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She was the greatest dancer of our epoch



Photo Stephen Lock

Rudolf Nureyev mourns his partner and lifelong friend, Dame Margot Fonteyn, prima ballerina assoluta, who died on Thursday aged 71. Below Dame Alicia Markova, Dame Ninette de Valois and Sir Kenneth MacMillan add their tributes

MY PARTNERSHIP with Margot was without doubt the most important of my life. Performing with her was intoxicating, and it has been my greatest piece of good fortune to have met and become her friend as well as her partner.

Margot had a catalytic effect on me. I had been at the Kirov Ballet and danced with 11 ballerinas there; then when I came to the West I partnered Yvette Chauviré and Rosella Hightower. I was about to go the United States, in fact, when Margot invited me to go to her at the Royal Ballet. Somehow I felt a call to change my plans. It was a crucial time. I was 23 and that meeting coloured my whole life.

The last time I spoke to her was four days ago, when I rang her to talk about my tour here in America. She was always curious about what I was doing. To cheer her up I told her that I was conducting for the first time. She was delighted, and giggled at that.

Then I called her yesterday [Wednesday] because it was my last performance in Salt Lake city and I wanted to brag about it to her. But she was asleep and I couldn't talk to her - she was under very heavy sedation. They told me to call again today at 11, but I had rehearsal and I couldn't. [Dame Margot died at 11.30.]

She was suffering for a long time, suffering a lot, and her death is not really a shock. She was very brave, and always kept her sense of humour, even when she was ill.

Personally she gave me backbone. Professionally she taught me by example, as we danced. She was always very direct. She wouldn't hide things if you asked her for advice, but she was never schoolmarmish and she would make a light joke of it. All the bitter pills had sugar on them.

I think *Sleeping Beauty* was really her best role, and I was honoured when she finally decided to share it with me. I couldn't pick any of our partnership above any

other - anything we did was a joy - but I do have great memories of our *Giselle* at Covent Garden. I remember during the very first rehearsal we had, the *corps de ballet* standing there with tears dripping from their eyes in that second act.

You can't separate her from the Royal Ballet because she was there at the creation of the company. She is dance in England, and you can see the proof in the Royal Ballet's dancers today. But even more than that she was the greatest dancer of our epoch in all the world. Because of her, dance itself became better.

Rudolf Nureyev was interviewed by Ismene Brown



Photo Bill Russell

Dame Alicia Markova

I first saw Margot in 1933 when her mother brought her from Shanghai to my teacher in Chelsea. I was the ballerina at Ninette de Valois's company by then and she was a girl of 14.

Margot always said that I was her inspiration. People have often tried to build up a feud between us, but one never existed. We were not rivals - after all, she was nine years younger than I. She was a chum of my younger sister, and I rather thought of her as another young sister.

There has always been admiration and affection between us, and we stayed closely in touch. Margot was very generous. Whenever I had a big performance somewhere in the world she would send me flowers. Even after I retired, flowers would suddenly arrive from her, with a note expressing love and admiration.

I remember a couple of years ago in Italy, we were both invited to take part in a television programme about ballet, along with Galina Ulanova from Russia and Yvette Chauviré from France. In the car going home afterwards, she looked at me and said, "Well, we've done our best for our country, haven't we?"

Of all her roles I will remember particularly her Princess Aurora. I think perhaps it goes back to knowing her when she was very young. She was a delightful young person - fun was important to her, and she loved parties. There was a part of Margot in that role, a young, beautiful princess, rising like the dawn.

Sir Kenneth MacMillan

MARGOT's appearance in the great classic ballets was, I think, her most important contribution of all. They hadn't existed here before her - *Sleeping Beauty*, for instance, had only been seen when Diaghilev brought it on tour. De Valois brought them into the repertoire, and the way Margot danced them influenced all those who followed.

She was also Frederick Ashton's muse, and inspired him to make *Ondine* and some great one-act ballets. Ashton helped shape her as a dancer, and through that she

in turn shaped the way the classics were danced.

Nowadays there's a great emphasis on technical ability alone, but Margot brought artistry, charm and gentleness to everything she did. She was extremely disciplined, worked very hard, and never complained - so nobody else could complain either. But her greatest quality was her musicality, the way she phrased her dancing to the music's phrasing.

I would have loved to have choreographed for her but I came onto the scene very late in her career. She was at the centre of my own greatest ballet memory: the New York opening of *Sleeping Beauty* in 1949 which launched the Sadler's Wells Ballet as an international company.

She had great influence in the Royal Ballet. Whatever practice clothes she wore were instantly copied by the other girls. They all wanted to be Margot.

Dame Ninette de Valois

DAME Margot Fonteyn has been the inspiration of the English ballet scene for many years. It is something that cannot fade. It will live to inspire our young generation, and leave with those of the older generation a memory that will not fade.

Dame Alicia Markova and Sir Kenneth MacMillan were interviewed by Ismene Brown