



## David Ashmole

David Ashmole, who died on July 25 aged 59, was a principal dancer with the Royal Ballet and one of British ballet's noblest exponents.

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Yorkshire-born, he was a dancer of boyish, courteous demeanour and fine English classical style – though due to his shyness he was eclipsed in his time by the more assertive male stars Anthony Dowell and Rudolf Nureyev.

On moving to Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet, however, Ashmole blossomed into what some considered the finest *danseur noble* of his generation to be found on any British stage.

He was born on October 31 1949 at Cottingham, Yorkshire, and trained at the Royal Ballet School. He joined the Royal Ballet at once and in 1970 was chosen for a featured role challenging Rudolf Nureyev in *The Ropes of Time*, a new ballet by the Dutch choreographer Rudi van Dantzig.

The idea was to allow the 32-year-old Russian star gracefully to acknowledge the rise of stronger, younger men, headed by Ashmole; but Nureyev bitterly protested: "They think of me as a threat to their manly solo dancers." The ballet, although welcomed by a

minority as livening up a comatose art, did not survive long.

Under Kenneth MacMillan's directorship Ashmole rose to principal rank in 1975. His roles included all the repertory's male leads, notably MacMillan's *Romeo and Juliet*, Ashton's *The Dream*, *The Two Pigeons* and *La Fille mal gardée* (in which his performance as the ebullient country boy hero Colas was acclaimed), and the classics, *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Coppelia*, *Swan Lake*, *Giselle* and *Les Sylphides*.

He was one of the renowned opening performers for the Royal Ballet's premiere of Jerome Robbins's landmark *Dances at a Gathering*, starring Nureyev, Dowell and David Wall, a cast showing the depth of male talent at Covent Garden.

Ashmole was also MacMillan's choice for his first cast in *The Four Seasons*. But his diffidence was a disadvantage in the competitive environment of Covent Garden, and it was on his transfer in 1976 to Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet that Ashmole became a major performer in his own right.

In the lively atmosphere of Sadler's Wells, under the direction of Peter Wright, Ashmole flourished, dancing the classics with fine style and dramatic interest.

He showed a new confidence in 20th-century ballets, notably in Ninette de Valois's chess ballet *Checkmate*, in which his magnificent Red Knight alongside Robert Helpmann's Red King was filmed by the BBC.

His clean, strong line and warm personality also inspired fine lead roles in Peter Wright's *Summertime*, set to Mendelssohn, and in apprentice works by the rising choreographer David Bintley (now director of Birmingham Royal Ballet), notably *Homage to Chopin*, *Night Moves* and the three-act ballet *The Swan of Tuonela*, a Finnish folk epic with Ashmole as the hero.

By 1980 Ashmole was reckoned the finest *danseur noble* to be found at either Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet or the Royal Ballet itself, partnering Sadler's Wells leading ballerinas Marion Tait, Margaret Barbieri and Galina Samsova, with whom he gave the premiere of Wright's great 1981 production of *Swan Lake*. One of the junior Princesses was Petal Miller, who became Ashmole's wife.

In 1982 MacMillan used Ashmole as one of his four protagonists in *Quartet*, set to Verdi, and the dancer also led the casts when Hans Van Manen's *5 Tangos* was acquired for the repertoire.

Ashmole's departure in 1984 for Australia was a blow to Sadler's Wells, but it proved a fruitful move for the dancer. As Australian Ballet's Senior Principal Artist, under the direction of his former Sadler's Wells partner Maina Gielgud, he was an exemplar in the 19th-century classics, and was filmed in their production of *The Sleeping Beauty*.

He was also acclaimed in Glen Tetley's *Orpheus*, thought by some to have been his greatest role in Australia. "He taught us all how to be ballet princes," said Australian Ballet's current director David McAllister, who was then a junior in the company. "He had this, I suppose, breeding, from being with the Royal Ballet."

From 1994 to 1999 Ashmole served on Australian Ballet's board of directors and took on

increasing coaching responsibilities.

He moved back to Britain in 1999 as senior lecturer in classical ballet at the London Studio Centre. He was a guest teacher at Birmingham Royal Ballet, Japan's K Ballet and Australian Ballet.

David Ashmole, who died of cancer, is survived by his wife, the dancer and choreographer Petal Miller-Ashmole.

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