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Lynn Seymour, superstar ballerina who embodied the rebellious and flawed heroines of 1960s dance – obituary

The young dancer inspired Kenneth MacMillan’s devastating child-abuse drama *The Invitation* and Frederick Ashton’s witty *The Two Pigeons*

By Telegraph Obituaries

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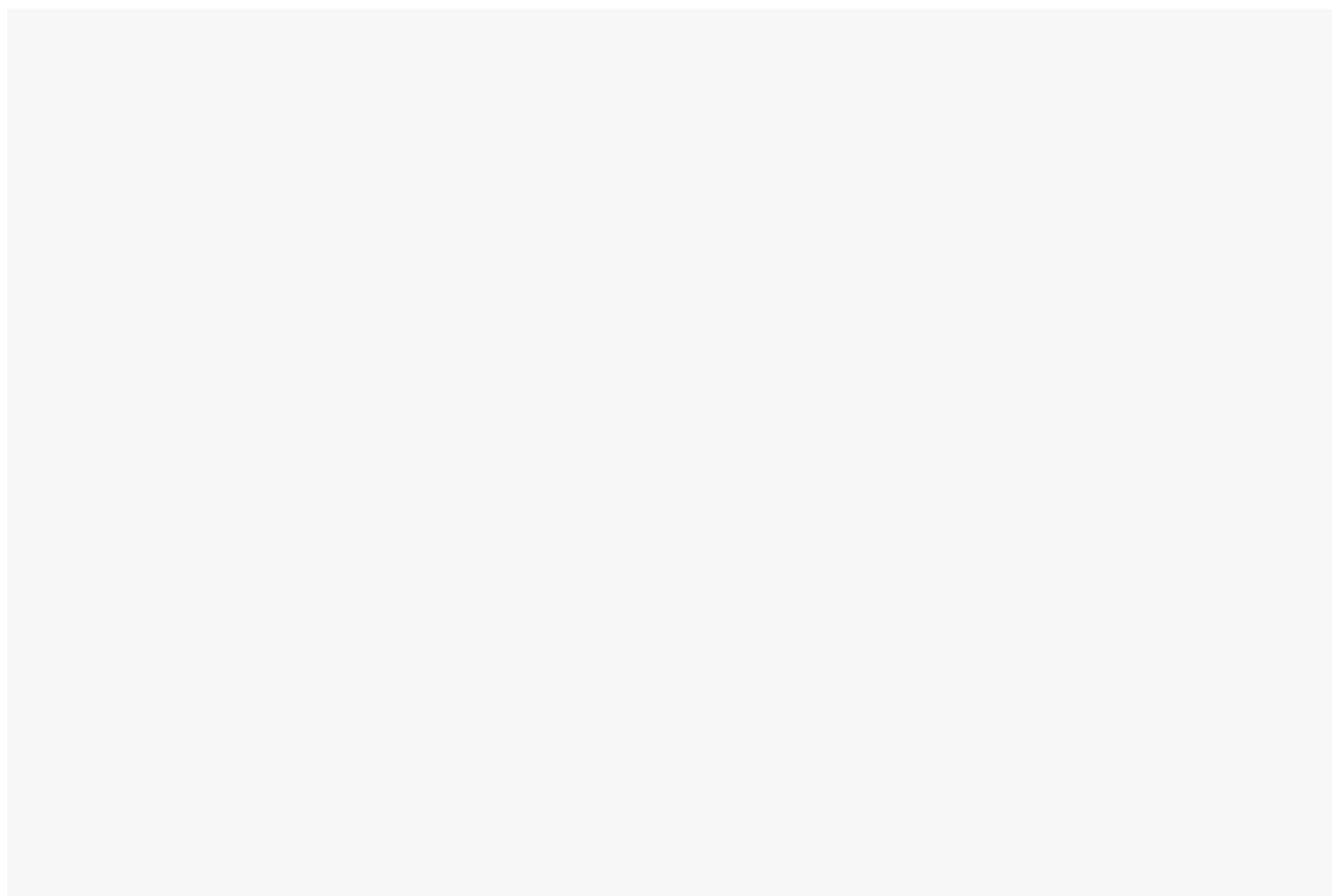


Lynn Seymour, the ballerina who has died on the eve of her 84th birthday, was

alongside Margot Fonteyn the Royal Ballet's most idolised and influential dancer: she unleashed an unconstrained emotional daring and a sense of modernity on to an English ballet style which Fonteyn had stamped with graceful decorum.

