



Irina Baronova

'Baby ballerina' from the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo whose 10 years of stardom began aged 13

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Irina Baronova, who died in Australia on Saturday aged 89, was one of the celebrated "baby ballerinas" of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and became a world star at the age of 13; little more than a decade later, she relinquished her career to marry Sir Laurence Olivier's theatrical agent, Cecil Tennant.

As an aristocratic child of a wealthy St Petersburg family, Irina was only a babe in arms when her family fled the country, after Bolsheviks requisitioned their estates. They took up a life of abject poverty in Romania.

The child took ballet lessons only at the insistence of her mother, but by the time she left the stage aged 26 she had lived half her life as a star attraction, having premièred ballets by Michel Fokine, George Balanchine and Leonid Massine.

She had danced with Edward, Prince of Wales, met Adolf Hitler, and had tea with Nijinsky. Her new life as wife of the leading London theatrical agent Cecil Tennant was no less glamorous; his clients Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh were close family friends – Olivier was godfather to her eldest daughter, the actress Victoria Tennant – and Clark Gable and Peter Finch were regular visitors to their Surrey home.

Tennant's insistence that his wife renounce the stage – and even her former associates – as a condition of marrying him now strikes a dictatorial note, but Irina Baronova never had anything but delight in her married life and motherhood to three children.

She called Tennant her "soulmate", and described marriage to him as "blissful". When Tennant was killed in a road accident in 1967, she considered the happiest part of her life was over, and in her recent autobiography spent barely a page or two accounting for the four decades that followed.

Born on March 13 1919 in Leningrad into a wealthy, aristocratic family, Irina Baronova took her first ballet lessons at a kitchen table in a rat-infested two-room flat in an industrial area of Bucharest, near the factory where her father, once a high-ranking Imperial naval officer, now went to work. Her teacher, a former St Petersburg *corps de ballet* dancer, urged the family to move to Paris to hone the child's talent.

In Paris Irina became pupil to one of the Tsar's most celebrated ballerinas, Olga Preobrazhenska, at whose studio she was spotted, aged 12, by scouts for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. Many of Russia's top dancers at that point taught in Paris, which became a home for the Imperial Ballet diaspora, and scouts regularly scoured their studios.

The three most phenomenal students in Paris, blonde, graceful Irina Baronova; dark, brooding 13-year-old Tamara Toumanova; and the quickfire, laughing 14-year-old

Tatiana Riabouchinska, were hired by George Balanchine as the new star attractions for the Ballet Russe, then reforming after the death of Serge Diaghilev.

The baby ballerinas were stars at an age impossible to conceive of had they come from a major ballet tradition in Leningrad or Paris. They were the first of a new breed – "name" performers of exceptional talent and stage appeal, trained on the hoof and attracting a public more by their prodigious individuality than as representatives of a great ballet tradition.

The baby ballerinas also marked a new dawn for a Russian ballet which had been thought doomed by the Bolshevik Revolution. Having trained with the greatest ballerinas of the Tsarist era, the three girls allied the technical strength and grace of the St Petersburg tradition to the fearless energy creating new waves in world ballet.

By the age of 12 Irina Baronova was an exceptionally strong technician. When Balanchine put her in his 1931 operetta Orpheus in Paris, a critic wrote of: "the sensation of the evening's tiny child Baronova, who went through the final gallop like a whirlwind." Baronova remembered how, being "madly in love" with Balanchine, she used to offer him sweets – he always took not one but the whole sticky little bag.

When she joined the two other baby ballerinas in Monte Carlo Balanchine developed a double-edged and bittersweet feminine mystique, of ageless girl-children, most notably in the ballet Cotillon. He made Baronova a feature of La Concurrence, designed by André Derain, a madcap ballet about two rival tailors.

With her blonde, warm grace, Irina Baronova became a favourite of the major choreographers Michel Fokine and Leonid Massine, starring memorably as the seductive, diabolical Queen of Shemakhan in Fokine's Coq d'Or and incarnating Passion in Massine's Les Presages.

Her stage aplomb and elegance belied her age: she recalled that an orchestral musician who fell in love with her sumptuous performances in Massine's Le Beau Danube waited one day at the stage door, only to find a 14-year-old scrubbed schoolgirl in white socks, with a dragon mother as chaperone.

Her mother's violent temperament led to blows, and inspired Irina Baronova's elopement at 18 with the manager of the troupe, German Sevastianov, who was twice her age and besotted with her. When he went to New York as manager to the new Ballet Theatre, he insisted his young wife be hired as leading ballerina.

Although dancing alongside other Ballets Russes alumni, such as Alicia Markova, in America Baronova gradually lost artistic focus.

The critic Edwin Denby, who had adored her "sumptuous" beauty and "phenomenal balance and ease" in Europe, now accused her of becoming "Miss Ironpants", hamming heartlessly in the manner of the Three Stooges. Personal troubles mounted and, as her marriage ended, she embarked on an ill-fated affair with dancer Yuri Skibine, then developed heart trouble, which necessitated rest.

In her mid-20s her career decisions caused concern to her colleagues: she danced in music-hall, posed for Disney's ostriches in Fantasia, and filmed some forgettable Hollywood movies, including Yolanda, Train of Events and Toast to Love.

However, in 1946 she met Cecil Tennant, then a rising theatrical agent of wealthy means. After starring successfully in London with Massine in a theatrical adaptation of Caryl Brahms's popular thriller, A Bullet in the Ballet, which satirised the ballet world, Irina Baronova married Tennant in 1948 and devoted herself with the utmost pleasure to matrimony.

The Oliviers, Peter Finch, Peter Ustinov and Clark Gable were among the most frequent guests at the Tennant home at Wentworth, Surrey, and the dancer Anton Dolin became Irina Baronova's closest friend.

Soon after Tennant's death, Irina Baronova went to Switzerland to renew her intimacy with her first husband, Gerry Sevastianov, and they lived together until his death in 1971. After returning to England, Irina Baronova took up teaching, becoming vice president of the Royal Academy of Dance.

In 1986 she staged Fokine's Les Sylphides for Australian Ballet, moving there in 1999 to live with her second daughter, Irina, in Byron Bay. She recalled her ballet life vividly in the Ballets Russes film documentary, shortly before her autobiography, Irina: Ballet

The Ballets Russes film documentary, shortly before her autobiography, Irina. Ballet, Life and Loves, was published in 2005.

Irina Baronova's sight failed at the end of her life, but she still enjoyed an evening bourbon and soda. She is survived by her two daughters and her son.



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