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Lesley's brilliant career

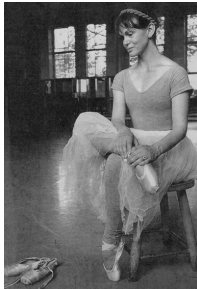


Photo Christopher Cox

The Royal Ballet star Lesley Collier has had an extraordinary 30-year career. As Ismene Brown reports, she is retiring at the peak of her powers

"I wish I wasn't a sturdy little English girl. I'm not exotic, and I always feel very ordinary"

YOU can buy a mug somewhere in Piccadilly Circus with the legend: "Ballerinas never die, they just miss the pointe". And perhaps it's true that the great stars who etched ballet's magic on our imaginations have occasionally clung to the stage a little too long.

But a ballerina retires this summer - already, in her discreet way, a legend in the making - who is ending her career at the pinnacle of her powers. In the last two years, in her late forties, she has laid down performances of the two most demanding roles in classical ballet so glorious as to hurt the eyes of a generation of younger dancers. With her Aurora in *The Sleeping Beauty* two years ago and her *Giselle* this spring, Lesley Collier ensured that the image she leaves behind will be forever untarnished.

On July 29, aged 48, she performs her last classical lead, *Giselle*, in the theatre which has given her a career of almost unparalleled longevity and variety, the Royal Opera House.

It will also be her only *Giselle* with the partner with whom, fleetingly, she formed a pairing as exceptional and well-matched as those of Fonteyn and Nureyev, and Sibley and Dowell. In Collier the great Russian Irek Mukhamedov found the ideal partner in physique, dramatic depth, classical polish and musical understanding. On Friday, at Hampton Court, they dance together in a pas de deux created for them by Michael Corder. Then July 29 will match the greatest Albrecht of our time with the current *Giselle non pareille* - for one night only. If only, we can mourn, the Russian had arrived in London 10 years ago, not five.

"Ah, but it might not have been so great if I'd been younger," says Collier. "Part of it may be that I was already a mother when I arrived, that I was relaxed about my dancing and my career. If I'd been ambitious and young, it just might not have worked."

Motherhood has often produced second winds in ballerinas; the birth of her twins six years ago did the same for Collier, and they and her boyfriend, dancer Guy Niblett, will ease the pain she feels at leaving the great roles behind her.

"I can't think of July as my last performance, otherwise I'm just going to go to pieces," she says. "Thank God for my children, or I'd have found it devastating. But as I've got them, I am very happy not to dance. I hope I'll still be invited back to do smaller parts, be somebody's mother, but I've had one of the best careers ever."

HER voice is remarkable, hushed, slightly husky, very musical and constantly bubbling with laughter. Like all dancers she appears even slighter off stage than on. Her face is surprisingly unlined and young, brown eyes bright and mischievous; she still blushes, and the decided chin and white teeth give her the look of a schoolgirl rather than of a romantic heroine.

"I wish I wasn't a sturdy little English girl. I'm not anything exotic, not Russian or Swedish or anything interesting. I do feel suited to *Beauty* but I definitely don't think I'm a Swan Queen. I think a Swan Queen should look very special, and I always feel very ordinary."

What's her character like, then? She laughed. "Hmmm... it's mercurial. It could be very sweet... (another throaty giggle). It could be very bloody-minded too, and stubborn."

Yes, there is no doubt that Collier may be captivating but she is also a formidable personality. All through her 30-year career she has been surrounded by long-limbed etiolated creatures with soulful faces, but it was the sturdy little Orpington girl with the prosaic sexless name who kept catching the eye, and outstayed the lot.

One whose eye she caught early on at the Royal Ballet School was the *Sunday Telegraph's* ballet critic Nicholas Dromgoole, who was to become her second husband.

It was not perhaps the smartest career move, she says, since it meant he could not write about her performances at all while they were married (they were to divorce much later), and everything critical he wrote about anyone else in the Royal Ballet was immediately fired back at Lesley. "But it would have been very much worse *not* to have married him," she says now.

Even Frederick Ashton, when he was the Royal Ballet's director, at first saw her only as a soubrette. Kenneth MacMillan gave her her break by casting the 20-year-old Collier in the slow movement of his *Concerto*, then in *Anastasia* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

She became a dramatic MacMillan heroine, then a bubbling Ashton one, then - as her colleagues retired - people began noticing that Collier was also a shining classicist of peerless technical clarity, as well as of very rare musicality.

Irek Mukhamedov says of her: "Lesley is very unusual at the Royal Ballet - she does not *do* every step, she *dances* every step." It's an art that hides technique, something that is rare at any time in so physically exacting a profession as ballet, but in particularly short supply just now when technical excitement is the height of fashion.

Collier instantly agrees that if she and the sensational French star Sylvie Guillem had been contemporaries she wouldn't have stood a chance of even getting into the Royal Ballet School. But she doesn't see that as a bad thing, necessarily.

"We have to accept every stage that comes along. I think young dancers with young bodies can be very excited by their physical exuberance and it's got its value. Sylvie's body is extraordinarily lovely and we would *all* love to have it, the younger ones in particular.

"The teaching today is marvellous, much more scientific about technique than it was when I trained - for us it was more dancing with your heart and listening to the music. But it's important to get past this technique and into your imagination, so you can believe in yourself and what must become very *real* on stage."

It's a penetrating combination of realism and vision that will surely make Lesley Collier an exceptional ballet-mistress at the Royal Ballet School, where she starts in September, even while the rest of us will look at a stage in Covent Garden that seems suddenly to have gone dark.

Lesley Collier and Irek Mukhamedov dance in the Hampton Court Festival on Friday. Giselle is on July 29 at the Royal Opera House