The Royal Ballet founder Ninette de Valois rated Lynn Seymour the greatest dramatic dancer in half a century, and she inspired the creation of masterpieces that changed audience expectations of ballet, bringing to life excitingly flawed characters and their often challenging behaviour. Her instinct to find realistic human touches in the idealised women of 19th-century classics had a marked influence on the performers of today.

In particular, her creative partnership and intimate understanding with the choreographer Kenneth MacMillan generated much of the core British ballet repertoire of the time, from adventurous one-act works exploring the psychology of imprisonment or sexual urges, to his ambitious full-evening dramatic ballets *Romeo and Juliet*, *Anastasia* and *Mayerling*.



Lynn Seymour (in 1981): she always felt an outsider | CREDIT: John Downing/Getty Images

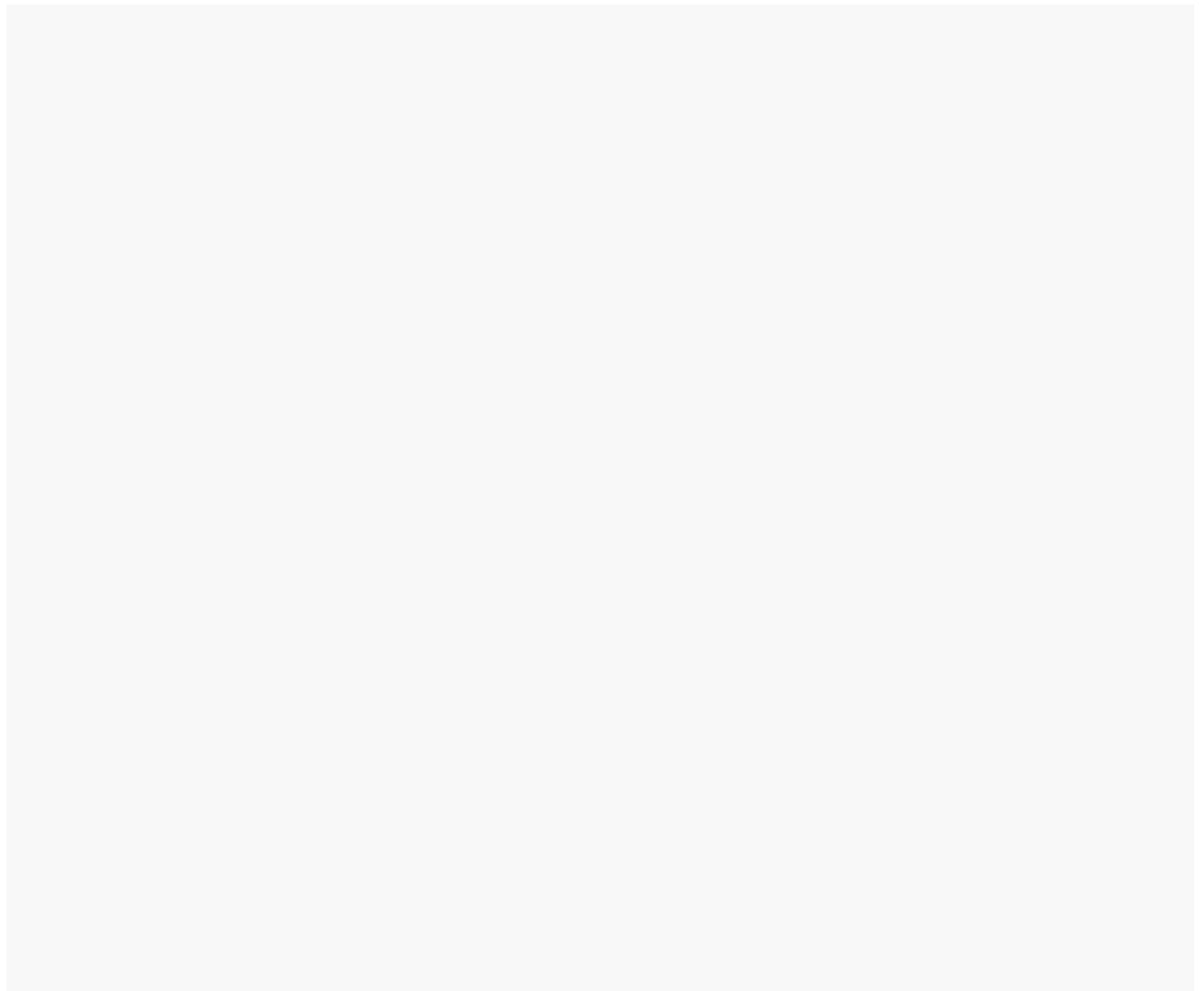
Notoriously, for commercial reasons the young Lynn Seymour, despite being MacMillan's Juliet in the studio, was denied the 1965 first night of *Romeo and Juliet*,

which was given to the celebrated partnership of Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev, and had to appear instead in a later cast.

