

Dressed in evening clothes, with white tie, woven wool hat, and a shawl draped over his shoulder, he took the curtain call supported by Isabelle Guérin who danced the role of Nikiya, and Laurent Hilaire who danced as Solor. To the cheers of the audience, he raised his arm in farewell.

When the curtain fell, Nureyev sat on the Rajah's throne to receive the insignia of the Commander of Arts and Letters from the French Culture Minister, Jack Lang.

Nureyev's *La Bayadère* was "a personal triumph", wrote Julie Kavanagh, "the apotheosis of a 30-year mission to bring Petipa's unknown classics to the West... To this day *La Bayadère* remains the company's showcase, the lush St. Petersburg plastique of the women, the taut strides, electric presence, and imperious ports de bras of the men still bearing their former director's indelible mark."

Three months after the premiere Nureyev was dead and the world mourned, none more than the men and women who had stood by him as he created his last work.

"I had such an admiration for him as a man of the theatre," said Bart. "He knew about lighting, about sets, choosing material; he had such knowledge about production, everything."

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Valerie Lawson is an author and journalist. Quotations in this article are from the author's interviews with Brigitte Lefèvre and Patrice Bart in Paris, September 2008, and from Julie Kavanagh's biography of Nureyev published by Fig Tree, an imprint of Penguin Books in 2007.

\*Text from the Paris Opera Ballet theatre program.



Photo © Anne Deniau

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# RUDOLF NUREYEV

- 17 March 1938** Born on a train crossing central Asia towards Vladivostok, where his father was serving in the army.
- 1942 – 1954** Childhood spent in Ufa. Danced with folk-dance groups.
- 1955 – 1958** Studied at the Leningrad Ballet School with Alexander Pushkin.
- 1956 – 1961** Admitted to the Corps de Ballet of the Kirov, rapidly becoming a soloist (*Le Corsaire*, *Don Quixote*, *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*)
- 16 June 1961** In France on tour with the Kirov (*La Bayadère*) – he was dancing Solor at the Palais Garnier (for the first time in Europe) in May 1961 – demanded political asylum at Le Bourget airport. Engaged by the 'Ballets du Marquis de Cuevas'.
- 1962** Debut at Covent Garden, in *Giselle* with Margot Fonteyn. Danced since all over the world in works by Frederick Ashton, Rudi van Dantzig, Roland Petit, Maurice Béjart, George Balanchine, Glen Tetley, Martha Graham, Murray Louis, as well as performing the entire ballet repertoire.
- September 1983** Appointed Director of Dance at the Paris Opera Ballet.
- 1987** Received the Capezio Dance Award together with Fred Astaire and Bob Fosse.
- 1988** Decorated *Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur* by the president of France.
- November 1989** Danced again on the Kirov stage in Leningrad after an exile of twenty-eight years. Resigned from his post as Director of the Paris Opera Ballet, but remained its principal choreographer. Also movie producer (*Don Quixote* with The Australian Ballet – 1972), movie actor (*Valentino* – 1977) and conductor (1991 – 1992).
- 1992** *Commandeur des Arts et Lettres* (French Ministry of Culture)
- 6 January 1993** Died in Paris

## CHOREOGRAPHY

### *La Bayadère*

(Act III, *The Kingdom of the Shades*) after Marius Petipa

- 1963** Royal Ballet, London  
**1974** Paris Opera Ballet

### *Raymonda*

after Marius Petipa

- 1964** Royal Ballet, London  
**1965** The Australian Ballet  
**1972** Zurich Opera Ballet  
**1975** American Ballet Theatre  
**1983** Paris Opera Ballet

### *Swan Lake*

after Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov

- 1964** Vienna Opera  
**1984** Paris Opera Ballet  
**1990** La Scala, Milan

### *The Sleeping Beauty*

after Marius Petipa

- 1966** La Scala, Milan  
**1972** National Ballet of Canada  
**1975** London Festival Ballet  
**1980** Vienna Opera Ballet  
**1989** Paris Opera Ballet  
**1992** Berlin Staatsoper

### *Don Quixote*

after Marius Petipa

- 1966** Vienna Opera Ballet  
**1970** The Australian Ballet  
**1979** Zurich Opera Ballet  
**1981** Paris Opera Ballet  
**1985** Central Ballet, Peking Matsuyama Ballet, Tokyo  
**1987** La Scala, Milan  
**1994** Enters the Royal Ballet of Sweden repertoire

### *Tancrede*

music by Henze

- 1966** Vienna Opera Ballet

### *The Nutcracker*

music by Tchaikovsky

- 1967** Stockholm Opera  
**1968** Royal Ballet, London  
**1969** La Scala, Milan  
**1979** Berlin Opera  
**1985** Paris Opera Ballet  
**1994** Enters the Finnish National Ballet repertoire

### *Romeo and Juliet*

music by Prokofiev

- 1977** London Festival Ballet  
**1980** La Scala, Milan  
**1984** Paris Opera Ballet

### *Manfred*

music by Tchaikovsky

- 1979** Paris Opera Ballet

### *The Tempest*

music by Tchaikovsky

- 1982** Royal Ballet, London  
**1984** Paris Opera Ballet

### *Bach Suite*

music by J.S. Bach

- 1984** with the collaboration of Francine Lancelot

### *Washington Square*

after a short story by Henry James  
music by Charles Ives

- 1985** Paris Opera Ballet

### *Cinderella*

music by Prokofiev

- 1986** Paris Opera Ballet  
**1981** Naples Opera Ballet  
**1998** Enters the La Scala in Milan repertoire

### *La Bayadère*

in three-act version  
after Marius Petipa

- 1992** Paris Opera Ballet



Stéphane Bullion © Julien Benhamou



Stéphanie Romberg © Patrick Herrera



Nolwenn Daniel © Sébastien Mathé



Karl Paquette © Icare