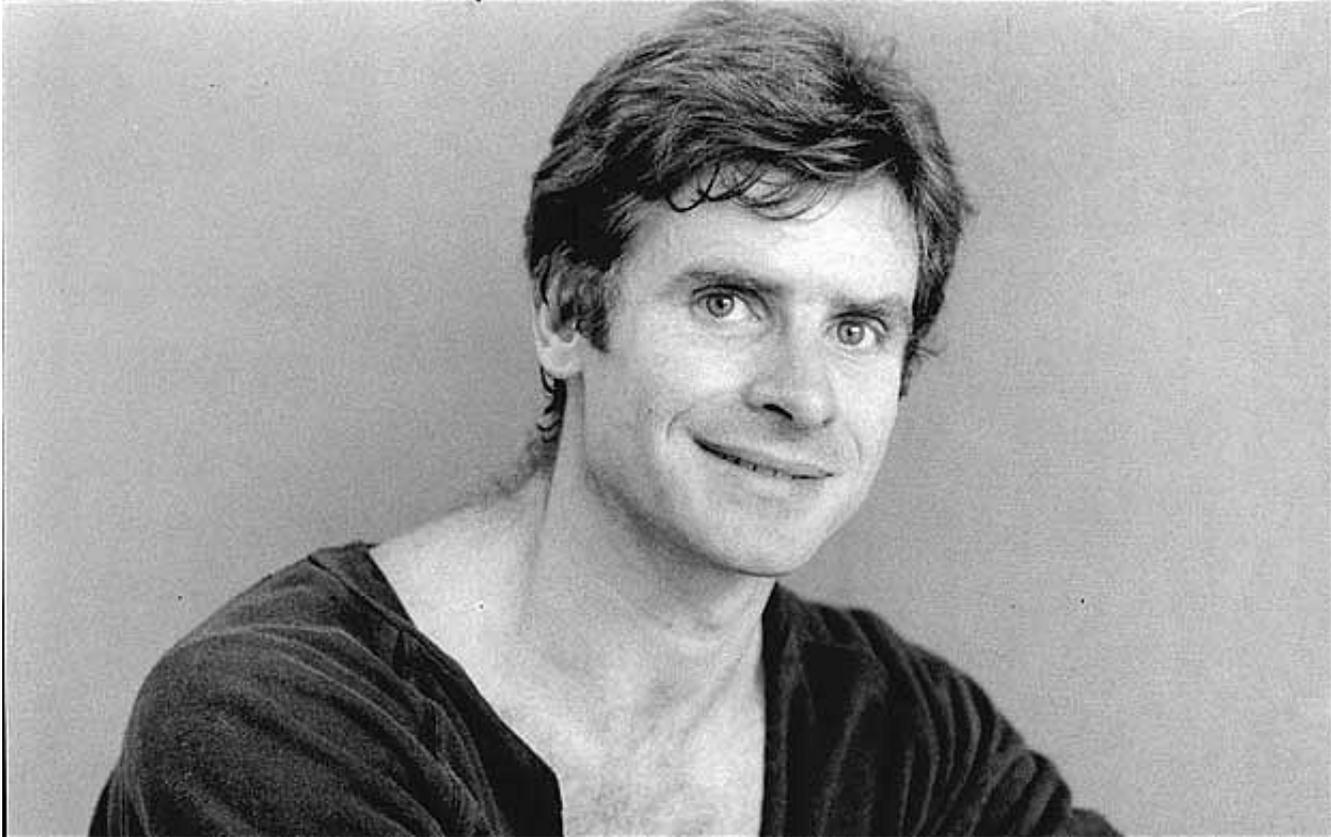


David Wall

David Wall, the dancer, who has died aged 67, became in the 1970s Britain's riposte to the charisma of Rudolf Nureyev.



David Wall Photo: DAVID O'NEILL/ASSOCIATED NEWSPAPERS/REX FEATURES

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A brilliant red-headed star of the Royal Ballet, Wall's qualities of polished grace and exceptional dramatic acting ability helped establish the worldwide reputation of English dance for sweeping away the artifice of ballet "acting" and exploring demanding emotional situations in a naturalistic way.

His exceptional gifts were indelibly imprinted on the leading role in Kenneth MacMillan's ballet *Mayerling*, in which Crown Prince Rudolf had to partner six ballerinas and die, drugged, in a murder-suicide pact. It was testament to Wall's profound interpretative understanding that he turned what could have been a sensational role into a truly affecting portrayal of a haunted, damaged man.

With chiselled, dramatic features setting off his fiery locks, he was certainly "easy on the eye", as the leading critic Richard Buckle once noted, and his masculine power, as well his natural amiability and splendid classical technique, made him the darling of most of the era's ballerinas, including Margot Fonteyn. At a performance they gave together in Hong Kong at the end of her career, she declared to the reception afterwards that Wall had been her "favourite" partner of her career, she felt so at ease

with him.

He is one of very few dancers to be the subject of a public statue – his lithe athleticism adorns the Chelsea Embankment near Tate Britain, immortalised in bronze in 1975 in Enzo Plazzotta's "Jeté".