Newly married and pregnant, Lynn Seymour had decided to have an abortion so as to be available, but found herself instead teaching her role to senior ballerinas including Fonteyn. “I know Margot didn’t want to hurt me,” she said later. “I didn’t blame her.”

Yet without Lynn Seymour’s injection of impetuous contemporary directness, British ballet’s impact on the world scene might not have long outlasted the Fonteyn-Nureyev era.

Nureyev became a close friend. Just watching her excited him, he said, and “heaven descends into your lap.” Mikhail Baryshnikov, another Russian superstar who danced with her, described Lynn Seymour as “all woman, one of the most fascinating artists on the stage”. Critics wrote of her unusualness, her “Cleopatra arms” and “Anna Magnani-sized passions”.



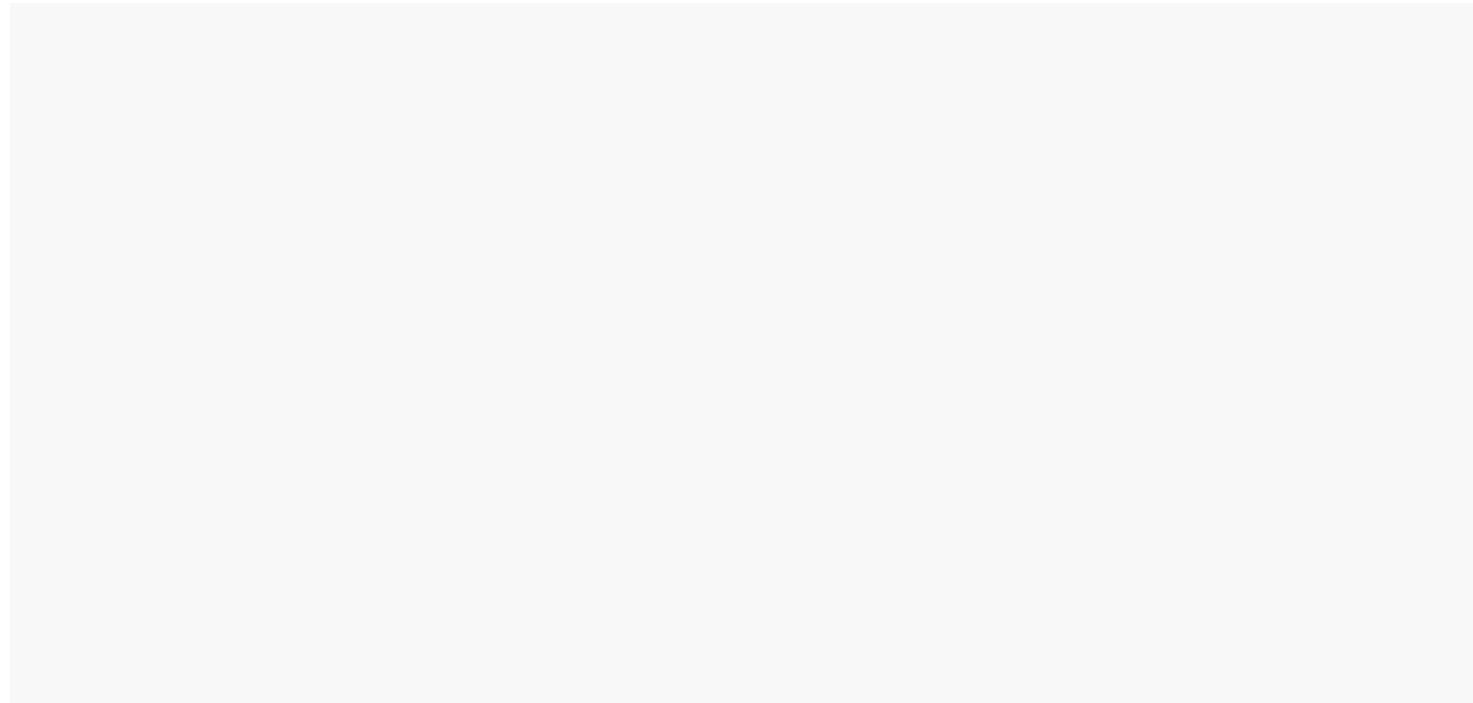
Lynn Seymour (1961): Ninette de Valois rated her the greatest dramatic dancer in half a century | CREDIT: Popperfoto via Getty Images/Getty

She herself always felt an outsider, a Canadian prairie girl spotted by Sadler's Wells Ballet on tour and brought to London aged 15. Comparing herself to her well-schooled classmates, she wrote in her diary: "I'm an earth-bound worm." Even as a rising star, she was no less self-critical, saying in an interview: "You should have steel wire somewhere inside you. I have sponge rubber."

