

RUDOLF NUREYEV'S INFLUENCE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF BALLET IN THE WEST

1961 was eventful and significant in the post war history of the Royal Opera House and its two principal companies, the Royal Opera and the Royal Ballet, for that year saw the arrival of Georg Solti as Music Director of the opera and the defection of Rudolf Nureyev, who was later that year to appear in a charity performance organised by Margot Fonteyn, which in turn led to an invitation from Dame Ninette de Valois to join the Royal Ballet as a guest artist. Suddenly in our midst were two charismatic artists, with strong personalities and boundless energy, hell bent on success for themselves and for those with whom they worked. At the beginning Solti announced to the world that he was going to make the Royal Opera the greatest company in the world, a sentiment which I am sure Rudolf would have shared if in such a position with a ballet company at the time. Their effect was of a meteor hitting Covent Garden.

Prior to Rudolf's decision to remain in Paris in June 1961, as the Kirov Ballet left for London, reports had been circulating in London and elsewhere about the quality and virtuosity of Rudolf's dancing in Leningrad. When the Company started to perform in Paris, immediately before their London season, the reporting became intensified, now first hand and gaining in credibility. Expectations of an astonishing revelation in male dancing ran high, only to be dashed by his failure to arrive with the Company.

I was at Heathrow that day, June 16th, waiting to greet the company. There was already talk of an incident around a dancer at Le Bourget, but no more than that and no light was shed on who it might be, a situation which was little changed on the company's arrival as Soviet practice of total secrecy prevailed. None was willing to talk, except for Constantin Sergeev, the Artistic Director, and Natasha Doudinskaya, his wife and ballerina, who told me that I should listen only to them and shortly the truth would be revealed. The company was in a state of shock and some were in tears. Rudolf had little opportunity to tell anyone why he was not coming to London. In any event, he did not believe the reason he was given by Sergeev for being returned to Moscow and concluded that this was the end for him as a serious dancer either with the Kirov or the Bolshoi, more likely he would be sent to the small company in his birth place, Ufa, unless he made a dash for freedom. That moment was seized.

For Rudolf nothing had come easily. His childhood was harsh and deprived, with little money, food or clothing. There was in him, however, a dream world in which he inhabited the theatre and dance: It was this which drove him and continued to drive him all his life. As he often said, the stage is my home. His father, a professional soldier and a staunch communist party member and commissar, was far removed from such a life and was angry and threatening when he discovered that Rudolf was attending ballet class, a fact which Rudolf had tried to conceal from him. Undeterred by this hostility, Rudolf continued his ballet tuition, intent on gaining entry to the Vaganova School in St Petersburg. Late starter though he was, he was still successful in being admitted and eventually came under the influence of a great teacher, Alexander Pushkin, who befriended him, having detected a rare talent in a raw and undisciplined frame, and accepted the challenge to help Rudolf to become a successful and fulfilled artist.

Rudolf responded wholeheartedly to Pushkin's encouragement and to the demands made on him. Rudolf worked and worked on his technique, something he was to do for the rest of his life, never content with where he was. This work ethos was part of what he brought to the West. He knew that there are no short cuts to success and there is no substitute for work however talented you are.

His graduation performance was a conspicuous success and was followed by an invitation from the Bolshoi. This was not what Rudolf wanted and he strove to join the Kirov Ballet, which he successfully achieved, winning the attention of Natasha Doudinskaya who asked him to dance with her, as he was to do, along with other leading ballerinas of the company.

Rudolf revelled in his work and in being a member of one of the world's greatest ballet companies. However, he saw it as a confined world with no contact with artistic developments in the rest of the world. The repertoire was narrow and confined to the work of Soviet choreographers. There was also the dead hand of Constantin Sergeyev, the artistic director, a fine former dancer but with a limited vision for his company. Rudolf was to have a direct experience of this when it came to the opening performance of *Sleeping Beauty* in Paris, a performance in which he assumed he would be appearing. This was not to be so and the premiere went to Kopolkova and Semenov, who were received with moderate enthusiasm. How much of Sergeyev's decision was due to jealousy and to an awareness that evening might well go to Nureyev rather than the company, I do not know, though Doudinskaya was to say later that Rudolf stunned the audience when he did appear in the fourth performance, and that he was a show stopper.

