

# CHOREOGRAPHY AND BALLET

# History of the Ballet

Ballet was popular in Britain in the form of the masque (a kind of courtly entertainment) in the 1500s. An English choreographer, John Weaver, developed the ideas of the masque in “*The Loves of Mars and Venus* (1717)”. This was the first known ballet of action.

The enormous increase in the popularity of ballet in the 1900s was made possible by the efforts of dancers, teachers, and enthusiastic supporters. Most of these were inspired by seasons of Russian ballet from 1911 to 1929, directed by Serge Diaghilev.

Ballet has, of course, undergone many stylistic alterations. The Romantic style of the early to mid-19th century was much softer - less studded with virtuosic jumps and turns - than the classical style of the late 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Russian ballet, frequently regarded as the paradigm of the classical school, is itself a blend of the soft and decorative French school, the more brittle and virtuosic style of the Italians, and the vigorous athleticism of Russian folk dances.

The design of classical ballet is traditionally symmetrical in the shapes made by the dancers' bodies, in the grouping of the dancers on stage, and even in the structure of the whole dance. Interest in ballet has grown enormously in Britain since World War II. Many people enjoy ballet in films, on television, and in theatres.

There are five major British ballet companies: two companies of the **Royal Ballet** (founded in 1931), one at the **Royal Opera House, Covent Garden**, and one touring; the **Ballet Rambert** (1930); **London's Festival Ballet** (1950), and the **Western Theatre Ballet** (1957).

# The Royal Ballet

It is recognized by most people as Britain's national company. In 1931, when the company was founded it was called the Vic-Wells Ballet. The company became known as the Royal Ballet in 1957.

The Royal Ballet bases its repertoire on the great classical and romantic ballets. The company is regarded as one of the principal homes of classical ballet outside Russia. The Royal Ballet has developed a British style of dancing in a remarkably short time.

The strength of British ballet lies partly in the individual manner in which a variety of choreographic styles are treated. The Royal Ballet has concentrated on developing strong organization, sound technique for its dancers, and sound teaching methods for its ballet school. The dancer's expression and interpretation have tended to come second. The opposite is true of the Ballet Rambert.

# The Ballet Rambert

It emphasizes expression and the expression possibilities of ballet. Ballet Rambert is the oldest existing ballet company in England. Since the 1930s the Ballet Rambert has been an important training ground for young talent;

among the famous artists who gained early experience with the company were the dancers Alicia Markova and Margot Fonteyn and the choreographers Antony Tudor, Sir Frederick Ashton, Agnes deMille, Andree Howard, Walter Gore, and Peggy van Praagh.

Inspired by **Dame Marie Rambert**, a former dancer with Diaghilev, the Rambert Dancers (performing from 1926) and the Ballet Club (established in 1930) staged small-scale Sunday afternoon productions that were mainly new ballets by unknown choreographers.

During World War II the company toured factories, military camps, and out lying areas and later staged seasons in major London theatres. Its postwar tours include one of Australia and New Zealand that greatly stimulated interest there in ballet.

The Ballet Rambert is a small company; in 1966 its repertoire was reformed to make it almost exclusively a forum for young talent. John Chesworth was appointed artistic director in 1974.

The Royal Ballet and the Ballet  
Rambert have trained fine dancers  
as well as choreographers.

# **The Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet**

It was founded in 1946 by De Valois (1898-1951), after that the Sadler's Wells Ballet moved to the Royal Opera House.

Based at Sadler's Wells Theatre (1946-55, 1970-90) and the Royal Opera House (1955-70), it traveled widely abroad after 1949. Renamed the Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet in 1977, it moved to Birmingham as the Birmingham Royal Ballet in 1990 and became independent of the Royal Opera House in 1997.

# Innovations in the 20th century

Fokine's reforms were a major influence on the development of 20th-century ballet. Particularly in the works that he created for **Sergey Diaghilev's company, the Ballets Russes**, he showed the range of different dance styles that classical ballet was capable of absorbing, helping to pave the way for more radical innovation.

For example, in *Chopiniana* (1908), a virtually plotless ballet that recalled the earlier Romantic tradition, Fokine created a soft and uncluttered style that contained no bravura feats of jumping, turning, or batterie.

Arm movements were simple and unaffected, the grouping of the dancers had a fluid, plastic quality, and above all there was a flowing, lyrical line in the phrasing and movement.

The style of later 20th-century ballet was influenced not only by the Ballets Russes but by modern dance as well. It became common for choreographers to extend the traditional ballet vocabulary with modern-dance techniques, such as curving and tilting the body away from the vertical line, working on or close to the floor, and using turned-in leg positions and flexed feet.

**Balanchine**, influenced by jazz, used syncopated rhythms in his phrasing and incorporated steps from such popular dances as **ragtime** and **rock and roll**. His movements were usually wide, almost exaggerated in shape and volume, and frequently characterized by speed and by hard, clear accents.

Despite these changes ballet retains significant traces of its courtly and classical past.

Although there are exceptions, ballet dancers still tend to dance in the calm, erect, and dignified manner of their aristocratic forebears.

# Sir Frederick Ashton (1904-1988)

Principal choreographer and director of England's **Royal Ballet**, the repertoire of which includes about 30 of his ballets.

Ashton studied dancing in London under Leonide Massine, Nicholas Legat, and Marie Rambert, who encouraged his first choreographic efforts, *The Tragedy of Fashion* (1926) and *Capriol Suite*.