Her penchant for huge hats, earrings, sunglasses and cheroots had an air of armour, and she once likened the artistic life to a bullfight: "Everyone is waiting for a bucket of blood. I think you ought to let every vein."

She was born Bertha Lynn Springbett in Alberta on March 8 1939, an open-air child. Her mother Marjorie, née McIvor, had gone to school by horseback. Lynn was the second child of Marjorie's marriage to Ed Springbett, a dentist. Her brother, Bruce, would represent Canada in the 220 yards at the 1954 Commonwealth Games.

Young Lynn studied ballet in Vancouver with Jean Jepson, whose tap-dancing lessons she credited with igniting her own latent musicality. At 15 she auditioned for Frederick Ashton when the Sadler's Wells Ballet toured to Vancouver, and she won a scholarship to train in London.

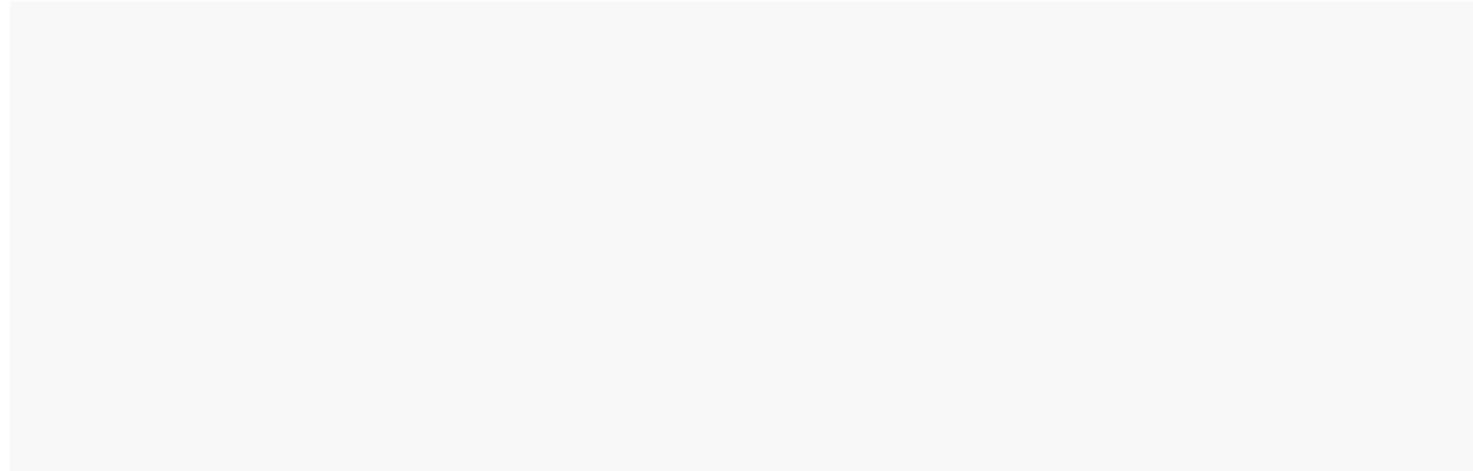


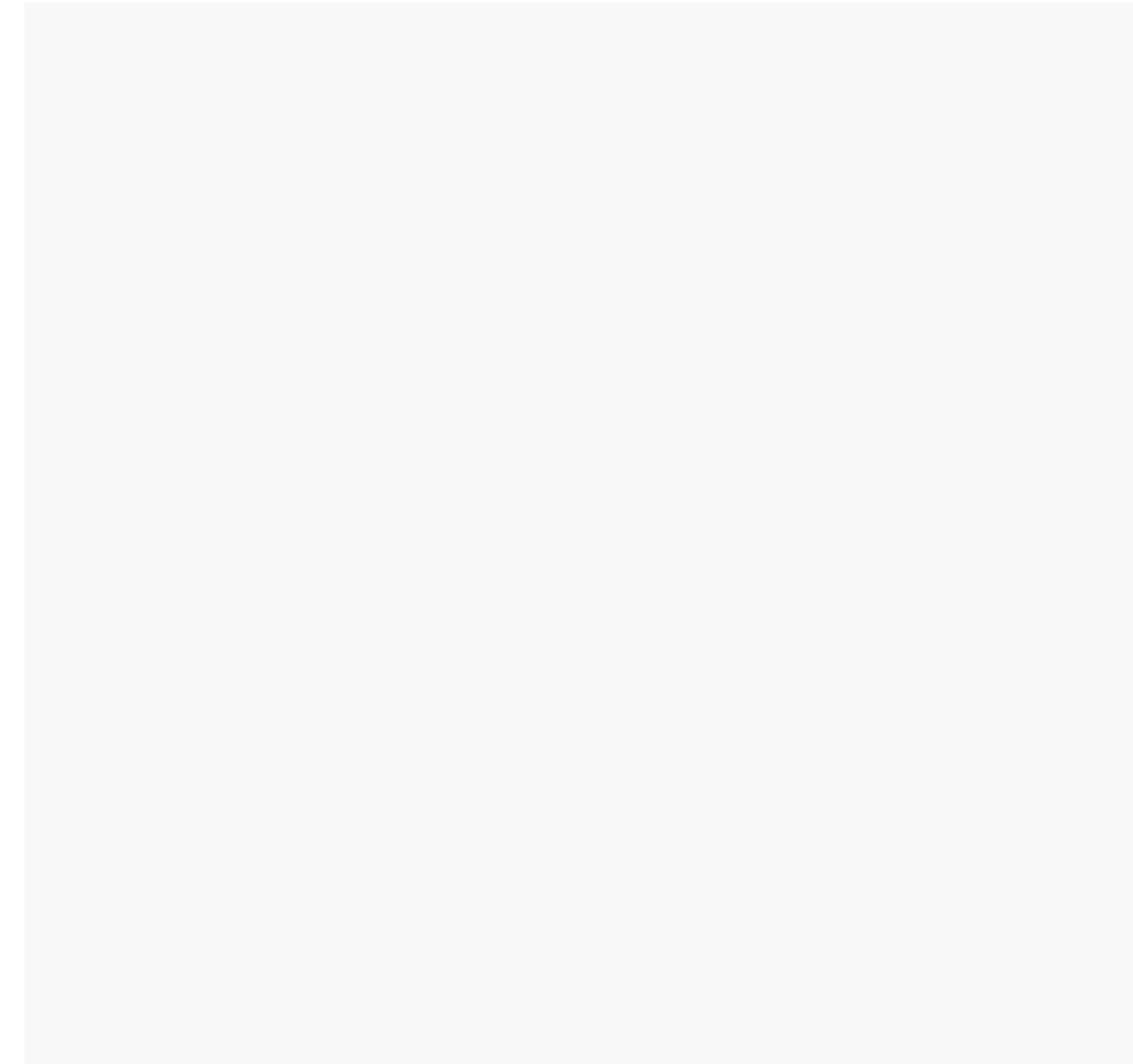
Rudolph Nureyev and Lynn Seymour enjoying a drink in the Crown, North End Road, Fulham, 1965, in a photograph taken by her first husband, Colin Jones | CREDIT: Colin Jones/TopFoto

Joining the Sadler's Wells company two years later, she was immediately cast by MacMillan as the lead in an early work, *The Burrow*, and from then on had the close attention of both the leading choreographers, as well as de Valois, who considered her "special".