Rudolf fell immediately in love with Paris and, contrary to all Soviet directions, wandered freely around the city, talked in faltering English and visited museums and galleries and, probably worst of all from the Soviet view point, private houses, but all anathema to the Russian authorities. There were strict rules for those on tour, enforced by the Kirov's assistant director, a KGB representative, commissars placed in the company and by company members who were paid up party members and who spied on fellow dancers reporting transgressions to their superiors. It was a horrible regime, which I saw at work at close quarters during visits by Russian companies to London. Nureyev was not to be deterred and eventually paid the price for the errors of his ways by being denied the London visit.

What thought he had given to defection before the event, I do not know. Clearly he longed for the personal and artistic freedom he believed existed in the West, but I have always thought that, however much he desired it, he would have needed a drastic measure to tip him over into a decision. Russians have an attachment to mother earth which, in my experience, binds them to it more strongly than any other nation. Be that as it may, the moment came and Rudolf was in the West and what was seen by Soviet authorities as its decadent culture.

Bewilderment, fear and uncertainty must have been overwhelming for him, but still the urge to dance prevailed. Within two weeks he was doing just that with the Marquis de Cuevas Company. Margot Fonteyn, who was organising her annual charity performance in London, was obviously very much aware of this astonishing dancer and thought that it would be a great idea to have him in her gala. However, she decided to check him out with her friend and teacher, Vera Volkova, whom she had discovered was giving him some lessons in Copenhagen. His undoubted talents were confirmed and Margot phoned him, to be greeted with his response to her invitation, " Yes, provided I dance with you in *Spectre de la Rose*". When told that this was impossible because of her commitment to John Gilpin, he eventually

agreed to appear provided a new solo was made for him, and by Frederick Ashton. Thus was born *Poème Tragique* to music by Scriabin and Nureyev's first performance on English soil.

Dame Ninette de Valois was naturally at the gala and immediately invited Rudolf to appear with Margot Fonteyn in *Giselle* with the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden in February of the following year, 1962. This was to be not only the beginning of one of the most famous duos in the history of ballet, but of much else that was to have a lasting impact on the Royal Ballet and all the other companies and dancers around the world with whom Rudolf came into contact.

In inviting Rudolf to dance with the Royal Ballet, Ninette de Valois was well aware that some dancers, particularly amongst the men, were likely to resent his presence, fearful of change and of perhaps losing their positions in the company. She was also aware that Rudolf was far from content with the traditional view of the male dancer's role and might introduce changes which might shock some. Nevertheless, with her extraordinary insight and vision for the future of her company, she saw the necessity of embracing a dancer of such amazing talent within her orbit. The Company lacked a virtuoso male dancer at the time, and, as she observed, here was a rare artist who combined virtuosity with taste, intelligence and sound artistic judgment. Too often virtuosity comes without the latter qualities.

For Margot Fonteyn Rudolf gave her a new lease of life. She was then 42, 20 years his senior, and already contemplating retirement. She had spoken to me several times about this and indicated that the time was not far distant when I would have a call from her after breakfast one morning to be told that this was it and she would appear on the stage no more.. There were to be many calls from her over the years but never this one. It is a tribute to Margot's extraordinary resilience and youthfulness that she could respond to the dynamic enthusiasm of her new found partner and rise to all the challenges he confronted her with. It was an amazing extension to an already illustrious career and one which will have a permanent place in the annals of ballet.

The *Giselle* performances were widely acclaimed, though not without expressions of discontent with changes which Rudolf had, in the minds of his critics, arbitrarily introduced. For example, he introduced a new ending, with Albrecht kneeling alone and in grief on the stage. This was an improvement on the previous version and did not call out for complaint in my view. Other changes followed what he had learned in Russia, different choreography for entries in Act 2 and a new solo when normally he is offstage. This made dramatic sense, illustrating how he was trapped by the Willis and emphasising the idea of them trying to dance him to death.