Ashton joined the Vic-Wells (later the Sadler's Wells and then the Royal) Ballet in 1933 and distinguished himself as a mime and character dancer in such roles *as Carabosse in The Sleeping Beauty* and the *gigolo* in *Facade* and as the versatile choreographer of ballets that include *Cinderella*, *Sylvia*, and *Daphnis and Chloe* and the film *Tales of Hoffmann* (1951).

He was the Royal Ballet's principal choreographer from 1933 to 1970, during which time he also served as its associate director (1952 to 1963) and its director (1963 to 1970). In 1970 he retired from his administrative position in order to devote his time exclusively to choreography. Ashton was knighted in 1962.

# Sir Anton Dolin (1904-1983)

British ballet dancer,  
choreographer, and director who,  
with his frequent partner Alicia  
Markova, founded the  
Markova-Dolin companies and  
**London's Festival Ballet.**

Trained by the notable Russian teachers **Serafima Astafieva** and **Bronislava Nijinska**, Dolin began his ballet career in 1921 in the corps de ballet of **Sergey Diaghilev's Ballets Russes**.

As a soloist with Diaghilev's company, he created the leading role in Nijinska's *Train Bleu* (1924) and an important role (one of two Servants) in **George Balanchine's** *Prodigal Son* (1929).

Dolin was considered to be one of the finest partners of his time. He eventually danced leading roles in numerous classical ballets but was also noted for such creations as Satan in **Ninette de Valois's** *Job* (1931) and the title role in **Michel Fokine's** *Bluebeard* (1941).

His many books on the dance include *Ballet Go Round* (1938), *Pas de Deux, the Art of Partnering* (1949), *Alicia Markova* (1953), *Autobiography* (1960), and *The Sleeping Ballerina: The Story of Olga Spessivtzeva* (1966).

# **Dame Margot Fonteyn (1919-1991)**

British ballet dancer who became internationally famous for the natural way in which she expressed emotions in her dancing.

She is the best remembered for her performances with Rudolf Nureyev in the ballets directed by Frederic Ashton in the 1960s. As a child she studied dance in Hong Kong and then in London with Serafima Astafieva and at the Sadler's Wells Ballet school.

Her debut was with the Vic-Wells Ballet in 1934. When Markova left the company the following year, Fonteyn took over many of her classical roles, including *Giselle*, and became a leading danseuse of the Vic-Wells Ballet.

In 1939 she danced *Aurora* in a revival of *The Sleeping Beauty*; her interpretation is still considered the definitive Aurora of the era.

After 1959 she appeared with the *Royal Ballet* as guest artist and also toured extensively.

Her celebrated partnership with Nureyev began in the early 1960s and is generally considered to have enriched her characterizations. She became president of the Royal Academy of Dancing in 1954.

She was created Dame of the Order of the British Empire in 1956. In the late 1970s, as she began to curtail her performing, she turned to television presentations and to the writing of such books as *Autobiography* (1975), *A Dancer's World* (1979), and *The Magic of Dance* (1979). She remained active in the world of dance until her death.

# Marie-Therese Kemble (1774-1838)

English singer, dancer, and actress  
who married the actor and  
theatrical manager **Charles  
Kemble**.

The daughter of a French family of musicians, Maria Theresa was taken to England as a small child. In 1786 she found an acting part at the **Drury Lane Theatre**. She continued to play a wide variety of minor parts, some of them singing.

In 1806 she married Charles Kemble and appeared with him for years in supporting parts at the **Covent Garden**. Their two daughters also won fame; they were the author and actress **Fanny Kemble** and the opera and concert singer **Adelaide Kemble**.

# **Michael George Some** **(1917-1994)**

English dancer, premier danseur  
and assistant director of the Royal  
(formerly Sadler's Wells) Ballet.

His extensive repertoire included leading roles, frequently as Margot Fonteyn's partner, in both classical and contemporary ballets. In 1934 Some received the first scholarship given to a male by *the Sadler's Wells School*, and in 1935 he joined the ballet company.

By 1937 he was appearing in solo parts; his first major creation was in Frederick Ashton's *Horoscope* (1938). After serving in World War II, he returned to create additional important roles in ballets choreographed by Ashton, including *Symphonic Variations* (1946), *Cinderella* (1948), *Daphnis and Chloe* (1951), *Tiresias* (1951), and *Ondine* (1958).

He also performed in such classical ballets as *Swan Lake*, *Giselle*, and *The Sleeping Beauty*.

In 1950 Somes succeeded Robert Helpmann as Margot Fonteyn's official partner, and in 1959 he was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire.

After retiring as premier danseur (1961), he became assistant director of the Royal Ballet in 1963 and appeared in pantomime roles such as *the Father in Marguerite and Armand* (1963). Leaving his assistant directorship in 1970, he remained with the Royal Ballet as its principal teacher until 1984.

# Ninette de Valois (1898-2001)

The stage name of **Edris Stannus**.

Irish dancer and choreographer who had a great influence on the development of the British Ballet.

After appearing in London and Paris in the early 1920s, she opened a ballet school in London with **Lilian Baylis**. In 1931 she started Vic-Wells ballet, which performed at Sadler's Wells and later became the Royal Ballet, which she directed until 1963. She was made a dame in 1951.