Promoted to the top rank aged only 20, she inspired MacMillan's devastating child-abuse drama *The Invitation* (1960) on the one hand, and Ashton's witty *The Two Pigeons* (1961) on the other. The young Lynn Seymour carried off both with utter conviction.

She was also able to bamboozle audiences with her gentle beauty even in demanding classical feats – debuting in *Swan Lake*, with its infamous 32 fouettés, she could only manage eight, but her partner Donald MacLeary manfully improvised multiple leaps to fill for her, and the audience remained spellbound.





Lynn Seymour as The Girl and Desmond Doyle as The Husband during rehearsals for the new Kenneth MacMillan ballet *The Invitation*, December 1960 | CREDIT: Terry Disney/Central Press/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

As MacMillan prepared his harrowing *The Invitation*, she suggested a classmate from school, Christopher Gable, as her partner, and, soon after, Ashton capitalised on the success of their pairing with *The Two Pigeons*. Gable and Lynn Seymour became the iconic new couple representing modern youth, and MacMillan's choice in 1964 as the lovers in his new *Romeo and Juliet*.

He also homed in on them for his sensuous triangle ballet, *Images of Love*, inspired by Shakespeare's sonnet 144, "Two loves I have of comfort and despair", in which she was the dark angel and Gable the light, with Nureyev torn rather erotically between the two.

