Eva Evdokimova

Eva Evdokimova, who died in New York on April 2 of cancer aged 60, made an unusually brilliant international career despite belonging to none of the great companies of world ballet.

10 April 2009 • 4:49pm

Shy, tall and graceful, she was Rudolf Nureyev's favourite partner in the latter part of his career, and he made her a star attraction at London Festival Ballet in the 1970s, where he was a regular visitor.

Although her remarkably cosmopolitan background and training – she was half-American, half-Bulgarian, and trained in London, Copenhagen and Leningrad – made her an outsider in the major companies, she was the first American to win, in 1970, the gold medal at the Varna international competition; the first foreign female to be invited to join the Royal Danish Ballet; and went on to become the first American ballerina to be invited to dance at the Kirov.

Her versatility also enabled her to move easily between classical companies undergoing revitalisation, and her repertoire of some 120 roles covered 170 years of choreography.

Eva Evdokimova was considered exceptional for her ethereal delicacy in the early Romantic ballets, La Sylphide and Giselle, yet she was also effective in the strident modern dance-drama Miss Julie of Birgit Cullberg, the Swedish choreographer, and was acclaimed at London Festival Ballet as the heroine of John Cranko's Onegin.

She once said that her multi-school training had given her quick, clean technique from the Royal Ballet, lightness and vitality from the Danish ballet, and legato elegance from the Russian school. The variety had come naturally to her: "Travelling has been a part of my career from the beginning. I lead a sort of gypsy life."

Born in Geneva on December 1 1948, Eva Evdokimova was the only daughter of a Bulgarian refugee journalist and an American UN employee. As a child in Munich she joined the Children's Ballet of the Bavarian State Opera, and when her parents separated she moved to London to the Royal Ballet School. For the next 15 years her assertive mother, known widely as a "typical ballet mother", ran her daughter's career. While studying ballet Eva also took piano and clarinet lessons at the Guildhall School of Music.

Inspired by visits to London by the Kirov and Bolshoi, Eva determined to study Russian style and joined the Royal Danish Ballet, which the acclaimed Russian teacher Vera Volkova and the dynamic new artistic director Flemming Flindt were revitalising. After three years she moved to another resurgent company, West Berlin's Deutsche Oper Ballet, which was making waves under its then director, Kenneth MacMillan. Although MacMillan returned to London soon afterwards as director of the Royal Ballet, Evdokimova became internationally known when she won the 1970 gold medal at the Varna ballet competition, and in 1976 she was invited to perform with the Kirov in Leningrad.

In Berlin she built a formidable reputation and repertoire, from romantic ballet to modern "leotard" ballets by Glen Tetley. She became prima ballerina in 1973, and remained the resident star until 1985, when she became its permanent guest artist.

It was her adaptability that drew Nureyev in the 1970s, after his partnership with Margot Fonteyn ended. During their 15-year partnership, she said, she danced in almost every city in the world with him. She was his regular ballerina on his Nureyev and Friends tours at the London Coliseum and other world stages. Their trips to the United States had mixed reviews – although her Sylphide and Giselle were found remarkable,

she was thought less suited to the more extrovert bravura heroines of Don Quixote and The Sleeping Beauty.

In 1980 she took a leading role in a new full-length ballet on Dostoevsky's Idiot created by the Kirov defector Valery Panov. Soon afterwards she was the subject of a biography which confirmed her stature in the dance world.

In the 1980s Eva Evdokimova forged another notable partnership, this time with her former Danish colleague Peter Schaufuss, by then director of the London Festival Ballet, who kept her busily engaged in London opposite him in La Sylphide, Giselle and other productions.

She won a devoted public for her Swanilda, the mischievous heroine of Coppelia, and

as Nureyev's exhaustingly active Juliet in his version of Romeo and Juliet. She also danced as a guest star with American Ballet Theatre, National Ballet of Canada and Munich Ballet.

By the late 1980s, when she was approaching 40, she was described by her American husband and manager, Michael Gregori, as the world's highest-paid ballerina, allegedly performing 150 times a year. In 1990, her final official performance in Berlin was received with 67 curtain calls and a 40-minute standing ovation.

She returned to the New York stage in 2002 to dance a solo created for her by Henning Rübsam, set to two Schubert songs. That year she was appointed as balletmistress to Boston Ballet, a position terminated only a year later due to the company's financial woes.

Little official film exists of Evdokimova's dancing, apart from a compilation called The Romantic Era and a 1980 teaching video by the celebrated teacher Maria Fay, in which Evdokimova, her former pupil, is the celebrity demonstrator. Excerpts of her La Sylphide and Giselle find a wide audience online.

After 1990 Eva Evdokimova became a busy judge of international ballet competitions and a sought-after guest teacher in America, notably at the Dance Theatre of Harlem School. "Dancers need to absorb all forms of art, literature, and history – everything that will develop them as complete artists," she said. "Many dancers focus only on the narrow aspects of gaining a brilliant technique. They need to delve under the surface."

Eva Evdokimova's husband survives her.