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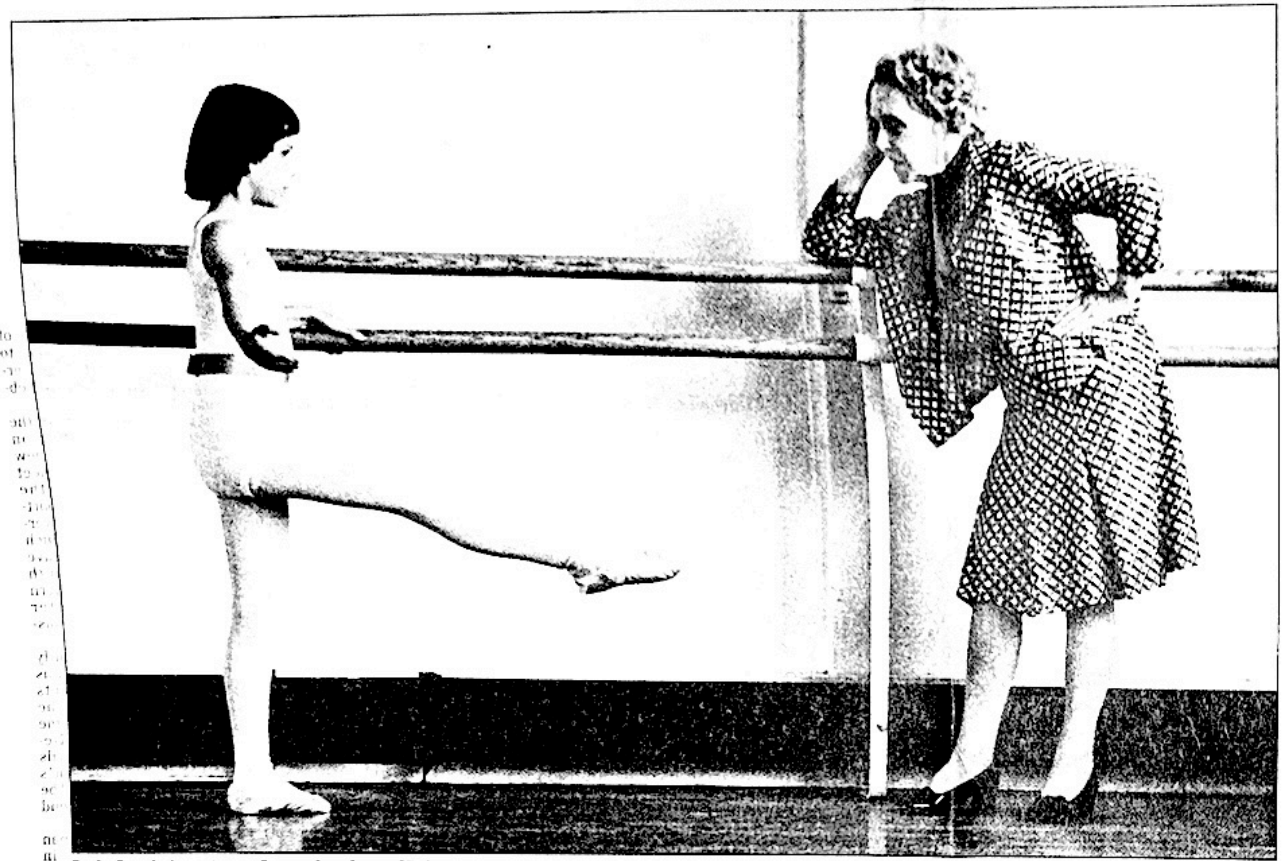

Lady Sarah Armstrong-Jones, daughter of Princess Margaret, takes her first steps at the Royal Ballet School, under the guidance of Ninette de Valois

The ballerina: Ninette de Valois, circa 1928

Star who gave birth to the Royal Ballet

An appreciation of Ninette de Valois

BY ISMENE BROWN, DANCE CRITIC

A GRAPHOLOGIST asked to identify an anonymous sample of handwriting by Ninette de Valois gave this verdict: "She is an idealist with absolutely no illusions."

De Valois was not simply the woman who created British ballet but one of the great figures in all British theatre. Having begun as an Irish-born child entertainer in Lila Field's Wonder Children, she became a ballerina with Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, and it was Diaghilev who inflamed her with the crusade to give Britain ballet.

At 28 she instinctively realised that to have a company you must first grow the dancers, and so she founded a dance school in 1926. When she died, 74 years later, not only Britain had a world-renowned ballet company but so did Canada, Australia, South Africa and Turkey, thanks to her disciples going forth.

The fact that in America people still think that Britain has a ballet tradition at least as old as Russia's or France's is a measure of the grand illusion that she successfully pulled over others' eyes.

Younger generations of ballet-goers who did not know her reign at the Royal Ballet heard frequently of her ruthlessness, even brutality. Pictures of her showed a handsome, intellectual face with haunting, direct eyes. Film of her at work showed an elderly woman waving a stick at dancers and shouting at them. As her longtime friend, Sir Peter Wright, former director of Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet and Birmingham Royal Ballet, pointed out yesterday, de Valois — easily hurt — was a mass of apparent contradictions.

"I will always think of her beautiful grey eyes, which could be so full of warmth and compassion and then change so suddenly into a penetrating fury, if she was faced with incompetence," he said.

"She was always brutally honest, which could be quite upsetting. But as a friend I found I valued her directness."

De Valois was married for 52 years to a GP, Dr Arthur Connell, who once attended Marilyn Monroe when she had a miscarriage shortly after her marriage to Arthur Miller. Wright says that despite her overwhelming commitment to the ballet companies and school, she was "an excellent housewife and good cook, and absolutely devoted to her husband.

"She had had so many illnesses and injuries that she once said to me, 'I've had everything except a baby'. But in truth I think she was too consumed by her work really for children."

For Sir Anthony Dowell, director of the Royal Ballet, who learned to dance under her reign, de Valois's death felt like losing a mother figure. "My early feelings were always of being scared by her," he said yesterday.

"The company was her family, and the Royal Ballet is a kind of dynasty unlike any other company anywhere." For ballet-goers, de Valois's colossal shadow was a source of constant reference. Under her came the rise of everything that makes British ballet great — its finest choreographers, Frederick Ashton and Kenneth MacMillan, its greatest dancers, Margot Fonteyn, Lynn Seymour, Dowell and his partner Antoinette Sibley.

De Valois's hiring of Rudolf Nureyev when he defected from the USSR was highly controversial — but it began a golden new era at the Royal Ballet.

Although de Valois was one of the great empire-builders of British history, she was less concerned with pomp and circumstance than with structure and stability. As a dancer with experience of touring in reach-me-down companies in a world without subsidies, she was more conscious than most of the fragility of the life.

The establishments — the grants system, the concept of national companies, the Royal Opera House, the Royal Ballet School, the redevelopments of Sadler's Wells Theatre and the Birmingham Hippodrome, base of the Birmingham Royal Ballet — were insurance policies, not intended to obstruct artistic energy.

Though she died many years after she would have wished to, Sir Peter is grateful that she had seen these complicated developments come to fruition, with all the vote of confidence that implied from the British people, recognising de Valois's legacy as truly national assets.

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