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Pierre Lacotte, choreographer famous for his role in Nureyev's sensational defection – obituary

Lacotte researched the Paris Opera archives and won renown for his recreations of 19th-century ballets including *La Sylphide* and *Giselle*

By Telegraph Obituaries

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Pierre Lacotte, the ballet dancer and choreographer, who has died in France aged 91, had a unique expertise in restoring to the stage spectacular lost ballets of the 19th

century, opening a worldwide debate about the possibilities for recovering legendary productions; but he was more famous as the man the KGB blamed for helping Rudolf Nureyev to defect from the Soviet Union.

As a fellow dancer, Lacotte had befriended the then unknown Russian in May 1961 in Paris, when Leningrad's Kirov Ballet arrived for its first ever tour to the West. Lacotte showed the Kirov's 23-year-old leading man around Paris, and the Russian instantly fell in love not only with the venerable Paris Opera Ballet but also with French art, culture, food – and freedom.

On the morning of Friday June 16, as the company prepared to fly from Le Bourget airport to London for the next leg of the tour, Nureyev – whose enjoyment of Parisian life had outraged the Soviet authorities – was ordered back to Moscow.

“I am a dead man,” Nureyev whispered desperately to Lacotte and other Paris Opera friends who had come to see him off.

As KGB minders and colleagues hemmed Nureyev in, Lacotte had a brainwave – he urged another dancer to phone a young woman, Clara Saint, with whom Nureyev appeared to have started a romance and who had links with the French government.

Clara Saint dashed to the airport and found out asylum procedure from the airport police. Under cover of passionately kissing Nureyev goodbye, she told him to approach two plainclothes policemen at a nearby bar and request formal asylum, if he truly wanted to leave.





Rudolf Nureyev in 1962, the year after Lacotte aided his defection, rehearsing Giselle with Margot Fonteyn at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden | CREDIT: George Freston/Fox Photos/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Nureyev later described his walk over to them as “six steps exactly” – “for a second which seemed to last an eternity my muscles were so heavy they might have been made of lead”.

In the chaotic aftermath, Lacotte arranged a lawyer and some clothes for Nureyev, whose possessions had gone on the plane to London, while Clara Saint found him an immediate engagement with the Marquesa de Cuevas Company, then performing in Paris. As a result, to fury in London and Moscow and delight in Paris, Nureyev performed *The Sleeping Beauty* in France on the same night he should have been performing *The Sleeping Beauty* at Covent Garden with the Kirov Ballet.

Two years later, Nureyev would be the Royal Ballet’s dazzling star, partnering Margot Fonteyn in the most famous ballet partnership in history. When 20 years later he became director of the Paris Opera Ballet, Pierre Lacotte would feature in his artistic plans.

Born in Chatou, near Paris, on April 4 1932, Pierre Lacotte trained from the age of 10 at the Paris Opera Ballet school. He joined the company at war’s end, aged 14, and reached its top rank when only 21, cutting an elegant, long-legged figure on stage.

But Lacotte wanted to develop his own choreography, and in 1955 formed his own touring group, the Ballets de la Tour Eiffel, one of several interesting French modern ballet troupes emerging from the moribund Paris Opera Ballet.



Pierre Lacotte with Josette Clavier in 1955, dancing with his company the Ballets de la Tour Eiffel | CREDIT: Hulton Archive

He was successful and would create new works for, among others, Ballet Rambert in 1966 (*Numéros* and *Intermède*), and in 1985 would found, at Princess Caroline of Monaco's invitation, the glamorous contemporary ballet troupe, *Les Ballets de Monte Carlo*.

However, the Kirov Ballet's arrival in Paris in 1961 proved a key artistic trigger for Pierre Lacotte, as well as the start of a beautiful friendship with Nureyev, for the pair's

shared passion for the French origins of Russian ballet led to Lacotte's deeper research in the centuries-old Paris Opera archives. From forgotten records he began piecing together possibilities for bringing back to life Paris ballet stagings of particular lavishness or historic interest.

His first great success in 1971 was centred on his wife, the Parisian ballerina Ghislaine Thesmar – 11 years his junior – for whom he recreated the earliest ballet danced on pointe, *La Sylphide*, in its original version for the iconic Marie Taglioni, created by her father.

The 1832 ballet had been wholly remade in Denmark a few years later with new music and choreography by Taglioni's partner, Auguste Bournonville, a version that had supplanted the first. Lacotte's homage to the Taglioni version was filmed to acclaim in 1972, with Ghislaine as the fairy sylphide, and became a staple on the Paris Opera stage.



