Norman Morrice

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Norman Morrice, who was found dead in his home in London on Friday aged 76, was artistic director of both Britain's major ballet companies, Ballet Rambert and the Royal

Ballet, at each of which he was seen as a radical figure.

His greater legacy, however, was as mentor to a generation of ballet choreographers, including Rambert's Christopher Bruce, Birmingham Royal Ballet's David Bintley and Scottish Ballet's Ashley Page - as well as such figures as Christopher Wheeldon.

Both Morrice's artistic directorships were intended to refresh the vigour and purpose of slightly tired classical companies whose golden days were passing; but his revisions were much more acclaimed at Ballet Rambert than at the Royal Ballet, where his many detractors believed classical standards were sacrificed to the pursuit of novelty.

Certainly he was by instinct more interested in new works than in ideal performances of Swan Lake, and he was thus a pivotal figure in the Royal Ballet's constantly vacillating search for identity, which regularly swings between its opposite duties to be both a ballet museum and a creative laboratory. However, despite the received view that Morrice was a failure as a Royal Ballet director - and he tended to be swept behind more famous directors (Kenneth MacMillan and Anthony Dowell) on either side of him - hindsight has shown him to be a greatly influential figure in British ballet today.

His interest in young choreographers and striking new stage design reinforced the view that British ballet could be more than simply a showcase for classical excellence. However, the howls against the lowering of technical standards under his directorship killed off for a generation the idea of the Royal Ballet returning to creativity as a primary generating force. Subsequent Royal Ballet directors have concentrated on maintaining the classical museum rather than the creative laboratory, while Morrice's protégé choreographers dispersed to make careers elsewhere.

Norman Morrice was born on September 10 1931 at Agua Dulce, Mexico, the second child of a British oil engineer on posting, and he remained a Mexican citizen until he finished school, thus exempting him from British National Service. This fact may have explained why he was the only Royal Ballet director to receive no public honour.

He took his first dance lessons at Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, before joining the Rambert School of Ballet. He danced with Ballet Rambert from 1953, and was particularly noted as the eccentric Dr Coppelius in Coppelia. His first choreography, Two Brothers, showed a powerful narrative inspired by James Dean's film Rebel Without a Cause. The ballet was designed by Ralph Koltai, the first of many designers who would became well known in ballet through links with Morrice.

After a second Koltai collaboration, Hazaña, premiered at Sadler's Wells Theatre, Morrice took up an American fellowship in 1961-62 and was deeply impressed by

Martha Graham and George Balanchine.

In 1966, after the huge success of the Martha Graham company's London debut, Marie Rambert was impressed by a proposal made to her by Morrice to dismiss the classical corps de ballet and turn Ballet Rambert into a creative strike force of soloists. The plan, said Rambert, was "so intelligent, practical and in accordance with our artistic ideals that I forthwith appointed him my associate director, a post he fulfilled to perfection". She added, approvingly, that the company was now "orientated" by herself, but "directed" by Morrice.

Over the next eight years Morrice's new ballets included 1-2-3; Them and Us; Pastorale Variée; Ladies, Ladies!; Spindrift; That is the Show; and Blind Sight - the last two considered by Marie Rambert as seriously good work.

Morrice also nurtured the greater choreographic talent of Christopher Bruce, and brought in leading European modernists such as Anna Sokolow and Glen Tetley.

An ITV programme in 1971, People for Tomorrow, highlighted Morrice's influence in new British contemporary ballet.

He resigned in 1974 to concentrate on choreography. By then the Royal Ballet was run by Kenneth MacMillan, a major choreographer who found artistic directorship an unwelcome burden.

Although the Royal Ballet's roots had been firmly in creativity in the 1930s and 1940s, when the existing ballet canon was small, by the 1970s it had created a large in-house stock of ballets, largely by Frederick Ashton and MacMillan, and had become the world's most glamorous and stellar company, headed by dancers such as Margot Fonteyn and Rudolph Nureyev, Antoinette Sibley and Anthony Dowell, Lynn Seymour, David Wall and Wayne Sleep. The quality of ballets on offer in London also attracted world stars, from the Soviet defectors Makarova and Baryshnikov to America's finest performers.

MacMillan longed to return to choreography, and though for a while Nureyev was considered as his successor, Morrice's reputation as a gentle, amiable champion of new choreography was thought likelier to raise morale among younger dancers and give the Royal Ballet a more contemporary touch.

Morrice's self-effacing personality went down well backstairs in encouraging choreographers, but less well in generating first-class new dance stars to excite the box office. As opera house finances changed, his unshowy policy came to seem both unpopular and detrimental to the Royal Ballet's aesthetic identity as a classical company.

Choreographically, however, the Royal Ballet benefited under Morrice. He staunchly supported MacMillan's choreography, commissioning the full-length Mayerling, a torrid but brilliantly handled tale of royal sex and drugs, and the ambitious Isadora, which split the leading role of the radical Isadora Duncan between a dancer and a singer. He also revived the then unpopular Manon, ensuring its future, and put at least five MacMillan one-acters into repertory.

He was less intuitively a custodian of Ashton's more delicate work, which required assiduous technical attention; but under his stewardship Ashton made the dazzling Rhapsody, starring Mikhail Baryshnikov and created for the Queen Mother's 80th birthday in 1980, and Margot Fonteyn's retirement was glitteringly celebrated.

Morrice invited the rising David Bintley, Michael Corder and Ashley Page to create their first Royal Ballet works, and brought a Rambert influence in through works from Richard Alston and Robert North. In 1983-84 alone he commissioned six new British ballets, and encouraged the development of new modern ballet design.

Although he staged safe new productions of Swan Lake (1979) and Giselle (1980), these showed that the Royal Ballet was losing its pristine classical technique in favour of an all-purpose dramatic bias to encompass Morrice's highly eclectic programming. American critics were particularly hostile after the Royal Ballet's inadequate 1985 performances of Balanchine's Ballet Imperial.

In 1986 Morrice was relieved to relinquish the directorship to Anthony Dowell. He moved over to the Royal Ballet School to hothouse young creators as director of choreographic studies, a post that no longer exists.

Norman Morrice never married.

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