It was the start of a lifelong friendship between Lynn Seymour and Nureyev which was not touched by the Romeo and Juliet debacle the following year.

The scandal did, however, sever MacMillan and Lynn Seymour's relations with the Royal Ballet, and in 1966 Lynn Seymour went with MacMillan when he quit to head the Berlin Opera Ballet. She scoffed at rumours that she and MacMillan were lovers, admitting only the intimacy of creative activity: "We just all lived in each other's pockets, that's all."



A coach to younger performers: Lynn Seymour from the Royal Ballet vets girls at an audition for a production of Aida
| CREDIT: Andrew Shaw

In Berlin she premiered MacMillan's beautiful abstract ballet set to Shostakovich music, Concerto – her fluidity of movement inspired its second movement– and his first version of Anastasia, an innovative, expressionist work about the mental patient who claimed she was the last Romanov princess.

A relationship with a dancer, Eike Walcz, produced twin boys in 1968, but Seymour's work ethic did not flag. She took up multiple guest invitations, especially to Canada, where she danced what Nureyev thought one of her best roles, the delicate, mischievous early 19th-century La Sylphide. She left a lasting impact on Canada's

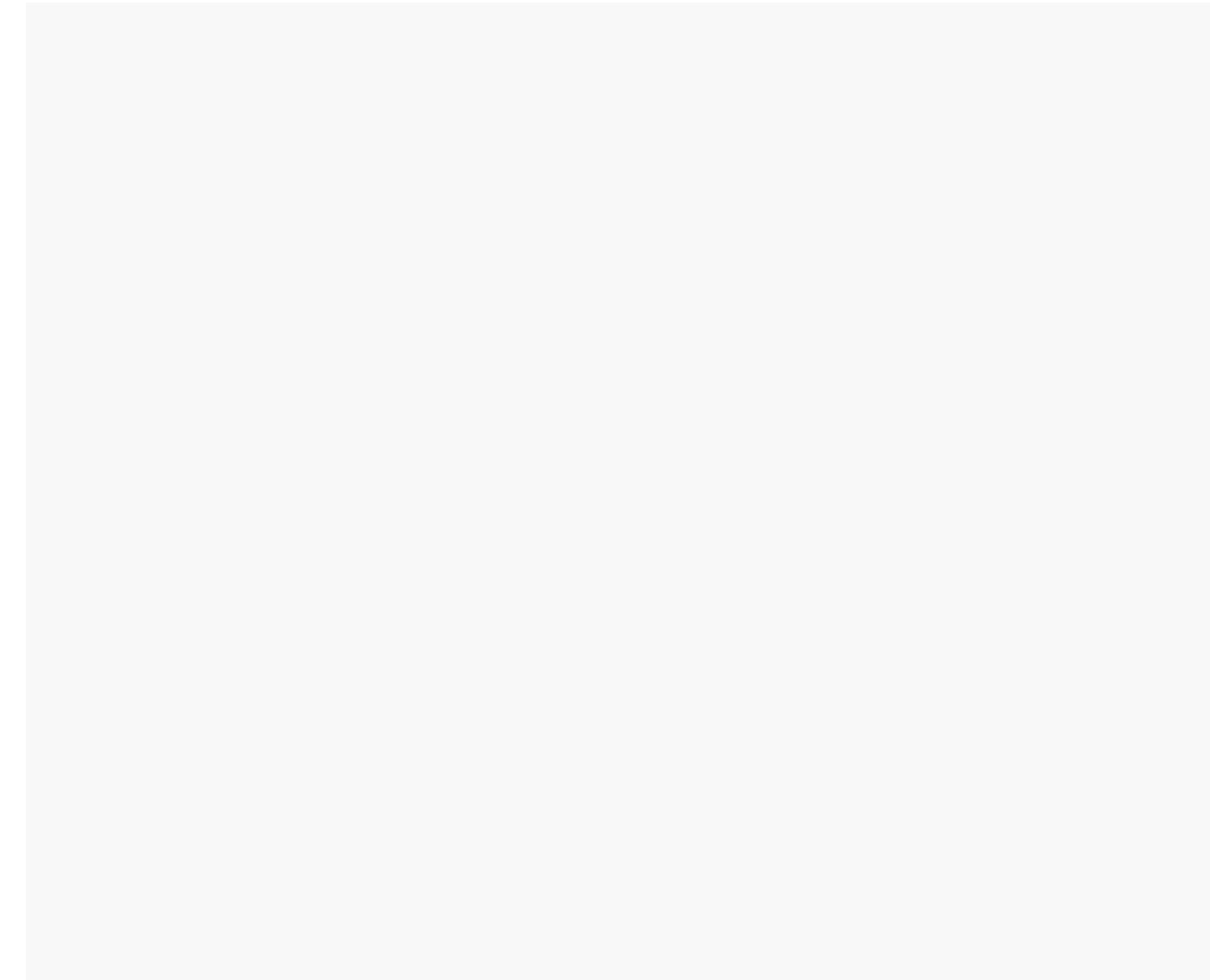
developing ballet.



