Maryon Lane

Ballerina who inspired Kenneth MacMillan, but whose career was overshadowed by Nureyev and Fonteyn.

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Maryon Lane, the ballerina who died on June 13 aged 77, played a pivotal role in the emergence of Kenneth MacMillan as the Royal Ballet's choreographer, helping him develop his mould-breaking, psychologically experimental style.

A tiny woman, just over 5ft tall, she was a young leading light of Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet in the early 1950s, when it was considered "second" to the Covent Garden-based Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet in classical terms, but had the edge for creative innovation.

While still very young, Maryon Lane took prominent roles in new creations by Frederick Ashton and the up-and-coming MacMillan, for whose early ballets she was something of a muse.

Born Patricia Mills to South African parents in Zululand on February 15 1931, Maryon Lane was one of a large contingent of talented teenagers in southern Africa which came to Britain after the Second World War. Her fellow-travellers included the choreographer John Cranko and the dancers Nadia Nerina and David Poole, to be followed later by the current director of the Royal Ballet, Dame Monica Mason, and the Rhodesian-born Royal Ballet dancer Dame Merle Park.

Having studied ballet in Johannesburg, Maryon Lane intended to join the Sadler's Wells school. The main Sadler's Wells company, however, had just moved into the Royal Opera House, taking several of its sister company's leading dancers, and new talent was badly needed in Rosebery Avenue. Shortly after her arrival, the 16-year-old Maryon joined Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet, and Frederick Ashton cast her in his new Ravel

ballroom ballet *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales*.

She was promoted to principal aged 17, and her brilliance and sense of style was noted by the visiting Anton Dolin. In 1950 George Balanchine, over from America to stage *Ballet Imperial* for Fonteyn at Covent Garden, picked Maryon Lane for his leading cast in *Trumpet Concerto*, a short-lived creation for the Sadler's Wells company. She danced her first full-length leading role in *Coppelia* in 1951.

With growing stage power, Maryon Lane was an outstanding Betrayed Girl in Ninette de Valois's *Rake's Progress* and Bride in Alfred Rodrigues' *Blood Wedding*. Her

combination of tiny physique, musical fluidity and strong dramatic presence impressed and influenced the then dancer Kenneth MacMillan when he first started as a choreographer.

In his first creation, *Somnambulism* (1953), on the theme of dreams, MacMillan created the leading female role for Maryon Lane, himself performing as one of the two men. She recalled that the ballet was prepared in a small room at Sadler's Wells Theatre so cluttered with skips and wardrobe baskets that the floor space was barely 8ft square. The ballet was instantly acclaimed as revealing a significant embryonic creative voice. MacMillan quickly followed up with *Laiderette*, with Maryon Lane as a young actress who is thrown out of her clown troupe when she is revealed to be bald – the first of many "outcast" roles in the choreographer's *oeuvre*.

MacMillan's next work, the angular, chic *Danses Concertantes*, which again starred Maryon Lane, was so successful that Ninette de Valois transferred both the ballet and ballerina to the main Covent Garden company. Ashton's interest in her was renewed, and he cast her as the lead in the New York première of his 1955 *Madame Chrysanthème*, a balletic version of *Madam Butterfly*.

Maryon Lane's identification with MacMillan's growing individuality deepened with *Noctambules*, in which she played the assistant to a bitter hypnotist in a decaying theatre (it was found by many to be shockingly violent), and *House of Birds*, his dark adaptation of a Brothers Grimm fairy tale, with Maryon Lane as one of two lovers captured by a sinister Bird Woman. She also took leading roles in MacMillan's abstract musical ballets *Agon* (1958) and *Diversions* (1961).

At Covent Garden, however, Maryon Lane found herself in a larger, more competitive arena dominated by Margot Fonteyn. Maryon's husband, David Blair, who had moved from the Theatre Ballet a few years earlier, became a regular partner to Fonteyn and

was groomed to be Covent Garden's next male star. In 1960 he took the leading male role in Frederick Ashton's new masterpiece *La Fille mal gardée* – between rehearsals he would visit Maryon Lane in hospital, where she gave birth to their twin daughters.

The arrival in 1961 of the Kirov defector Rudolf Nureyev had a devastating effect on their careers. Maryon Lane thought the attention paid to the Russian verged on the obsessive: "Cats and dogs were in love with Nureyev. We were all perfectly blinded by him. Even Ninette de Valois lost her reason."

She and Blair were among many dancers who felt trampled over by de Valois, the Royal Ballet's director, in her narrow focus on Fonteyn and Nureyev. Blair in particular was a casualty, losing both his partnership with Fonteyn and his hopes of directing the Royal Ballet, hopes which de Valois had encouraged. He died of a heart attack aged 43 in 1976 when about to take up directorship of the Norwegian National Ballet.

Maryon Lane remained with the Royal Ballet till 1968, guest dancing in 1966 with Ballet Rambert in MacMillan's *Laiderette* and in London Festival Ballet's new *Swan Lake*.

After retiring from the stage she became a sought-after teacher at the Royal Ballet School, London Ballet Centre and the Urdang Academy among others. Her pupils went

on to found dance schools in Ireland, Britain and America. She contributed an illustrated guide to ballet steps for Clement Crisp and Edward Thorpe's *Colourful World of Ballet* (1977). Her Sadler's Wells partnership with David Poole was immortalised in Val Guest's 1955 ballet-world melodrama for Rank, *Dance Little Lady*, starring Mai Zetterling.

In middle age Maryon Lane moved to Cyprus, and set up the Maryon Lane Ballet Academy in Kyrenia. Her daughters survive her.