The anticipated expressions of shock and horror at these changes to the choreography and production of a standard classical work were quick to come. *Giselle* and much else of the Royal Ballet's repertoire were regarded as sacrosanct and a precious heritage not to be tampered with, particularly not by a dancer from another tradition. Part of these objections can be explained by the relative youth of the Company (it was then only 31 years since its formation) and the feeling that it was not yet ready to take such risks in disturbing what had been achieved. There was also amongst aficionados a proprietorial interest which they felt was threatened by this interloper.

Mercifully for the Royal Ballet, Dame Ninette saw otherwise and gave Rudolf her unstinting support. She realised what a vitalising effect he would have on male dancers, though his influence was soon to spread to the girls as well. She understood, too, the value to the

company of his likely contributions to the repertoire, his understanding of the great Russian classical tradition and, above all, the impact of his extraordinary performances. It is worth noting here the irony in all of this. Here was the one person who built up the traditions of the Royal Ballet which Nureyev is accused of endangering and yet who is encouraging him!

To ease potential tension within the Company Dame Ninette proposed that Rudolf be engaged as a guest artist. This may have helped a little, but such was the force of Rudolf's personality, his utter and total commitment to dance, his determination to succeed and to have his way that titles were of no significance. Some dancers were worried about their futures, but most quickly realised that they had a unique and magnetic personality in their midst who was capable of helping them in their careers. Who could be anything other than amazed and enthralled by his extraordinary elevation, his seeming suspension in the air at the height of his jumps, his dramatic sense and an ability to search out ways of enhancing the quality and excitement of his performance.

Rudolf was soon to become the icon for all dancers, the artist for whom the stage was his home, his life. He was a perfectionist, for whom the words no and impossible had no meaning. He worked and worked at his technique, maybe the result of his late start with serious training as a dancer, though I believe that it was more than that. It was the quest for standards and the means of expressing emotion and drama through dance in the most compelling and convincing manner.

It was this which persuaded him to find new meaning to the role of the danseur noble, hitherto a cardboard figure without personality, there only as a support and foil to the ballerina. As Rudolf transformed these figures into living characters, at no point did he under-rate the need for the danseur noble to be in support of the ballerina and showing her off to best advantage. Even so, Rudolf so changed the role of the male dancer that it became difficult to accept the notion that so and so ballerina was simply partnered by Rudolf but rather that Rudolf danced with xxx.

That he could go too far in promoting the interests of the danseur noble was demonstrated for me in a production of *Sleeping Beauty* at the Scala, Milan. Apart from its playing length of nearly 4 hours, in the Hunting Scene, for example, Rudolf introduced a long solo for the Prince to hauntingly beautiful music, but it was very long and could only be sustained by a charismatic dancer. This was also the subject of several costume changes. At supper afterwards Rudolf, after explosive comments about the Sovrintendente of the Scala for seating me in his box, which was apparently exactly what Rudolf had asked him not to do because of poor sight lines, he asked if I thought some of his changes were excessive. I told him that I thought that he had gone a few steps too far in some instances. About the alterations to Act 2 he readily agreed and subsequently made revisions. What, incidentally, also struck me as strange was that that he did nothing to provide a more convincing conclusion to Act 2 after Aurora's awakening. As so often, she wakes up and rushes off the stage without further ado and re-appears in Act 3 in the grand pas. For me Ashton provided the perfect coda to this act in an earlier Royal Ballet production, now sadly lost.

Again in quest of his ideals Rudolf would change choreography in the male variations where he thought that there would be gain in showing to full advantage his elevation and virtuoso technique. None of this went unnoticed and others would follow in an attempt to emulate him, but not all had the technique or the charisma to bring the changes off.

Nureyev, as we know, was a late starter. The knowledge that he had much to catch up with was a continuous motivating force. His achievement in overcoming many technical difficulties was amazing, but there were peers whose technical prowess he could not quite match. None, however, could surpass him as a performer. His charisma, his grasp of a character, his ability to use every device available to him in timing, phrasing and expressiveness, his animal sexual quality were exploited to the full.

He would reject costumes if he regarded them as ridiculous, either because they were out of style or inhibiting to his dancing. What he was seeking was the most effective way of delineating a character and adding to the dramatic expressiveness that he knew that dance was capable of delivering to the audience.

