Nadia Nerina

Nadia Nerina, who died on Monday in France aged 80, was a brilliant leading ballerina with the Royal Ballet, whose bravura brought her admiration in Russia and was immortalised in Frederick Ashton's masterpiece La Fille mal gardée.

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Renowned as the best technician at Covent Garden in the 1950s and 1960s, she impressed and humbled Rudolf Nureyev when he attempted to show off in a performance of Giselle with a series of 16 entrechats six (jumps with rapid changes of feet). Performing Swan Lake a few nights later, with Nureyev watching from the stalls,

Nadia Nerina doubled his feat to 32 — an unheard-of achievement for a female dancer — and a furious Nureyev stormed out of the performance.

With her happy personality on stage and her startling technique, Nadia Nerina was expected by many to take over from Margot Fonteyn as the company's leading ballerina at the beginning of the 1960s; but Nureyev's arrival inspired an unanticipated second career for the ageing Fonteyn, and Nerina was one of several gifted ballerinas who felt suffocated by the obsession of the public, and of the Royal Ballet leadership, with the Fonteyn-Nureyev phenomenon.

The choreographer Frederick Ashton saw Fonteyn almost exclusively as his muse. It was, however, for Nadia Nerina that he created what is often thought of as his masterpiece. In La Fille mal gardée she incarnated Lise, a charming young French farm girl who contrives to marry her boyfriend against the wishes of her dragon mother.

Now one of the most popular three-act ballets in the world — taken up by the Bolshoi in Moscow, Paris Opera Ballet and American Ballet Theatre, among many other companies — La Fille mal gardée owes its success to Nadia Nerina's charm, speed, physical daring and high, floating jump. Lise's choreography is full of darting steps and innovative balances that challenge ballerinas to this day, and also contains a daring "bum lift", in which the ballerina sits high on her partner's outstretched hand.

Nadia Nerina had developed a taste for acrobatic lifts when she was the first Royal Ballet star to be invited to perform in both Moscow's Bolshoi and Leningrad's Kirov in 1960. Her combination of brilliance with clear, yet soft, classical style was much admired by Russia's best. When she returned to Leningrad in 1973 to watch a gala for their star ballerina Natalia Dudinskaya, the audience recognised her in her seat and gave her a spontaneous ovation.

Nadia Nerina was born Nadine Judd on October 21 1927 in Bloemfontein, South Africa. Her mother died when she was young, and the girl took ballet lessons from two teachers with connections to Anna Pavlova and Marie Rambert. Determined to join the Ballet Rambert in London, at the age of 17 she took the boat from Cape Town, like several other teenage South African dancers, among them John Cranko, who would become an important choreographer.

After briefly attending the Rambert and Sadler's Wells schools, she went to Paris to improve her technique with the former Imperial ballerina Olga Preobrazhenska. On returning to Britain she joined first the Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet, and then, in 1947,

the Covent Garden company, renaming herself after the nerine, a South African flower.

At this time the Sadler's Wells Ballet was led by Fonteyn, who was at the peak of her powers, and it was about to make the historic tour to New York that was to establish it in the eyes of many as the greatest company in the world. It was full of exceptional young ballerinas, of whom Nadia Nerina was the outstanding virtuoso. The American critic Edwin Denby remarked sorrowfully how poor his country's ballet looked by comparison with British ballet, which had such "luxuries" in it as Nerina.

Although Nadia Nerina's principal quality was her technical superiority, which she honed by working harder than anyone else, she also had a sunny, sexy personality — it was noted that she could not walk down a street without men whistling at her.

This characteristic struck Ashton early on when he created his first full-length ballet, Cinderella, in 1948. Although the star was Moira Shearer, Nadia Nerina had a luscious, bursting solo embodying the season of spring. In 1953, when Ashton celebrated the opulent array of ballerinas at the Royal Ballet with Birthday Offering for seven star ballerinas, Nadia Nerina's section exploited her high, soaring jump.

Kenneth MacMillan tried to tap a darker side in Nerina in his first ballet, Noctambules,

1956 — a sinister tale of a hypnotist, in which he cast her as a Faded Beauty in a black veil manipulated innovatively by four suitors. Robert Helpmann would later create a more melodramatic vehicle for her in Elektra (1963).

Nadia Nerina was, however, more suited to lively roles and classical brilliance, performing memorably in the leading roles of The Sleeping Beauty, Coppelia, The Firebird and Les Sylphides, usually partnered by the equally bravura David Blair. She also made strong impressions in Balanchine's Serenade and Ballet Imperial.

In 1952 the critic Richard Buckle had declared that, while Nerina gave great pleasure with her dancing, she would never be moving; but almost a decade later he changed his mind, writing that "with the strength of her fine feet and legs, her delirious extensions and… a gift she has for conveying rapture" Nerina was at the height of her powers and "should be seen at least once a week".

In 1960 Ashton enshrined these qualities in the effervescent young Lise of La Fille mal gardée, in which Nadia Nerina's mesmerising performance with her partner David Blair was filmed by the BBC. Later that year Nerina was invited to Moscow and Leningrad, where she was hailed in straight comparison with the Soviet Union's best, such as Plisetskaya.

Nureyev's defection in 1961, however, would derail Nerina's progress, diverting the Royal Ballet's focus on to him and to Fonteyn, whose expected retirement did not occur.

The major event of the 1962 season was expected to be the Covent Garden debut of the great Danish dancer Erik Bruhn, partnering Nerina in Swan Lake, The Sleeping Beauty and Giselle. But the late scheduling of the first pairing of Fonteyn with Nureyev, also in Giselle, though expected by many to be little more than a publicity stunt for a veteran ballerina, eclipsed the Bruhn-Nerina event. Bruhn, by then in an intense relationship with the younger Nureyev, felt depressed and overshadowed, and when Nureyev came into the studio to watch him rehearsing, Nerina angrily ordered the Russian out.

Despite their prickly relationship, Nureyev respected Nadia Nerina enough to choose her as his ballerina for televised performances at Covent Garden and the London Palladium. He also took advice from her husband, the financier Charles Gordon, which enabled him to become very rich.

In 1965, when Ashton had become Royal Ballet's director, Nerina asked to become a "guest artist" to enable her to pursue other invitations, including the creation of a major role at Western Theatre Ballet, Peter Darrell's Home, about a young woman in an asylum. The next year she gave an interview to Queen magazine in which she aired her frustrations at "the muddle" under Ashton at Covent Garden. Yet it was notable that the generous Nerina never blamed Fonteyn for her dominance, remaining an affectionate friend, even if she and her husband remained ambivalent about Nureyev.

She made guest appearances with the Royal Ballet until 1968, performing La Fille mal gardée and Sylvia, and was a popular star in ballet galas, usually giving her fee to dancers' benevolent funds. She retired in 1969, and became a patron of the Cecchetti Society, which preserved the Italian teaching system on which British ballet style was founded.

Nadia Nerina moved with her husband to Monte Carlo and then to southern France, where she lived until her death. There were no children, and her husband, whom she married in 1956, survives her.

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