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Bob Lockyer, television producer whose films established modern dance as a cultural force in contemporary Britain – obituary

He changed how dance was filmed, saying: ‘You can choreograph with an eyebrow as excitingly as you can with a grand jeté across the stage’

By Telegraph Obituaries

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Bob Lockyer, the BBC television dance producer who has died aged 80, was a pioneering and pivotal figure in the surge of dance on to television screens that, from the 1970s, established new dance at the forefront of contemporary British culture – a phenomenon that led to the ubiquity of the form today.

Once described as “dance’s recording angel”, Lockyer helped to document now-historic people and events, ranging from the legendary circles of Diaghilev’s Ballet Russes, Margot Fonteyn’s *The Magic of Dance* and Natalia Makarova’s *Ballerina*, to the 1980s modern powerhouses of London Contemporary Dance Theatre and DV8 Physical Theatre. He persuaded the BBC to make programmes on then little-known British choreographers such as Richard Alston, Siobhan Davies, Mark Baldwin and Wayne McGregor.

However, Lockyer also invented a path for contemporary choreographers into televisual creativity that generated innovations in both filming and dance, transforming a niche and underexposed stage art into globally acclaimed dance-films. His monument was the BBC’s much-imitated *Dance for the Camera*, a 1990s series of some 50 original TV dance films executive-produced by Lockyer.



Members of the CandoCo dance troupe perform *The Human Suite* at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, in 2004: the company was launched to international fame by the first film in Lockyer's *Dance for the Camera* series | CREDIT: Dee Conway

The scale of his achievements was underappreciated, publicly overshadowed by those of his life partner, [Sir John Drummond](#), the booming titan of British television and arts who ran the Edinburgh Festival, BBC Radio 3 and the Proms.

This was in part because of Lockyer's backstage modesty, yet his achievement was all the more striking given that he had left school at 17 as a dyslexic underachiever, his first job being a mail boy in the BBC's postroom.

Robert David Lockyer-Nibbs was born on April 9 1942 in Woking, the result of a Canadian officer's wartime affair with a local girl, and was adopted by Joyce (née Kimble) and Lt Sydney Charles Lockyer-Nibbs of the Royal Army Service Corps, a north London couple who already had an adopted daughter.

The boy went to Harrow High School, where he repeatedly won the top art prizes but

was frustrated academically by severe dyslexia. The BBC, he would say, “was my university”.



When he joined in 1959, music and arts production in the BBC was booming, reflecting rapid postwar developments in publicly subsidised theatre, music, opera and ballet, and getting to grips with live broadcasting. Seeking chances of promotion, Lockyer nearly wrecked his career early on when, working as an assistant floor manager on a soap opera, *Compact* – broadcast live – he failed to prompt an actor who dried on air.

Lockyer was banished to the dance production department, headed by Margaret Dale, who would punctiliously translate stage dance to television and was regarded by younger producers as over-literal. However, Dale also commissioned new pieces and the teenager drafted ideas and camera scripts for her. He became interested in how camera focus and editing could change a stage presentation, infusing it with a new expressiveness manipulating the viewer’s perception.

In 1966 he assisted on a now-historic film document of Kurt Jooss’s anti-war protest ballet *The Green Table* and guided the inexperienced BBC producer Peter Wright (the future director of Sadler’s Wells Ballet and Birmingham Royal Ballet) on *Corporal Jan*, whose failure exposed to the observant Lockyer the problems and potential of dance on film.

At the time John Drummond was launching his celebrated Omnibus documentary

project on the last survivors of Serge Diaghilev's legendary Ballets Russes, and asked Lockyer to be the camera assistant. Drummond's subsequent book, *Speaking of Diaghilev*, told how Diaghilev's elderly former secretary Boris Kochno made a drunken pass at Lockyer, before refusing to cooperate.



Members of the Richard Alston Dance Company in 2012 performing at The Place in London in a show marking Lockyer's 70th birthday | CREDIT: Tony Nandi

“Bob said to me through clenched teeth: ‘Just how much do I have to do to make this film happen? Poor Diaghilev.’” Drummond and Lockyer would be partners until the former's death in 2006.

Meanwhile, Lockyer found openings for his interest in the camera's creative potential via projects to bring the burgeoning contemporary dance scene to television. This area baffled more conventional dance producers, who habitually used camera edits in time to ballet beats and moves, all counted out. But new music was less predictable than ballet music, and *musique concrète* – used by [Bob Cohan](#) in a London Contemporary Dance Theatre work, *Cell*, one of several Cohan works that Lockyer filmed – had no counts at all.

“You can't actually count the bars or the music,” Lockyer explained. “One did it by

movement and by vision memory, and my visual memory was good. So when I came to direct, I did it on move – not on count.”

Another insight of Lockyer’s was that screen-time was not the same as stage-time – filmic language and choreographic language were distinctly different. “It’s interesting how little dancing dance-screen work may have in it. I mean, you can choreograph with an eyebrow as excitingly as you can with a grand jeté across the stage – in fact, more powerfully.”



Lockyer with dancers and musicians at his 70th birthday show | CREDIT: Theatrepix/Alamy

He would be responsible for significant recordings of Bronislava Nijinska’s *Les Noces* (1978), with the Royal Ballet, and [Merce Cunningham](#)’s *Points in Space* (1987), the latter conceived and the former radically reconceived for camera filming.

Lockyer’s work with Lloyd Newson’s iconoclastic new contemporary troupe DV8 Physical Theatre further proved the point. Newson’s acclaimed 1990s stage productions *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men*, *Strange Fish* and *Enter Achilles* were transfigured and intensified by their reinvention as 50-minute TV dance films.

The culmination of Lockyer’s approach was the body of more than 50 15-minute dance films he commissioned, the late-night BBC *Dance for the Camera* series (1994-2000).

Some choreographers “got it”, he said – but not all. The first film, “Outside In”, launched the CandoCo disabled dance troupe to international acclaim. A later one, “Birds”, had no dancers at all – it was a remarkable choreography of bird sequences.

Bob Lockyer’s innovatory format brought the BBC into the spotlight as an active patron of avant-garde dance and film creativity, spawning international dance-film festivals in Australia, New Zealand and Canada.



A man of Left-wing views, he ironically credited [Margaret Thatcher](#)’s attacks on the BBC for this unexpected development, and her insistence on a large quota of independent productions. “That immediately allowed us to go to work with the Arts Council. That was the birth of Dance for the Camera.”

However, the sector was heavily reliant on Lockyer’s own expertise and editorial eye, and did not fit into the mainstream of either cinema or dance. When he retired, no successor was obvious and the BBC-Arts Council collaboration ended. He was further angered that few of the films were accessible even for student viewing because of unresolved rights issues.

He continued, however, to advocate for dance on screen and for performers, founding the multidisciplinary Performance Arts Lab, which he set up in 2014, and the national dance lobby, Dance UK (now OneDance UK). He also chaired South East Dance and Lost Dog Productions, promoting new choreographers and campaigns for dancer health.

Following John Drummond's death, Lockyer established the Drummond Fund with the Royal Philharmonic Society in 2008, supporting composer-choreographer collaborations, whose fruits include dance productions by Mark Baldwin, Aletta Collins, Didy Veldman and Shobana Jeyasingh for the Royal Ballet and Birmingham Royal Ballet, among others.

Bob Lockyer was appointed OBE for services to dance and broadcasting in 2021.

Bob Lockyer, born April 9 1942, died June 3 2022

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He was a lovely man.

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