What Rudolf was doing all the time, and encouraging others to follow suit, was pushing out the boundaries of the possible. He was constantly challenging himself to go beyond a point of technical achievement so far reached. This whole notion of performing beyond your limits was second nature to him, but new to many others who needed his encouragement to dare. Dancing dangerously, daring yourself, watching your phrasing and timing were elements in his performances which made them so exciting and so moving to watch. There would often be the cry from Nureyev, "Come on, girl, of course you can do it. Go for it". If failure was the outcome, Rudolf would give not up but press on to further effort. This was part of the spell which he cast all around him to those responsive to him. There were few who weren't.

In this regard he did come up against what might be termed English respectability and inhibition. When Dame Ninette was pioneering ballet in this country during the 20's and in 1931 forming the Sadler's Wells Ballet Company, to convince parents to allow their children, particularly boys, to train as dancers, she had to demonstrate that it was a respectable thing for boys and girls to do. As Lincoln Kirstein, the co-founder of the New York City Ballet with George Balanchine, often used to say to me, she created a rod for her back, necessary though it was to summon up forceful arguments in favour of dance at the time. Nureyev helped to hasten the end of the inhibited dancer.

It was Frederick Ashton, then director of the Royal Ballet, who gave Rudolf his first opportunity to mount a production of a 19th century ballet: Act 3 of *La Bayadere* (Kingdom of Shades) at Covent Garden in November 1963. It was a bold decision, taken in the face of opposition from some of his staff. It was a gamble giving a totally untried dancer the opportunity to mount his first production, and on the company as distinguished as the Royal Ballet and in the full glare of the critics and public. Once again, Ashton's intuition was vindicated. Nureyev's choreography was based on that of Marius Petipa and his remembrance of the ballet at the Kirov. He did not reproduce step for step and saw Petipa's creation as a guide, changing where he considered there was benefit and interpolating other sections from the ballet. It was a huge success with the public. More importantly it enabled him to work closely and intensively with the dancers to the huge benefit of the Royal Ballet. It showed very clearly his creative talent and a rare ability to coach dancers and encourage them to stretch themselves beyond their view of what was possible. Another classical ballet was later entrusted to him, *Nutcracker*, which was highly developed in its approach and departed from the original scenario and traditional view of this work. Nureyev detected an underlying menace in the story and uncharted depths of meaning. For him it was not just a pretty ballet.

Rudolf possessed a wonderfully enquiring mind, an asset which he might have inherited from his father, who contrary to everything which might be thought about him, wanted to improve

himself intellectually and lift his family and himself from the poor situation in which they lived and worked. Rudolf was continuously in search of new experiences in listening to music, looking at pictures and antiques, and collecting them. This interest in so much beyond dance, although often inherent in it, was something which dancers need to emulate to widen their horizons and imaginations.

Like Maria Callas, Rudolf could lose his temper rapidly if somebody or something got in the way of what he was trying to achieve. He did not suffer fools gladly, but also like her with young singers, he was of immeasurable help to the young and talented dancer, encouraging and demonstrating effective ways of surmounting technical problems and leading them to find true expressiveness in their dancing.

Perhaps because of his own initial difficulties in pursuing a career as a dancer he was sympathetic to the less talented. I was reminded of this recently in response to a request from a company in the Far East to mount his production of *Sleeping Beauty*. Enquiries led me to think that the company was not up to the demands of this and said no. I was also concerned about the shortage of time they were giving themselves to put on a production of a major classical ballet. They begged me to reconsider. I then re-called what he would sometimes say in response to a request from a less than top flight company, "Let them have a go. If no good in the end, we drop it." I was glad to be reminded of this because, while the results were by no means perfect, they were not bad and in the course of the 10 weeks of rehearsal much was learned by the company about adopting Nureyev's style and in understanding the absolute necessity of long, continuous and hard work to achieve their best potential. It was rewarding experience for them and for me.

