David Howard

David Howard, who has died aged 76, was one of the world's great ballet teachers, sought out by leading artists including Sylvie Guillem, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Natalia Makarova and Tamara Rojo; he also became an inspiring coach at the Royal Ballet.

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Howard was a gentle, sociable man much loved for his awareness of anatomy and psychology in helping dancers to become more confident — and stronger — athletes. Yet he was sympathetically blunt about the demands of the art. A dancer, he pointed out, had to be a sprinter, a hurdler, a high-jumper, a long-jumper and a long-distance

runner, as well as look beautiful, fit the current "look", and be prepared to work without rest for very little money.

In an interview with The Daily Telegraph in 2003 he said that dancers were "bad" at two things: understanding how they changed physically over time; and at letting go of their own fixed ideas of what was beautiful. Yet despite his own focus on strength, he also cautioned that rigorous development of athletic technique was coming at a cost, warning that dance had begun to suffer from a diminution of artistry. Believing that ballet was in a slump, he blamed children's increasingly sedentary lifestyles. Cycling, skipping and walking to school all improved youngsters' co-ordination , he argued, and

could be developed into artistry and musical expressiveness in all kinds of performing.

According to Tamara Rojo, who as a Royal Ballet ballerina flew to New York to spend holidays studying with him, Howard's classes had a unique coherence, as he had such expert understanding of dancers' bodies and worked with such care towards their goals. The faith that such stars put in Howard was due in part to his own experience as a dancer. Last year he described himself as an "upstart who ended up a part of the American dream".

David Howard Edwards was born in London on June 14 1937. He later dropped the Edwards for Equity reasons. The only child of Walter and Dorothy, he went to the Cone Ripman School, where at 15 he won the Royal Academy of Dance's top prize, the Adeline Genée Award. Leaving school at 16, he joined the troupe at the London Palladium, where he performed with stars such as Marlene Dietrich, Julie Andrews and Howard Keel.

The Royal Ballet's founder and director Ninette de Valois wrote to his parents protesting that no winner of the Genée Award should go into commercial theatre, and she invited him instead in January 1957 to join the Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet. There he spent seven years, rising to soloist. He danced supporting roles in classics as well as the works of Frederick Ashton and de Valois herself, broadening his experience in a range of different dancing styles. Later, all his students remarked on how encyclopedic was his knowledge and understanding of every form of dance.

Howard joined the National Ballet of Canada in 1963, but before long returned to London and to musical theatre, performing in Bob Fosse's Little Me. A back injury led to his premature retirement and he began part-time teaching while retraining as a hairdresser. However, he found that standing to cut hair was just as bad for his back as dancing, and in 1966 he answered a call by the American oil heiress and ballet patron

Rebekah Harkness for apprentice teachers for her new Harkness Ballet School, in New York.

Attracted to new ideas about kinaesthetic teaching – based broadly on learning by doing, rather than by watching or being told – David Howard rapidly became known for his independent-minded insights. He proposed that dancers should rely less on their mirror image and understand inside themselves what their best dancing felt like, infusing it with their instinctive musicality. "I think syllabus work is terrible," he once said, arguing that it resulted in, formulaic, identikit dancers. "It's so set, it produces cookie cutters."

He also used unorthodox methods to help dancers acquire strength and flexibility, such as weights and floor exercises. He insisted on good music and pushed dancers to understand how to use rhythm expressively, rather than simply to count beats.

He opened his David Howard Dance Center in New York in 1977, and it became the haunt of every ballet star in New York. Nureyev, Baryshnikov, Makarova and America's great ballerinas Gelsey Kirkland and Cynthia Harvey were among his constant students. In 1995 he closed the centre and became a freelance teacher at ballet companies worldwide, among them the Royal Ballet; American Ballet Theatre; San

Francisco Ballet; Joffrey Ballet; and the National Ballet of Canada.

Howard was equally sought out by dance teachers seeking to emulate his success, and he created some 125 teaching CDs and DVDs. He was also an authority on the development of the pointe shoe, and was said to have saved several ballerinas' careers, including that of the Royal Ballet's Alina Cojocaru, by the advances he steered in pointe shoe manufacture.

He received, in 1983, the Dance Master of America Award, and until suffering a stroke a few months ago was teaching at several New York dance studios.

David Howard, born June 14 1937, died August 11 2013

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