When MacMillan was appointed the Royal Ballet's new director in 1970, Seymour returned again with him, and premiered four of her greatest roles. Two were MacMillan's, as Anastasia again in a new full-length version (she was hailed as “funny, tragic, miraculous”); and, though nearing 40, as the shockingly clingy and obsessed teenager Mary Vetsera in the 1978 drama about Crown Prince Rudolf, Mayerling – now an international classic.

In total contrast, Ashton created for her a poignant bored-housewife role in *A Month in the Country*, using a Turgenev short story, in which she falls for her children's tutor; and a luscious barefoot solo set to Brahms waltzes, in which he explored Lynn Seymour's evocativeness of his memories of Isadora Duncan, the daringly unfettered modern dance pioneer.

Meanwhile, she showed her classical lyricism and deep musicality in *The Sleeping Beauty*; Ashton's *Cinderella*; and some plotless ballets by Jerome Robbins and MacMillan.



Nureyev and Lynn Seymour as Hamlet and Ophelia during rehearsals for Robert Helpmann's Hamlet at the Royal Opera House, March 1964 | CREDIT: Roger Jackson/Central Press/Hulton Archive/Getty

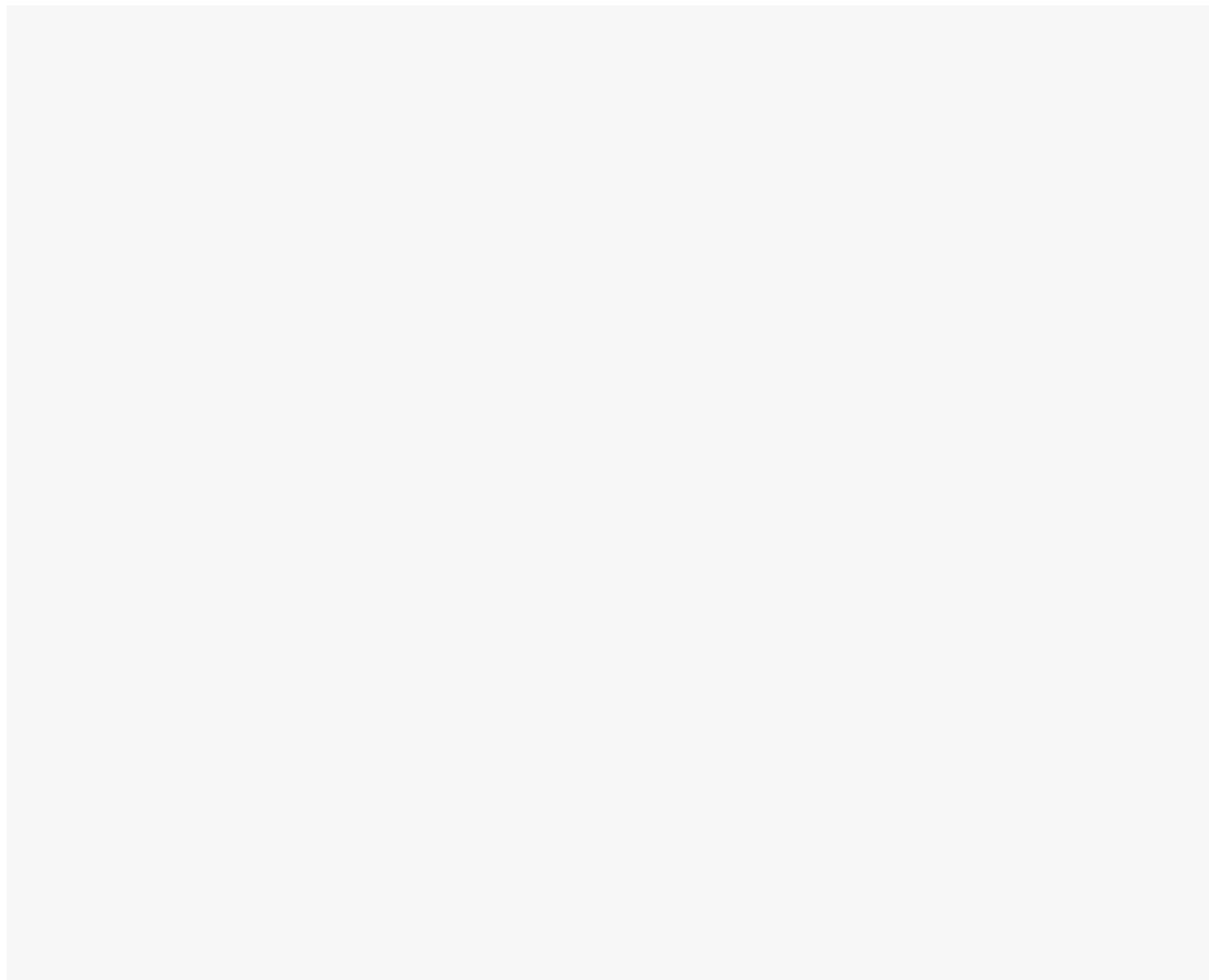
From time to time, however, the rebel emerged: as Terpsichore in Balanchine's Apollo, she wore her short curly hair instead of the conventional bun, and she once showed her disdain for a tarty role MacMillan had created for her in *The Seven Deadly Sins* by turning her backside to the audience at curtain call.