Curiosity took Rudolf in all sorts of directions, but not least in search of new choreographers and ballets which he had not hitherto performed. This was all part of the challenging process to which he constantly subjected himself and others. Nothing stood still, there were new territories to be explored and tested. He went to everybody whom he admired and believed could give him a new and wider experience of dance. Many welcomed him: Martha Graham, Paul Taylor, whose ballet *Aureole* to music by Handel he particularly admired, Roland Petit, Jiri Kilian, Hans van Manen, to name but some. Where he was unsuccessful was with George Balanchine, whose ballets he loved and admired more than those of any other choreographer. From the beginning of his time in the West he sought a way of getting to Balanchine. Eventually he did, only to be rebuffed. Balanchine considered him too closely identified with the 19th century classics, the world of princes. In any event, his company was not based on stars and could see no way of accommodating Nureyev in his company without serious disruption of what he had carefully developed over the years. By then Rudolf was a star. He was dismayed by Balanchine's rejection. No further overtures were successful, but 17 years later Balanchine had been asked by the New York City Opera to make a production of *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, based on the Molière play and with music by Richard Strauss and concluded that Nureyev was ideal for the leading role, a decision, it seems, more related to his personality than his abilities as a dancer. This went ahead but never achieved much success and a lasting place in the repertory. Balanchine immediately lost interest. In my view Rudolf never came to terms with his rejection by the choreographer whom he most admired, not least because he could not understand the reason why he would not have been welcome in that company.

It was his quest for perfection and his enquiring mind which led me to try to persuade him become Director of the Royal Ballet on the impending resignation of Kenneth Macmillan in the 70's. We had many discussions. He liked the company, but was concerned about its

restricted performing opportunities as it shared the Royal Opera House with the opera. He was also adamant that he continued to dance, a point about which I was uneasy. The company had both benefited and suffered from the success of the Fonteyn/Nureyev partnership, the downside being the diminished number of performances available to other dancers. In a relatively small company and with limited performances and a director wanting to perform as often as Rudolf felt it necessary to keep himself on form, I could see trouble ahead. Our discussions ended with Rudolf making the comment, wise from his point of view, that if he became director of the Royal Ballet and failed, he could not return to dancing having performed not at all or very little. Whereas, if he went on dancing and then became a company director he would have nothing to lose. Effectively that is what he did in becoming director of the Paris Opera Ballet in 1983.

What he then did for Paris was miraculous, though not without the difficulties that could be attributed to a star turned director and still craving for performances. His extension of the repertoire there and the encouragement of many young and talented dancers brought that great company to the peak of its form.

Rudolf was not a great original choreographer and his newly created ballets never achieved the success he enjoyed in the re-creation of the 19th century classical repertoire. Though critical and public response was a disappointment to him he remained undeterred and persevered in creating a range of ballets based on interesting ideas and stories.

Rudolf's influence was widespread. Classical ballet will never be the same again as the result of the impact which he had upon it. His creative strength lay in his productions of the 19th century repertoire, in which he respected the original choreography where he believed that was effective. Otherwise he revised the original or substituted his own version. In the case of Nutcracker he completely re-made the ballet. He was not averse to adding solos, as in Swan Lake at the conclusion of Act 1 where he has included a variation for Prince Siegfried, underlining his deep sense of melancholy.

Rudolf showed that nothing can replace the hard grind of continuous work if success is to be attained and maintained. Communicating with the audience in the most direct manner had to be a continuing goal. Nothing in dance can be taken for granted, everything has to be striven for and the seemingly impossible constantly challenged. These were the lessons which Rudolf taught us.

Ballet is a living and vibrant art form, capable of expressing the whole gamut of emotions and dramatic action. Nobody has been more successful in searching out the truth and showing it to audiences around the world than Rudolf Nureyev, and around the world I really mean for there were few companies which did not benefit from an injection of the Nureyev charisma and artistic endeavour.

Let the final word go to Violette Verdy, a great dancer and member of the New York City Ballet for many years, who recalls:

" I could not get over his intensity, his focus and, of course, his beauty. He was not so much wild as untamed and unpolluted. You could see the purity right away in his dedication and total involvement in the role....He had conceived the part of the prince as man in search of an ideal, with the wonder of discovering it - and with that extraordinary sense of being mesmerised by what he was looking for, and being mesmerized by what he was finding. I had never seen such a vulnerable, exposed quality.... He was invested in the part and the part was speaking for him. That was tantalising and made the audience all the more curious about him."