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## Patricia Ruanne, magnetic Yorkshire-born ballerina who leapt into the spotlight in Nureyev's Romeo and Juliet – obituary

Nureyev created lusty, strenuous lovers' duets: '[His] thinking was, what you wanted out of life you had to get straightaway'

By Telegraph Obituaries

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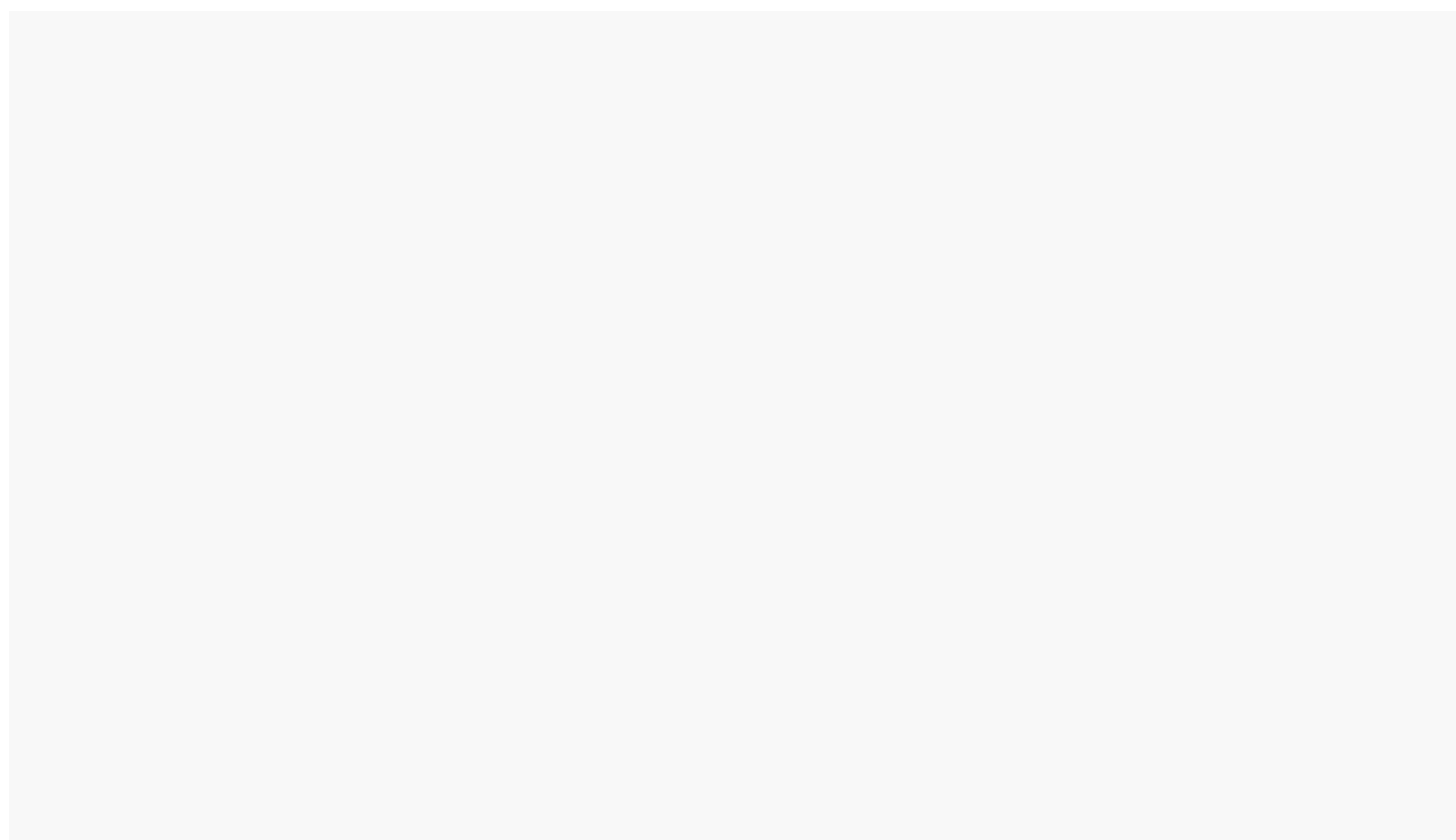
Patricia Ruanne, the ballerina, who has died aged 77, was a star of London Festival

Ballet in the 1970s, and Rudolf Nureyev chose her to play Juliet opposite his Romeo in his own lavish ballet version of the Shakespeare tragedy; she then became his assistant during his remarkable period of directorship at Paris Opera Ballet in his final years.

At the Royal Ballet, Patricia Ruanne had commented wryly that she dreamt of the role of Juliet but it would never happen, since there was such a galaxy of brilliant talents there. The Nureyev and Fonteyn phenomenon at Covent Garden in the 1960s had been famously showcased in Kenneth MacMillan's cinematic new ballet version of Romeo and Juliet, which had its premiere in 1965, and a new wave of home-grown stars had arrived just ahead of Patricia Ruanne.