Often struggling with her weight and depression, with three sons but sometimes no husband, Seymour's personal life was rocky despite her world renown, and in 1980 she left the Royal Ballet for the second time. She took up a more selective world schedule as a guest star, often alongside Nureyev, and explored choreography, and film and television acting.

Yet nearly a decade later – at nearly 50 – she returned to the stage in unforgettable performances as Tatiana in John Cranko's Pushkin ballet, *Onegin*, for London Festival

Ballet, and as Anastasia on the Royal Ballet's New York tour. More recently she performed character roles with Second Stride; at Christopher Gable's Northern Ballet Theatre; and in Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* (as the Queen) and *Cinderella* (as the original Stepmother).

She choreographed several works between 1973 and 1988 for the Royal Ballet and Sadler's Wells companies, Ballet Rambert and the London Contemporary Dance Theatre.



Lynn Seymour (right), playing the title role in Kenneth MacMillan's *Anastasia*, in 1971 meeting Ingrid Bergman, who played the same role in the 1956 film *Anastasia* | CREDIT: Frank Barrett/Keystone/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Lynn Seymour had two short spells as artistic director in Munich and Athens. In 1978-79 she headed the Bavarian Opera Ballet of Munich, where she brought Nureyev and Natalia Makarova as star guests and showcased the young William Forsythe (now a celebrated name in choreography).

She also filmed Giselle with Nureyev, a rare record of her work, though unofficial glimpses remain on YouTube. In 2006-07 she co-directed the Greek National Ballet with Irek Mukhamedov.

As an actress she played alongside Gert (Goldfinger) Fröbe and [Michael Gough](#) in the Canadian children's series The Little Vampire, appeared in [Herbert Ross](#)'s 1987 film Dancers, starring Baryshnikov, and portrayed the colourful Ballets Russes ballerina Lydia Lopokova in Derek Jarman's Wittgenstein (1993).

Karin Altman's documentary, Lynn Seymour: In a Class of Her Own, appeared in 1979, and a biography by Richard Austin in 1980. She published an autobiography, Lynn, in 1984.

In a class of her own: Lynn Seymour in 1960 | CREDIT: Evening Standard/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Lynn Seymour was outspoken and sometimes provocative about the art to which she was devoted. In the late 1960s she declared ballet “the most boring, decadent art form that exists. It’s essentially a dead form with a dead hierarchy.”

But this belied her intelligent obsession with expressiveness in movement, and she was a remarkable coach to younger performers. She decried what she considered the neglect by the Royal Ballet of the vanishing oeuvres, calling for a national ballet trust to establish a central training core and stylistic heritage of key British dance works.

Lynn Seymour was appointed CBE in 1976. Portraits of her by the photographer Bill Brandt and sculptor Andrew Logan hang in the National Portrait Gallery. The Lynn Seymour Award for Expressive Dance was established in 2000 at the Royal Ballet School.

In addition to her relationship and children with Eike Walcz, she was married and divorced three times: to the photographer and dancer Colin Jones, the photographer Philip Pace, producing her third son, and to Vanya Hackel. Her children survive her.

Lynn Seymour, born March 8 1939, died March 7 2023

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