Wall showed an unusual early bravura, becoming the Royal Ballet's youngest-ever male principal at the age of just 20. He idolised Nureyev, then Fonteyn's partner at the Royal Ballet, later saying that the Russian had had a life-changing effect on his idea of men on the ballet stage. For his part, Nureyev regarded Wall with both wariness and a rare affection, seeing him as the young lion most likely to steal his own position, yet valuing his pleasant friendship.

While Anthony Dowell was the paragon of Royal Ballet lyricism and aesthetic grace, Wall, giving little away in those aspects, had a theatrical commitment to darker, complex interpretations which belied his friendly nature. This opened up new dramatic possibilities to the two leading choreographers Frederick Ashton and Kenneth MacMillan and Wall became a favoured leading man for both.

He had a special gift for playing charismatic, morally ambiguous men, such as the irresistible roué in Antony Tudor's Knight Errant, Ninette de Valois's Rake in *The Rake's Progress*, Kenneth MacMillan's Lescaut (Manon Lescaut's sinister brother), and above all MacMillan's Rudolf in *Mayerling*. "David has great sex appeal," MacMillan told an interviewer. "You believe women would be fascinated by him."

David Richard Wall was born on March 15 1946, a war baby adopted by Charles and Dorothy Wall, who also adopted two girls. He grew up in Staines where his primary school had compulsory ballroom dancing lessons; the boy's evident talent and interest in dancing won him a place at the Royal Ballet School.

Aged 17 he graduated into the Royal Ballet, assigned to the Touring Company, the smaller, more creative part of the company. As a minor he had to be made a ward of court to be allowed to travel the country.

He danced Prince Siegfried in *Swan Lake* while still a teenager and was promoted to the highest rank of principal at just 20 by the touring company's director John Field, who saw in the youth an actor of power and range as well as a classical prince in the making.

Both the Royal Ballet's major choreographers homed in on him: Frederick Ashton cast him as the Young Man in his romantic period comedy *The Two Pigeons* and MacMillan cast him as the Boy in the brooding sex drama *The Invitation*.

“Ginger” – as Wall was inevitably known – swiftly stood out, and he formed with Doreen Wells the touring company’s leading classical couple, the regional audiences’ answer to the London-based star pair of Antoinette Sibley and Anthony Dowell. He also paired up both on and offstage with the ballerina Alfreda Thorogood, whom he married in 1967.

His sex appeal as well as his technical grace brought an unusual credibility to his portrayal of the philandering Albrecht in the early 19th-century classic *Giselle*. In lighter ballets such as Ashton’s *The Two Pigeons* and *La Fille mal gardée* and MacMillan’s *Elite Syncopations* he possessed what Buckle called “an utter sureness of touch”.

This acting quality made Wall’s classical and comedy performances a delight, drawing huge critical acclaim and requests to partner many leading ballerinas, Fonteyn, Merle Park, Jennifer Penney and Lesley Collier among them.

When in 1970 MacMillan succeeded Ashton as Royal Ballet director and the touring company merged into Covent Garden, MacMillan saw in Wall a performer brave and curious enough to develop a new kind of male ballet character, enabling more complicated and realistic storytelling than the traditional hero-heroine format.

Above all Wall had a daring which made plausible the risky, uninhibited pas de deux that MacMillan was constantly evolving under the stimulus of his ballerina muse Lynn Seymour. In *Manon* in 1974, MacMillan created for Wall a role that in conventional ballet terms would be a token subsidiary male part, but which here became pivotal: the manipulative brother Lescaut of the amoral courtesan, a performance that some observers felt stole the show from the story’s hero, Des Grieux, played by Anthony Dowell.

MacMillan took Wall’s special gifts a stage further in his 1978 ballet *Mayerling*, where the part of Crown Prince Rudolf encapsulated all that Wall was capable of, his physical strength and also his ability to find pathos in even the most damaged of characters. In *Mayerling*, ready to achieve anything MacMillan could dream up, Wall and Seymour took pas de deux to a dark extreme that had never before been envisaged in the pleasing art of ballet.

Wall described dancing *Mayerling* as the pinnacle of his performing career, after which no role could be so challenging again. He was determined to teach, and at 38 retired from the stage to join the Royal Academy of Dancing, where he spent seven years as associate director and director, working with Fonteyn in promulgating English teaching worldwide. A year after the career move he was made CBE.

He coached performers at the London Studio Centre and the London City Ballet, before in 1994

joining English National Ballet as balletmaster. He described it as a great and satisfying challenge to fuse an international crop of dancers into one company style, dealing with a variety of arenas and the Royal Albert Hall. Among his most devoted proteges were Tamara Rojo, now ENB artistic director, and the ENB leading ballerina Daria Klimentova.

Wall and his wife staged MacMillan's production of *The Sleeping Beauty* for ENB in 2005, and he retired in 2007 as the company performed *Swan Lake* in the Palace of Versailles. He continued to consult on international stagings of MacMillan works, including *Mayerling* on its adoption by the Hungarian Ballet.

David Wall was diagnosed with cancer three months ago, and died at home in Croydon. He is survived by his wife, their son and daughter.

David Wall, born March 15 1946, died June 18 2013

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