But she leapt into the spotlight 12 years later when Nureyev created his own version of Romeo and Juliet for the London Festival Ballet, reflecting Shakespeare's portrayal of a tomboyish, fiery heroine. Nureyev had briefly considered performing with a male Juliet, echoing Tudor convention, before he turned to Patricia Ruanne, who after leaving the Royal Ballet for Festival Ballet had rapidly become one of its most elegant and magnetic ballerinas.

She was willing to take on the physical challenges Nureyev set her in the lusty, strenuous lovers' duets. "Rudolf's thinking was, what you wanted out of life you had to get straightaway, because if you thought about it too long, you might be dead," she told the Telegraph in 2010. "It's complicated, but as a woman, basically, I know I'm playing a boy playing a girl."





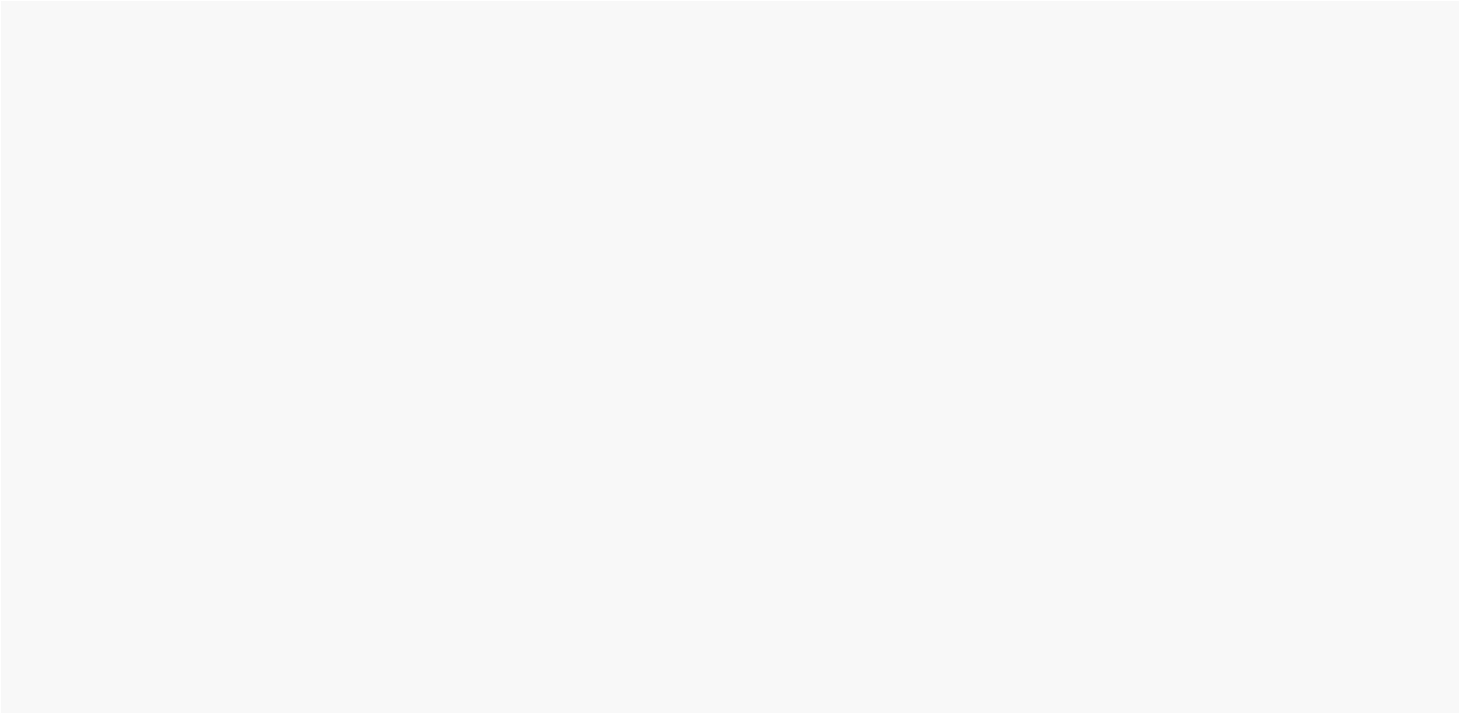
As Juliet to Rudolf Nureyev's Romeo | CREDIT: alamy

The exhausting creation of Romeo and Juliet in 1977 – to mark the Queen's Silver Jubilee – precipitated a renewal of purpose for Patricia Ruanne after two traumatic events in her life. The previous year her regular Festival Ballet partner, Paul Clarke, had died suddenly aged 28 after reacting to dental anaesthetic. She decided to abandon thoughts of retirement and leave her husband, the photographer and former Royal Ballet dancer Richard Farley, focusing on her dancing career.

In the catalytic atmosphere of Romeo and Juliet she found her life partner in the New Zealander whom Nureyev cast as Tybalt, Frederic Jahn, whom she would marry in 2004.

