

## **THE FORGIVABLE RUDI**

*Reviewed by VALERIE LAWSON. Valerie Lawson, a senior Herald journalist, won the 1998 Walkley Award for Reviews and Critique for her dance writing in the Herald and The Australian Financial Review.*

NUREYEV His Life

By Diane Solway

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SNOWDON'S cover portrait on this new biography of Rudolf Nureyev says it all. In the gaze of the dancer, we sense more than a thousand words can ever explain, the mixture of arrogance and appetite, intensity and refinement, an actor's assurance and the confidence of a man at the peak of his sexual magnetism.

They called him a Russian James Dean, a monstre sacre, a cheetah, the prototype for Mick Jagger. At the height of Rudimania, fans liked to chant: "We want Rudi, in the nudie."  
Sex lay at the heart of his great stage allure, and desire, in one form or another, drove his whole life.

This book was five years in the making and involved more than 200 interviews, so it is not surprising that Solway's forensic skills uncover more than we ever knew before of a genius whose greed and petulant displays of temper were matched only by his drive to achieve perfection.

But despite her assiduous research, Solway is often less successful in bringing the man to vivid life than she is in painting the bigger canvas, that is, Nureyev's setting - Soviet Russia from 1938 to 1961, the tensions of East-West politics, and his role in the cult of celebrity which arose in New York and London in the 1960s.

He was born in the Soviet Union in 1938, a time when Stalin dispatched prominent cultural figures to labour camps or to their death. When his father, Hamet, a soldier, came back from the war after many years, Nureyev felt he lost his mother to his father. That loss, combined with his father's cruelty, helped create the restless, never satisfied, rude, yet deeply ambitious adult Nureyev.

The first step on his path from Ufa, the charmless frozen capital of the Bashkir Soviet Republic in the Ural Mountains, to ballet school in Leningrad, came when he entered the Ufa Opera House where he "glimpsed the potential inside himself, as if a secret passageway had opened". He had no ballet mother in his life, no pushy parent. Unlike so many professional artists, he was self-determined and self-propelled.

As a performer, Nureyev knew how to take the light, a lesson he later taught his protege, the star dancer Sylvie Guillem; he'd learnt how to grab an audience's attention way back, when he danced in a roving folk troupe against a red cotton curtain hoisted across the middle of two trucks.

Nureyev had twin passions, music and dance, but was fascinated by all the arts and by life itself. Long before he defected to the West, he prepared himself intellectually for a world beyond the confines of the Kirov Ballet and used that company's occasional tours outside the Iron Curtain to educate himself further. But as Solway makes clear, his defection in 1961 during one of the Kirov's showcase tours to the West was more a result of bureaucratic chaos than careful planning.

Her greatest coup was to have declassified material on Nureyev from the former central archive of the Communist Party. The files showed that the KGB ordered Nureyev home 13 days before the Kirov Ballet was scheduled to leave Paris for London, but competing interests among Soviet agencies delayed that planned departure. He knew nothing of this and was told only at Le Bourget airport that he would not be going on to London with the rest of the Kirov, but to Moscow. He panicked, threatened suicide. After calling a friend and arranging his escape, Nureyev took just six quick, momentous steps into the arms of waiting gendarmes.

Said Mikhail Baryshnikov (the next Russian superstar of dance who later defected): "It was like a bird in a cage and suddenly the door is open."

A day later, Nureyev was front-page news, "perfect fodder for the burgeoning medium of TV news", caught in the glare of what the writer David Halberstam called the new media society.

Nureyev had become a political symbol - and remained one. As the dance writer Arlene Croce wrote, "it was good that he saw the Soviet Union disintegrate, for he was Gorbachev's advance man as well as Mikhail Baryshnikov's."

In the West, Nureyev was a restless traveller, adding lustre to companies with whom he danced, and later rechoreographed the classics. He retained the look of a stateless man, a rich refugee, always pushing his "doggy", as one dancer called it, a wheelie-bag containing his essentials - make-up, tights and ballet shoes.

Without his own mother and sisters, he looked to women for comfort and friendship (among them, his one-time Australian manager Joan Thring, formerly married to the actor Frank Thring), but men provided both sex and guidance.

He amassed a fortune estimated at \$US25 million to \$US30 million ("everything I have, the legs have danced for") and his name developed a momentum of its own, becoming a kind of universal standard for greatness.

One major achievement of this biography is the sense of just how very hard he worked to achieve greatness. (Technically, he was not without faults.) His inspiration came from two other brilliant dancers, Margot Fonteyn and Erik Bruhn, who represented what Solway calls his "defining ideals" of perfectionism and perseverance.

His on-stage relationship with Fonteyn generated much heat and gossip but Solway comes to no conclusion on whether they were having an affair. In contrast, the media kept in the closet Nureyev's passion for his real love, the technically perfect, handsome Danish dancer Bruhn, of whom Nureyev said: "I was running after him and the fans were running after me."

The one important dance figure Nureyev failed to impress was the choreographer George Balanchine, whose New York City Ballet was everything Nureyev was not - cool, sleek, uniform, an ensemble of equal stars. Balanchine told him: "You don't know how to dance the way we dance and it would take you too long to learn."

This was too tough on Nureyev, a man so adaptable to all dance forms, and so hungry to learn about grace and impetus of any kind that he even advised a friend in a restaurant: "Watch how the waiters run from table to table; there you will see great movement."

Dance-savvy readers will enjoy Solway's explanation of how Nureyev developed his animalistic yet feminine style (striving to be "light, quick and above ground, standing on high demi pointe to elongate his legs and line").

She does not dwell long on the details of his promiscuity. (He chose beautiful boys "like a piece of cake", hunting often in small London bars or New York bathhouses.)

He danced almost to his death, notably in Australia - where, I recall, a deep sense of embarrassment pervaded the State Theatre in November 1991 - then tried bravely for a new conducting career before he died of AIDS in early 1993.

This is a much better book than the Peter Watson biography of Nureyev, rushed into print in 1994, but suffers in comparison with the recent biography of Sir Frederick Ashton by Julie Kavanagh, who had the advantage of spending many years gaining the confidence of her subject, then publishing after his death.

But if Solway's insights do not exactly soar off the page, like a Nureyev leap, she does allow us to understand her subject, not just to admire the sheer force of his energy and astounding talent, but to like him and forgive his excesses.

As one card at his funeral said: "Rudi, dance in peace."