Alicia Markova, queen of British ballet, dies at 94

By Ismene Brown

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Dame Alicia Markova, Britain's first great ballerina, died in her sleep yesterday in a Bath hospital, the day after her 94th birthday.

One of a handful of artists acknowledged as "prima ballerina assoluta", Markova was the ballerina on whom all British ballet was founded, and was significant in America's classical ballet boom.

Her life was shaped and dominated by her dancing. She began ballet lessons to stave off physical handicap, and joined the most celebrated ballet company in Europe when she was just 14.

At 19 she became the lynch-pin of what would become the Royal Ballet, Ballet Rambert and English National Ballet.

She was a dedicated populariser of ballet, performing outside conventional theatres, in arenas and at dog-tracks to tens of thousands of spectators. She never married, becoming the epitome of the ballerina dedicated to her art.

Renowned worldwide as the greatest of Giselles and as a phenomenal technical performer, Markova set a new athletic standard that recognised the need for superlative technique to create the illusions and poetic expression necessary for art.

In the 1930s she was the only ballerina in Britain capable of dancing the great classics, without which no credible ballet tradition could have emerged. She laid the ground for Margot Fonteyn, who took over her London roles when Markova left to forge a freelance global career.

Born into an Irish-Jewish family in Finsbury, north London, Markova began dancing because of her crooked legs - the surgeon advised her the choice was between ballet classes or leg irons for life.

At 10 she was billed in London as "the child Pavlova". At 14, Sergei Diaghilev asked her to join his Monte Carlo-based company, then planning to appear in London.

Markova had a unique relationship with the impresario. Her father had recently died and she called Diaghilev her second father. He developed a paternal attitude towards her.

Her undeveloped androgynous body and fearless male-type technique contrasted with the sophisticated femininity of Diaghilev's famed ballerinas, and was a valuable spark to the modern revolution.

Henri Matisse designed daring all-over leotards for her (now standard ballet kit), Igor Stravinsky found her able to absorb new musical ideas readily, and - because of her emotional immaturity - the choreographer George Balanchine began to conceive a more abstract kind of female dancing, driven by music rather than drama.

In 1929, when she was 19, Diaghilev planned to launch her as his new star Giselle,

succeeding Anna Pavlova, Tamara Karsavina and Olga Spessivtseva. However, his sudden death forced her to return to England.

It was thanks to her abilities that classical ballets were first mounted in Britain but Markova's career was also a landscape of all the era's greatest choreographic talent.

In addition to Balanchine, she inspired ballets by Frederick Ashton, Ninette de Valois, Antony Tudor, Mikhail Fokine, Bronislava Nijinska and Léonide Massine.

She temporarily lost the British public's affection when she went to America during the Second World War, but in the US she gained recognition as the unquestioned queen of world ballet.

Returning after the war with her favourite partner, the Irishman Anton Dolin - whom she was long believed to be secretly in love with - Markova set up the Markova-Dolin Ballet.

This became the Festival Ballet, then English National Ballet of which she became president. She was made a Dame in 1963 on her retirement from performance, but remained an energetic coach.

Tamara Rojo, whom Markova coached at English National Ballet in the 1990s, said: "I found her very inspirational. She was very funny and interesting. She was a real diva, always with a wonderful hairdo and beautiful outfits, and she always expected flowers, but very pleasantly.

"I think of her as a very powerful ballerina who brought a rigour into ballet that didn't exist. She was able to do the steps better than anybody else."

Matz Skoog, the director of ENB, described her as "a true giant of the ballet world and the last of her generation".

Markova suffered a brain haemorrhage last month and was taken to hospital in Bath where she died. Her funeral will be next Wednesday at Bath Crematorium.

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