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## Clement Crisp, ballet critic whose witty, trenchant reviews won him an international reputation – obituary

‘My prejudices are against pretension, messages, the week’s good cause, flat feet, unstretched bodies, and dancers with no necks’

By Telegraph Obituaries

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Clement Crisp, who has died aged 95, was the doyen of ballet critics, witness to the

early birth of Britain's rich ballet scene and the postwar international dance explosion, and renowned for scintillatingly written and meticulously observed coverage of the great events and personalities who passed through Britain over the 20th and 21st centuries.

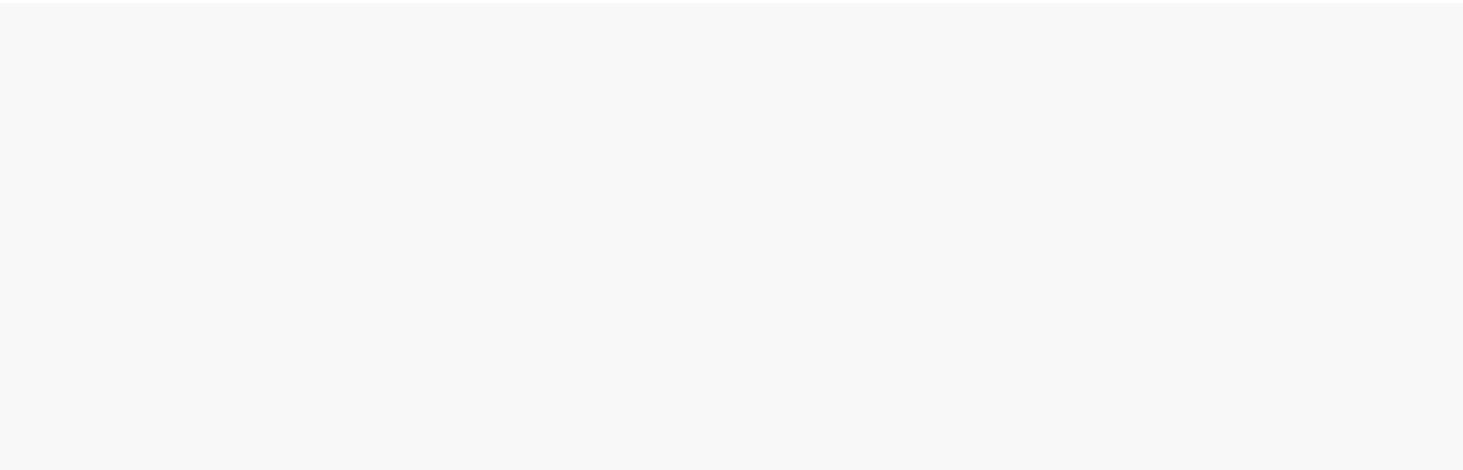
Attached for more than 50 years to the Financial Times, Crisp was acknowledged worldwide as a peerless arbiter of excellence. He saw countless first nights; reviewed historic British debuts by the Bolshoi Ballet and New York's superb companies; and retained vital memories of conversations with performers and creators raised in traditions stretching back into the 19th century.

This experience informed his standards of theatrical and expressive finesse, which was not, in his view, the same as technical or acrobatic facility, let alone what he called "modish vapidity" of the modern era.

In witty and trenchant reviews he relished the English language, threw in challenging references to soap opera, long-forgotten vaudevillians, and antique popular literature – and took the view that "when you shoot, shoot to kill".

He felt that anything in a newspaper had to be worth the reader's time, particularly if the show was not.

Crisp remained, above all, a spectator, excited by the experience of going to the theatre. His love of stories and individual creativity showed in his prolific output of books, and he was as enthusiastic about designers as ballerinas.



Clement Crisp with the leading dance artist Kenneth Olumuyiwa Tharp in 2015 | CREDIT: Elliott Franks

He saw the dance critic's task as an urgent historical necessity: "I find it tragic that in the century of the cinema, when newsreel film has preserved 80 years of non-entities, from the greasiest political opportunists to pop singers, there is not one frame of the Diaghilev Ballet in action; that Nijinsky is to be seen only in five seconds of film that show an old man walking from his Vienna hotel."

The critic's duty was "to be guardian of a work's proprieties as he understands them".

Crisp's immense knowledge gave his judgments formidable authority, but he acknowledged that there was no such thing as objectivity: "Prejudice is what makes a critic interesting," he told an interviewer. "My prejudices are for, essentially, very beautiful Russian-trained dancing, for New York speed, for French temperamental virtuosity and physical virtuosity, and at its best English lyricism can be very beautiful.

"My prejudices are against pretension, messages, the week's good cause, flat feet, unstretched bodies, and dancers with no necks."

Clement Andrew Crisp was born in Romford, Essex, on September 21 1926, five years earlier than the date he admitted to in *Who's Who*. The only child of Bertha (née Dean) and Charles Crisp, a banker, he attended Oxted Grammar School, and by his teens was a devotee of ballet: "I went to the ballet about every couple of weeks. It was only an hour or something on the train. Have a glass of milk and a bun, then go up to London... see a show, and be home by six."



A good pianist, Crisp considered a musical career, but decided instead to take a year's French at Bordeaux University, followed by a degree at Keble College, Oxford, where he joined OUDS and played one of the Ugly Sisters in the future producer Michael Codron's pantomime, Cinderella.

After working briefly for his father's timber import/export company, Crisp taught French at a Dulwich comprehensive school while developing his reviewing experience. His first pieces were published in 1953, by which time he had already spent a decade observing the incubation of Britain's ballet, culminating in Sadler's Wells Ballet's postwar emergence as a new world force.

