



Mary Clarke, dance critic - obituary

Writer who chronicled the story of ballet in Britain and edited *Dancing Times* for 45 years

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Mary Clarke, who has died in London aged 91, was a commanding figure in British ballet criticism and historiography, *The Guardian's* dance critic for over 17 years, and for 45 years the influential editor of *Dancing Times* magazine. During her 65-year career she was also the author of a wealth of books telling the remarkable story of the rise of ballet in Britain from virtually nothing in the 1920s to world-renowned 40 years later.

Mary Clarke was the most senior of a dynamic generation of dance writers who had grown up during the early days of British ballet in the 1930s and who played an active part in its artistic development and public popularity. It is notable that a number of the most distinguished figures in ballet, including writers, dancers and choreographers, emerged from humble circumstances .

Mary Clarke's lucid writing made the arcane mysteries of technical vocabulary and historical sources easily intelligible to the general reader, and her reliability with facts

was respected by the profession, even when she made no bones about criticising what she felt was artistically below par.

Though the war denied her a university education, she was astoundingly fortunate in the range of British theatre and dance to which she was exposed, including prolific variety of performers and troupes that visited London in the years after the Second World War. As a result Mary was exceptionally well educated by experience.

She saw every step of British ballet from its nursery steps, through the golden period of Frederick Ashton's supremacy at the nascent Royal Ballet, to the later turbulence when Kenneth MacMillan asserted more modern psychodramatic values in ballet. In the heated division of reactions around MacMillan's emotional experiments, Mary Clarke was a calm supporter of his ambitions. Her response to his *My Brother, My Sisters* – a 1978 portrayal of apparently incestuous siblings loosely based on the Brontës – was typically judicious: “You can't pretend to 'like' a ballet of this nature but goodness how you have to admire it. The accumulation of evil and horror is brilliantly achieved.”

Born on August 23 1923 in Camberwell, the only child of Frederick and Ethel Clarke, who ran a laundry business, Mary Clarke was bitten by the ballet bug as a child in the late 1930s when watching early performances of the Vic-Wells Ballet (the original version of the Royal Ballet) and Ballet Rambert.

On leaving Mary Datchelor's Girls School, Camberwell, soon after the outbreak of war, Mary became a typist at Reuters while spending her evenings in the theatres. In 1943, aged 19, she had her first ballet review published in *Dancing Times*, Britain's oldest dance monthly, whose editor Philip Richardson became her mentor.

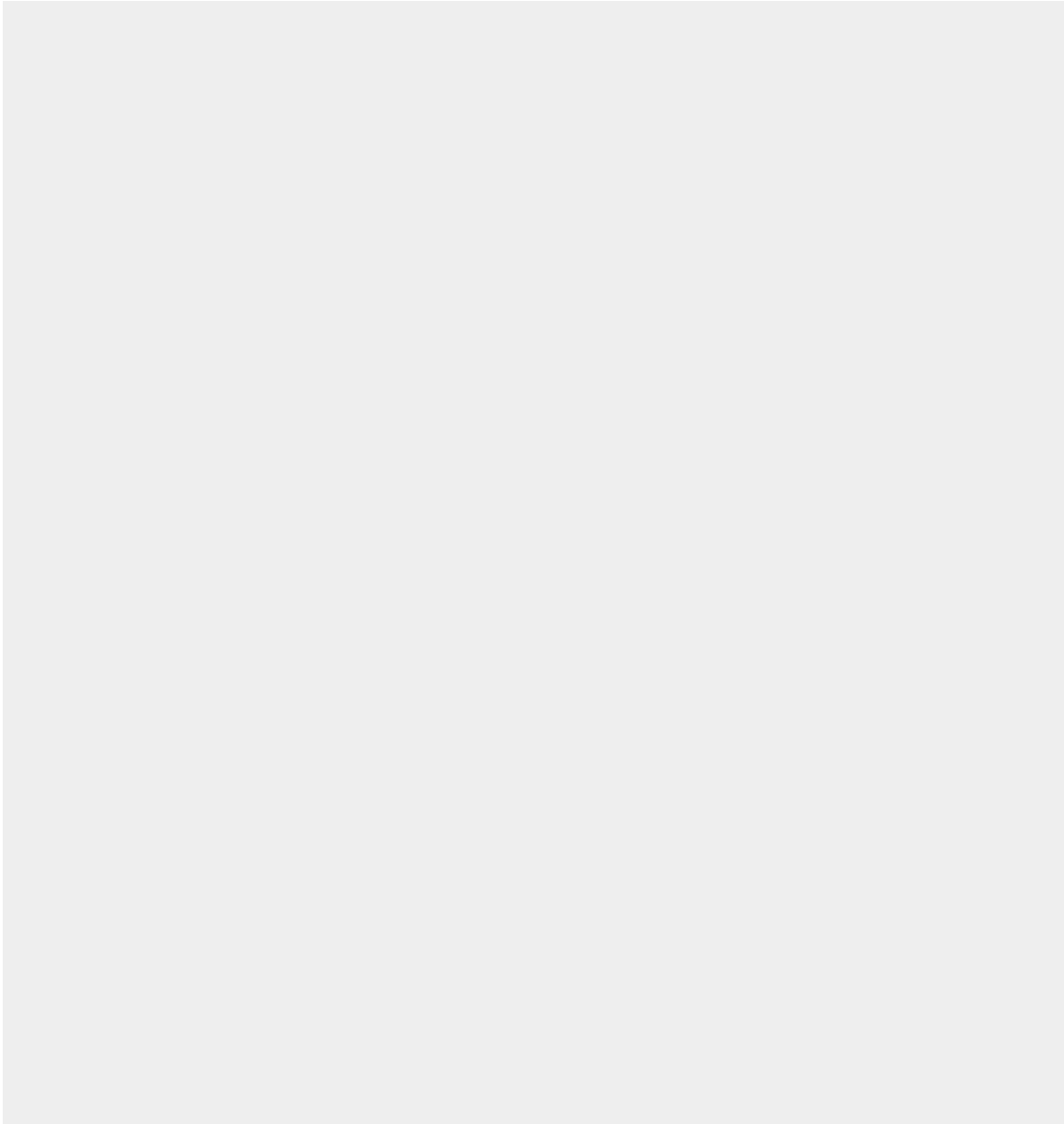
At the time dance was mostly reviewed for newspapers, by somewhat uninterested music critics, and *Dancing Times*, founded in 1894, stood out as the prime source of specialist dance coverage that valued ballet's history and academic tradition. Under Richardson's editorship, the monthly magazine had been instrumental in the founding of what became the Royal Academy of Dance and early performance societies such as the Camargo Society, and it had an international profile thanks to the excellence of its dance reviews.