Patricia Ruanne formed a lifelong bond with Nureyev, taking crucial career advice from him and becoming his ballet mistress at Paris Opera Ballet, which under his stewardship in the late 1980s and 1990s became recognised as the greatest company in the world.

In 1992, as he was gradually overcome by Aids, Nureyev was battling to complete a huge restoration of the lost classic, La Bayadère, and Patricia Ruanne provided vital artistic and personal support in bringing the monumental production to the stage a few weeks before he died.



A lifelong bond: with Nureyev | CREDIT: David Thorpe/ANL/Shutterstock

Patricia Ruanne was a Yorkshirewoman of Irish stock; she was born Patricia Ruane on June 3 1945 into a family from Co Mayo living in Leeds. She was the only child until she was nine, and her parents sent her to ballet classes with her cousins to make some friends. Taught by Louise Brown in York, she quickly progressed, and aged 13 won a county council grant to board at the Royal Ballet School's White Lodge in Richmond.

She was one of only two students in her year to be accepted into the Royal Ballet in 1962. Her first leading roles typified her ability to convey drama, as the violated girl in MacMillan's *The Invitation* and as the sacrificial victim of his *Rite of Spring*.

At 18, however, she realised she was in the wake of a wealth of brilliant young ballerinas at the Royal Ballet, forming what she would describe as “a tapestry of such richness that it's hard to credit today”.

She flowered in the more eclectic Royal Ballet Touring Group led by John Field, with whom she became great friends, and whose packed performance schedule around Britain offered numerous dramatic roles in one-act ballets – “something to disguise my defects”.

After 10 years, Patricia Ruanne and her frequent performing partner Paul Clarke longed to dance the classics “before it was too late”, and they moved to London Festival Ballet together. She told Roy Plomley on Desert Island Discs in 1981 that leaving the Royal Ballet after spending 17 years in its school and company was “like leaving Mum and Dad”.

At Festival Ballet Patricia Ruanne sealed her ballerina status, triumphing as Nureyev’s Juliet and being critically admired in Giselle, The Sleeping Beauty, The Nutcracker and La Sylphide. In her final season, aged 38, she was nominated for a Laurence Olivier Award for her outstanding performance as the shy, romantic Tatiana in the first British staging of John Cranko’s ballet Onegin.

Other acclaimed roles were in Ronald Hynd’s The Sanguine Fan and Barry Moreland’s Prodigal Son (in Ragtime) (she was in both the original casts), Jack Carter’s Witch Boy and Hans Van Manen’s Twilight and Tilt. She was a “radiantly seductive” Queen of Shemakhan in Festival Ballet’s revival of the Ballets Russes 1920s landmark, Fokine’s Le Coq d’or.

In 1983 she became London Festival Ballet’s ballet mistress, so successfully that after three years she was summoned by Nureyev to the 350-year-old Paris Opera Ballet at the Palais Garnier. “Just come and just shut up and just do it,” he told her.

She stayed on in Paris for three years after Nureyev’s death and then spent a year as acting artistic director at the venerable La Scala Ballet in Milan, before going freelance in 2000. Often working in tandem with her husband Frederick Jahn, she became a specialist director of Nureyev productions, particularly of Romeo and Juliet, which she staged at English National Ballet in 2010. She also staged MacMillan’s Manon at Paris Opera Ballet, the Australian Ballet, La Scala Ballet and the Stanislavsky Ballet in Moscow.

Patricia Ruanne once remarked that coaching was a transmission that could only be effective if the receiver was switched on, and she took no prisoners in the studio. The Italian ballet star Roberto Bolle declared that she made him so uncomfortable in rehearsals that he had once burst into tears. But the French ballerina Aurélie Dupont (recently Paris Opera Ballet’s artistic director) paid emotional tribute on Patricia Ruanne’s death to her friendship, great intelligence and truthful clarity: “Elle aimait, ou pas” – she either liked something, or not.

She is survived by her husband.

**Patricia Ruanne, born June 3 1945, died November 1 2022**

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**Lexi McGregor** · 16 NOVEMBER 2022

What an interesting life. Terrific photo of Patricia Ruanne with Nureyev. RIP.

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**Kate Robertson** · 16 NOVEMBER 2022

One of life's blazing beautiful stars who in later years provided so much artistic cement to many companies and dancers

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**John Huddlestone** · 16 NOVEMBER 2022

Perfect to see a Yorkshire girl rise right to the very pinnacle of her career. It certainly sounds like she suffered no fools during her incredible life, no doubt she did not want to waste valuable time doing so.

A beautiful lady living an inspirational life, many thanks for sharing it with us. RIP.

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**Chrissie Jones** · 16 NOVEMBER 2022

Two different birth dates?

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**Telegraph Obituaries** · 16 NOVEMBER 2022

Reply to **Chrissie Jones**

Thanks for pointing out that discrepancy, which we've corrected.

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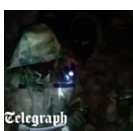
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