He described his chief mentor as the prewar British superstar [Alicia Markova](#): "She was my university. I had a sensational education. You could see every single company you wanted to see in [postwar] London. The Danes made their first appearance, the Paris Opera had come, [Roland Petit](#)'s company, the last relics of the Diaghilev company and pre-war Ballets Russes, American Ballet Theatre within seven years of its foundation, and New York City Ballet within two years of its foundation."

In 1957 Crisp was hired as a second-string critic by the Financial Times's dance critic [Andrew Porter](#), also covering for The Times, until becoming The Spectator's dance critic in 1966. In 1970 he returned to the FT, succeeding Porter, and wrote for nearly 50 years until retiring three years ago.

One of his editors, Richard Lambert, was struck by Crisp's eternal optimism: "the possibility that tonight's performance may just turn out to be something wonderful, or that some new talent could emerge to brighten our lives. When he is disappointed, he responds with a rapier or a sawn-off shotgun depending on the mood."



Crisp was a fierce defender of sometimes unpopular creative enterprise, consistently backing the choreographer Kenneth MacMillan, and spotlighting young experimentalists such as Siobhan Davies, Michael Clark and Jonathan Burrows.

But his favourite memories were always of ballet dancers: "One's first sight of Galina Ulanova in Romeo and Juliet, [Maya Plisetskaya](#) in Don Quixote – phenomenal! Margot Fonteyn's Aurora, Alicia Markova in Giselle and then Swan Lake. One's first sight of Natalia Makarova, Yuri Soloviev and Mikhail Baryshnikov."



Clement Crisp with Natalia Makarova | CREDIT: Dina Makaroff

In his latter years Crisp had new favourites – Irek Mukhamedov, Edward Watson, Sergei Polunin and Akram Khan – and new bêtes noires. Much of European contemporary dance he considered facile, and he was often dismayed by the French

star of the Royal Ballet, Sylvie Guillem, whose physical extravagance and opinionatedness he felt obstructed a genuinely exciting artistry.

His Who's Who entry claimed that his recreations were "avoiding noise, gardening, despair about dance". He cut a theatrical character in intervals and on television broadcasts – tall, immaculate, sociable, cracking loud laughs, speaking with the refined vowels of past eras – and lived in an elegant Westminster townhouse.

But the terrifying figure proved kind and down-to-earth, and a deeply loyal friend to the ballerinas he revered. Natalia Makarova wrote that Crisp "never lied to me, even when the truth might be painful". Lynn Seymour recalled him turning up at her house "in an hour of need, with a cheque book in one pocket and a bottle of Valium in the other, not being sure just which one might be the most effective."

Clement Crisp wrote or edited some 20 books, several with The Guardian's dance critic, Mary Clarke, and contributed prolifically to dance journals and to programme notes, notably for the Bolshoi Ballet, to which he was devoted. His ballerina studies included [Nadia Nerina](#) in 1975 and Lynn Seymour in 1980, and two books accompanied BBC TV programmes, *Dancer: The Art of Male Dancing* (1984) and *Ballerina: The Art of the Ballerina* (1987).

He wrote books on Ballet Rambert and London Contemporary Dance Theatre, and important essays on the choreographers Kenneth MacMillan, George Balanchine, Mark Morris and Walter Gore. He was the Royal Academy of Dancing's archivist from 1963 to 2001 and associate professor for the University of Notre Dame's London faculty from 1997 to 2008.

Last year an anthology, *Clement Crisp Reviews: Six decades of dance*, was published, edited by Gerald Dowler.

Appointed OBE in 2005, Clement Crisp held many awards, including the Royal Academy of Dancing's Queen Elizabeth II Coronation Award in 1992, Poland's Vaslav Nijinsky Medal in 1995, and also in 1992 the honour of Knight in the Order of Dannebrog, conferred by Queen Margrethe of Denmark.

He is survived by his civil partner Peter Hollamby.

**Clement Crisp, born September 21 1926, died March 1 2022**

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NW

**Nicky Westcombe** · 9 MARCH 2022

If you caught his eye on a first night of a questionable ballet, his expression or bon mot said it all. Fondly remembered, RIP

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JR

**John Rimmer** · 7 MARCH 2022

It is inspiring read of such clever and resourceful people who, if we have them now, are well hidden.

[REPLY](#) 1 REPLY LIKE 0

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JR

**John Rimmer** · 7 MARCH 2022

Reply to **John Rimmer**

Posted in the wrong obit! But could apply just the same.

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IB

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**John Crompton** · 7 MARCH 2022

I am rather surprised that there was a comprehensive school in Dulwich at the time being described- late 40s/early 50s. Possibly more than one as it described in the obituary as "a Dulwich comprehensive school" They must have been amongst the first in the UK.

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**Stuart Williams** · 7 MARCH 2022

A superlative tribute. Thank you.

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**Mg Hoy** · 7 MARCH 2022

There was a review of the life of Dame Alicia Markova (celebrating her 90th birthday) shown by BBC about 20 years ago, that Clement Crisp was asked to take part in. The programme can be seen on YouTube.

His comments epitomised what one would expect from a man ingrained and in thrall with the dance world. He loved ballet & delighted in Alicia Markova and he loved lyrical dance. We shall not see his like again.

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**Joyce Field** · 7 MARCH 2022

Reply to **Mg Hoy**

Clement Crisp failed to teach my husband French at Kingsdale Comprehensive, we did however sit behind him at Covent Garden one evening and my husband proudly pointed him out to me as a 'charming man and a formidable teacher'.

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