Lacotte then won renown for his stylistic recreations of 19th-century ballets such as the first versions of *Giselle*, *Coppelia*, *Paquita*, *Ondine* and other Paris hits which had either disappeared or been supplanted by later revisions (many were by the French choreographer Marius Petipa, who moved to St Petersburg – pursued by a cuckolded husband – and turned Russia into the new hub of classical ballet with productions such as *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Swan Lake*).

Requiring lavish decor and musical research, Lacotte productions entailed huge financial commitments, and there was much debate as to whether the historical results – and public entertainment value – were worthwhile.

Some regarded Lacotte's work as intriguing creative archaeology generating new interest in period style, others as academically bogus – dubiously disinterring silly ballets at distracting cost. Yet his difficult choreography delighted some of the world's finest dancers, challenging them to perfect their skill and understanding of dance, and he was in any case a realist about theatre, rather than a purist.

It was impossible to be academically authentic, Lacotte argued, given the multiple,

often indecipherable, methods of recording dance steps over centuries. “It’s all about finding the style of a period,” he told the Telegraph in 2004. “The steps may be the same but they are done in different style for a period and for their music.”





Pierre Lacotte rehearsing *The Princess* with Violette Verdy in 1960 | CREDIT: Alamy

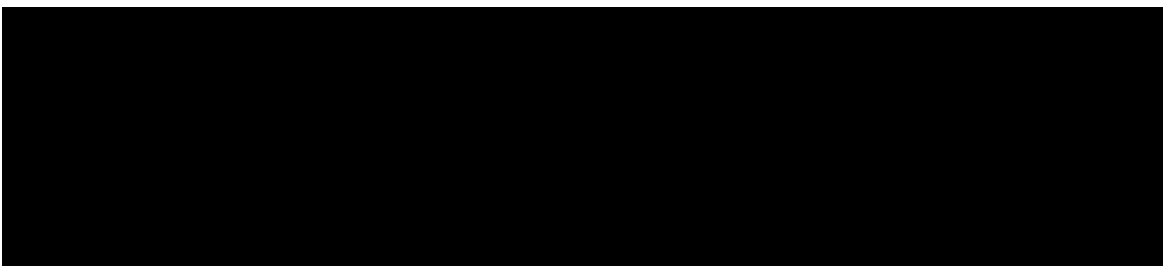
He cited an elderly Bolshoi ballerina who in 1927 had danced *The Pharaoh's Daughter*, a ballet with an Indiana Jones plot set in ancient and modern Egypt, which he wanted to recreate for the Bolshoi in 2000, but whose choreography records were incomplete. The ballerina told him she was so old she could not remember, but she trusted his mastery of 19th-century style.

Lacotte recalled: “She said, ‘Pay respect to the style but do it yourself.’ So that’s what I did. You have to be honest and not lie about it. You have to say it’s in the style of Petipa but it’s my choreography. If you know how to take the audience in your hand and bring them to the stage, make them sleep or dream, that’s the point. If the performance is good, it’s good.”

Pierre Lacotte was unperturbed that others disagreed with his versions and *The Pharaoh's Daughter* is currently undergoing its third so-called “authentic” restoration by different hands at the Mariinsky Ballet.

Rudolf Nureyev was fascinated by Lacotte’s work, and asked him to recreate *Marco Spada*, an 1857 Paris ballet about aristocrats and bandits, for Rome Opera, starring himself and Lacotte’s wife Ghislaine Thesmar, who was a favourite partner of Nureyev’s.

When Nureyev went to direct the Paris Opera Ballet, he staged Lacotte’s recreation of Saint-Léon’s original *Coppelia*, and suggested Petipa’s *The Pharaoh's Daughter* for the next project. The Paris Opera financial authorities balked at that, however, and it would eventually appear at the Bolshoi Ballet.





Lacotte also recreated from archived texts the pioneering first version of Giselle by Perrot and Coralli, Perrot's Ondine, Saint-Léon's Vivandière pas de six, Marie Taglioni's Le Papillon, her father Philippe Taglioni's La fille du Danube, The Fairy Lake and Nathalie or The Swiss Milkmaid, and Mazilier/Petipa's Paquita. He believed his version of Swan Lake for the Ballet de Nancy to be the closest possible to the 1895 Petipa/Ivanov premiere.

More recently, at Paris Opera Ballet Lacotte returned to his own original choreography, creating lavish and swashbuckling story ballets of The Three Musketeers in 2010, and, two years ago, Le Rouge et le Noir, based on Stendhal's 1830 novel about an ambitious young man sleeping his way to the top of society; it was costumed and designed by Lacotte.

Pierre Lacotte, a Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres, wrote Pierre Lacotte: Tradition with Jean-Pierre Pastori in 1987.

He is survived by his wife, Ghislaine Thesmar.

Pierre Lacotte, born April 4 1932, died April 10 2023

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