Richardson influenced Mary Clarke's first staff post as London correspondent of *New York's Dance Magazine*, which was eager for reports on the surprising stimulus to British ballet provided by wartime conditions. For the next dozen years she was a privileged traveller between London and New York in a formative period for ballet. She reported from New York on Sadler's Wells Ballet's sensational 1949 debut, when Margot Fonteyn became a world star overnight, and was one of the few British critics to be regularly invited to the master choreographer George Balanchine's New York City Ballet festivals, at which he would unveil his new ballets.

Post-war London quickly became a destination for every kind of dance, from classical Japanese kabuki and the remnants of the Ballets Russes to Soviet ballet. The critic Clement Crisp, co-author with Mary Clarke of some 16 books, believed that she saw every significant company in the world and every significant world dancer except Marina Semyonova and Irina Baronova.

After 12 years reviewing for American readers while continuing to work by day as a secretary, Mary Clarke joined *Dancing Times* full-time as assistant editor in 1954, and assisted Arnold Haskell with the celebrated *Ballet Annual*.

She became the editor of *Dancing Times* in 1963, at the beginning of a phenomenal boom in ballet popularity, when the Royal Ballet was making world headlines, modern dance was on the rise, and developments in Soviet and American ballet were fascinating the critics.



Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev rehearsing Giselle at the Royal Opera House in 1962 (2010 Getty Images)

Increasingly Mary Clarke wrote for newspapers as well, reporting for the Sunday Times in February 1962 on the young defector Rudolf Nureyev's first appearance with Margot Fonteyn (42 at the time) in Giselle. "A match made in heaven," Mary Clarke enthused in a prophetic phrase.

As The Guardian's resident critic from the mid-1970s to 1994, Clarke was a calm voice of experience in a period now seething with dance writers. Ranging with ease from high expertise to general interest books, she was in constant demand from publishers. Her books as author and co-author include definitive histories of the Sadler's Wells Ballet (1955), Ballet Rambert (Dancers of Mercury, 1962) and the London Contemporary Dance Theatre (1989).

With Clement Crisp she wrote several books introducing a new public to ballet, as well as books accompanying television programmes (Dancer: Men in Dance, 1984, and Ballerina, 1987). Crisp recalled that whenever Mary Clarke typed the last words of the current book, she would always put another sheet of paper in her typewriter and start the first page of the next one.

She co-edited, with David Vaughan, The Encyclopaedia of Dance and Ballet (1977) and in 1981 wrote the biography of the Royal Ballet's great ballerina Antoinette Sibley.

She was a conscientious observer of the ballet schools, and in 1990 the Royal Academy of Dance awarded her its highest honour, the Queen Elizabeth II Coronation Award. Her advocacy for ballet was also internationally recognised, in 1992 by the ballet-loving Queen Margrethe II of Denmark, who appointed her a Knight of the Order of Dannebrog, and in 1996 by Poland's Nijinsky Medal.

She was unmarried.

Mary Clarke, born August 23 1923, died March 20 2015



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