Frederic Franklin

Frederic Franklin, who has died aged 98, was a Liverpool boy who rose to partner the starriest ballerinas of ballet's golden age, outlived them all and – thanks to his exceptional memory – became a priceless historical link to the Ballets Russes period.

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Exuberant by nature, he was described by the American choreographer Agnes de Mille as "strong as a mustang, as sudden, as direct and as inexhaustible". She cast him as the Champion Roper in her pioneering cowboy ballet Rodeo, and he was a favourite leading man too in creations of the 1940s by Léonide Massine and George Balanchine.

His remarkably eclectic career, performing with the Ballet Russe companies in America and Europe, gave him access to a very large repertory, which he remembered in astonishing detail. As a result he was a pivotal resource for biographers, stagers and historians of the ballet explosion of the early 20th century, particularly in America.

He was also a vivid raconteur of the early days of British dance. He recalled his first touring job, at the age of 18, on a northern England circuit: "We used to follow a comedian called Billy Bennett, who was billed 'Almost A Gentleman' and told lewd stories. I would stand in the wings, terrified. At the weekends the audience was always drunk. 'Look at him!' they'd shout. 'Here, you've got your knickers on, mate!' I'd be doing my big jetés around the stage — oh, terrified. We used to dread it. They'd never seen ballet before, let alone a man in tights... We were followed by a lady snake charmer."

Thanks to his outstanding musicality, dramatic personality and athletic deftness, Franklin's career rapidly improved; he would go on to become a favourite partner of the era's greatest ballerinas, such as Alicia Markova and Alexandra Danilova.

Fred Franklin (he would rename himself Frederic) was born on June 13 1914 in Liverpool, the eldest of three children of Mabel and Fred Franklin, a refreshments caterer.

His imagination was fired when his parents bought a Victrola gramophone, and he asked to take dancing lessons, turning up to his first class aged six with a pair of girls' pointe shoes. He found himself the only boy in his class at Shelagh Elliott-Clarke's dance school — one of the first such institutions in the country — but disarmed potential bullies at his normal school by showing off medals won at dance competitions.

His mother took him to the Liverpool Empire to see Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and Anna Pavlova, and at 17 he answered an advertisement in Variety that read: "Wanted: A Boy". It turned out to be for a tap-dancing troupe, the Jackson Boys, hired for a Josephine Baker revue at the Casino de Paris .

Franklin had an uncanny ability to pick up steps. After showing himself an exceptional tap-dancer, he became a more than competent ballet dancer, able to perform with virtually no rehearsal. He was also a useful standby pianist, playing entirely by ear.

Having danced with Josephine Baker's pet leopard, he moved back to England to dance with elephants and Peggy Ashcroft in a revue, The Golden Toy, at the London Coliseum. He got his longed-for ballet break when he was hired by Markova, Britain's prodigious young star, as she launched her own touring company with Anton Dolin in 1935 . Franklin recalled: "I would say to her, 'We're the pioneers of ballet, like the early settlers. We're the covered wagons.'"

In 1938 Massine signed him up for his Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, and cast him in his hugely popular Gaîeté Parisienne as the romantic Baron who wins the favours of the flighty Glove-seller, played by Alexandra Danilova.

Massine also gave Franklin leading roles alongside Markova in his new Seventh Symphony (to Beethoven) and Le rouge et le noir (which had costumes by Henri Matisse); but it was for Franklin's tap-dancing bravura that Agnes de Mille cast him alongside herself as the Champion Roper in her iconoclastic cowboy ballet Rodeo (1942).

Frederick Ashton made Franklin the romantic lead in his ballet for the Ballet Russe, Devil's Holiday, intended to premiere in London in 1939 but, because of the outbreak of war, given an unsatisfactory opening in New York instead (from which the ballet's reputation could not recover).

At Balanchine's instigation, Franklin became the Ballet Russe's ballet master in 1944 as well as principal dancer. Danilova looked at him warily and said: "So, young man, you are going to be my boss." But their dancing partnership endured, with a global tour in the mid-Fifties.

In 1952 Franklin broke away from his usual light-hearted roles to score a critical success as Stanley Kowalski in Valerie Bettis's ballet version of A Streetcar Named Desire, with

Mia Slavenska as Blanche Dubois.

His undying popularity with the colourful refugee ballerinas of the post-Diaghilev decades was recorded in the 2006 documentary Ballets Russes, in which he and other almost equally aged legends of dance recalled their picturesque lives on the road.

After quitting leading roles, Franklin continued to perform character roles while moving into management, as director or choreographer for several American companies — Washington DC Ballet, Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, Cincinnati Ballet, Tulsa Ballet and Dance Theatre of Harlem (for which he staged an acclaimed Creole Giselle in 1984, transplanting the tragedy to a sugar plantation in Louisiana).

Remarkably, Franklin joined American Ballet Theatre at the age of 80, performing

veteran character roles such as the Tutor in Swan Lake — which he performed on ABT's London tour in 2009 aged 94.

He was appointed CBE in 2004, and in 2011 won a Bessie Award for Lifetime Achievement, America's highest cultural accolade.

He is survived by his partner of 48 years, William Ausman.

Frederic Franklin, born June 13 1914, died May 4 2013

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