



## Rosella Hightower

Ballerina of American Indian descent whose pas de deux with Nureyev in London caused a sensation in 1961

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Rosella Hightower, who died on Monday aged 88, was a ballerina with American Indian blood who became one of the 1950s' biggest international stars and appeared with Rudolf Nureyev on his first, sensational appearance in Britain in 1961.

Long one of Nureyev's closest friends, she was his predecessor as artistic director of the Paris Opera Ballet and also founded the world's most important ballet students' prize, the Prix de Lausanne.

As the first 20th-century American ballerina to become a resident European star, Rosella Hightower spent most of her career in France, where her ballet school in Cannes has become world-renowned. Her home state of Oklahoma, proud of its five American Indian ballerinas, commissioned a mural depicting Hightower, the sisters Maria and Marjorie Tallchief, Yvonne Chouteau and Moscelyne Larkin, which was unveiled in the State Capitol in Oklahoma City in 1991.

Rosella Hightower's career was unusually mobile and successful, as she moved with ease – thanks to her superb technique and unusual intelligence – through several of the world's best companies.

She was a favourite partner of the renowned Danish male star, Erik Bruhn, in the 1950s, and when Nureyev defected in June 1961 in Paris, he considered Rosella Hightower both a fitting partner for his high standards and a close friend. When Margot Fonteyn invited him to perform in a charity gala for his British debut in November that year, he asked Hightower to dance a *Swan Lake* pas de deux with him. They made such an impact that the couple afterwards had to force their way through unprecedented, and almost hysterical, crowds at the stage door.

In the weeks that followed, until he joined Fonteyn at the Royal Ballet, Nureyev briefly formed a stellar performing group with Rosella Hightower, Bruhn and Sonia Arova. It was based in Cannes, where Hightower had just opened a dance school in the former kitchen of a casino built by Russian nobility. Between the group's four sell-out performances Nureyev and Hightower flew to London to perform a *Nutcracker* pas de deux for British television.

Nureyev found working with her "particularly rewarding - Rosella is one of those rare dancers who do not cling rigidly to what they know but are always ready to accept innovations if they are likely to enrich their art - I found her an inspiring partner." She was also useful when their car broke down in the middle of the night returning from a party in Marseilles, as she fixed the problem by torchlight.

By then in her forties, Rosella Hightower moved on to become a sought-after artistic director in European ballet companies in France and Italy, peaking with her three years as director of Paris Opera Ballet from 1981 to 1983, having been hired to prepare the company for Nureyev's long-hoped-for acceptance of the directorship.

Rosella Hightower was born on January 10 1920 at Ardmore, Oklahoma, the only child of Charles Edgar, a railway employee, and Eula May Flanning Hightower, an American Indian of the Choctaw tribe. The family moved to Kansas for work, and the girl studied ballet in Kansas City.

When the Ballet Russe choreographer Léonide Massine toured with a company to Kansas City, he invited Rosella Hightower to join a new company in Monte Carlo. Although it emerged that this was merely to be an audition at the dancers' own expense, Massine hired her for his Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo.

Three years later, however, as war took hold in Europe, the company sailed for New York, where Rosella Hightower joined Ballet Theatre (now American Ballet Theatre). Here her mentors included a galaxy of great choreographers – Michel Fokine (creator of *Les Sylphides*), the Englishman Antony Tudor, Agnes de Mille and Bronislava Nijinska, the outstanding modernist choreographer and sister of Nijinsky.

In 1944 Rosella Hightower broke through as a star in her own right with a sensational performance as Giselle at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York, learning the role on the day of the performance after Alicia Markova suddenly fell ill. The performance was described as revealing not only a fine trouper but also a genuine artist.

The following year Rosella Hightower rejoined former Ballet Russe colleagues in Europe, first with Massine and then with Colonel de Basil, forming a regular partnership with the Russian André Eglevsky. The couple were invited by Alicia Markova to perform in her Markova-Dolin Ballet.

Rosella Hightower then moved to Monte Carlo, where she was the leading ballerina (from 1947 until 1961) of the company run by the rich ballet patron the Marquis de Cuevas. This specialised in grand classical productions, and attracted leading world stars. Known for her prodigious technique and appetite for modern creations, Rosella Hightower danced with the era's great male names, including Nureyev and Bruhn, and created many leading roles for European choreographers.

Her former mentor Bronislava Nijinska, then also working with the de Cuevas troupe, choreographed the bravura *Rondo Capriccioso* for Rosella Hightower; and she portrayed an exotic butterfly who bewitches escaped convicts in the jungle in John Taras's *Piège de Lumière*. She also performed in works by Maurice Béjart, with whose Ballet of the 20th Century she became a guest teacher.

In 1952 she married de Cuevas's theatre artist Jean Robier, who had designed Balanchine's *Pas de trois Classique* for the company in 1948, in which Hightower danced. Their daughter, born in 1955, later took up a dancing career with Béjart.

After the de Cuevas company broke up in 1961 Rosella Hightower founded her own studio in Cannes, the Centre de Dance Classique (now the Ecole Supérieure de Dance Rosella Hightower), which rapidly generated dance activities on the Riviera and is today one of the major ballet schools. "It was a challenge to open a school in Cannes at the time, because dance was London, New York, or Paris; it wasn't Cannes!" she said.

Meanwhile she directed the Nouveau Ballet Opera de Marseilles (1969-72) and the Ballet de Nancy (1975-78), and staged Nijinska's production of *The Sleeping Beauty* in Marseilles, Stuttgart and Paris.

In 1973 she instigated and chaired the jury of the first Prix de Lausanne, an annual prize of advanced training for which ballet students hotly compete, involving the Royal Ballet School as well as her own now celebrated institution.

Rosella Hightower was appointed artistic director of the Paris Opera Ballet in 1981, the first American to be offered the post. She pursued an experimental line while negotiations with Nureyev – the company's ultimate target – continued. When Nureyev finally agreed to terms in 1983, Rosella Hightower moved to direct La Scala Ballet in Milan.

The French government created her Chevalier, then Officer and finally Commander of the Légion d'honneur. She last appeared on stage in 1991 in an Etienne Frey creation, *Harold and Maud*, and retired from teaching in 2000. A documentary film, entitled *Rosella Hightower*, was made by the experimental choreographer François Verret in 1991.

She was married briefly to the dancer Mischa Resnikov in 1938, and to Jean Robier from 1952. Their daughter, the dancer Dominique Monet Robier, survives her

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