



Jean Babilée - obituary

Jean Babilée was an explosive star of post-war European ballet who risked life and limb staging his character's suicide

03 February 2014 • 7:31pm



Jean Babilée, who has died aged 90, survived as a Jew in Occupied France to become the most exciting male ballet star of post-war Europe, breaking the mould of classical princes with his explosive athleticism and contemporary stage persona.

He epitomised in his performances the urgency and anarchy of the battered generation of young men who had experienced war and faced death – dramatic qualities that also made him a prominent actor with France's leading New Wave cinéastes.

Babilée had many sides to him – having evaded the Nazis he joined the Maquis and spent three years as a Resistance guerrilla in the forests of Touraine, gaining a reputation as a sniper. He danced till he was 80 and rode a motorcycle until he was 85, often with his cat riding pillion.

To the world of ballet he became legendary above all as the original protagonist of a vivid ballet-drama of 1946, Roland Petit's *Le Jeune homme et la mort*, which has drawn

the world's greatest male dancers to it ever since. Wearing dungarees rather than a princely jerkin, Babilée played a moody young painter who is visited in his garret by a mysterious woman, and seduced by her into hanging himself.

Le Jeune homme et la mort had an immediacy of emotion and sexuality that the post-war public responded to. Petit's choreography exploited the dancer's ferocious power in the air in some extraordinary, reckless-looking leaps. The young Frenchman had a contemporary magnetism that later superstars such as Nureyev and Baryshnikov strove to emulate when they took on the role.

In the first-night enactment of the suicide, which was somewhat experimentally staged, Babilée had to find the strength to dangle on the noose for a full minute in public view. Later he confessed that it terrified him, as he felt himself choking. The death position and scenery were then adapted for a safer outcome. He performed the ballet some 200 times, he believed, over the next four decades.

Jean Babilée was born Jean Gutmann, the son of Dr René Gutmann, a Jewish eye surgeon, in Paris on February 2 1923. His father was also a ballet enthusiast, thanks to Diaghilev's Ballets Russes activities in Paris. Jean entered the Paris Opera Ballet school at 13, but amid a rising anti-Jewish mood his parents sent him for safety to Monte Carlo, a centre for displaced Ballets Russes dancers.

By the age of 16 he was already the leading attraction at performances staged in the Monte Carlo Casino by his teacher Marika Besobrasova, and he made his professional debut in her company in Cannes in 1940, where he was acclaimed as "sensational".

In 1942 Babilée was invited to join the Paris Opera Ballet, but he was lucky just to avoid the mass Nazi round-up on July 16 of 13,152 Jews, who were penned in the Vélodrome d'Hiver before being sent to Auschwitz for extermination. After three years in the Resistance, Babilée returned to the Paris Opera Ballet in 1945, where he was acclaimed as a brilliant Bluebird in the classical *The Sleeping Beauty* thanks to his matchlessly high and light jump.

Feeling constricted, however, in 1946 he joined his peers, the choreographer Roland Petit and the unorthodox ballerina Renée Jeanmaire (later Zizi Jeanmaire), in Petit's mould-breaking new Ballets des Champs-Élysées. Within three years this company of dynamic young ballet individualists had built an electric reputation in Europe.

Petit proved a remarkable choreographer, and with his creation for Babilée, *Le Jeune homme et la mort*, followed by his radical new *Carmen* (1949) for Jeanmaire, all three forged global reputations. Babilée's status as the most extraordinary male dancer in post-war ballet was challenged only by the defection 15 years later of the Soviet dancer Rudolf Nureyev.

Compact, with a striking aquiline face, Babilée did not look like a traditional ballet prince – he said he found himself ugly. But he had a quicksilver athletic vivacity and an enigmatic quality that viewers found extraordinary: the American critic Arlene Croce wrote of him that he had “a reposeful violence ... In the midst of calm he appears ready to explode.”

He was the continual focus of France’s leading modern choreographers and more interesting film-makers: new ballets made for him included Janine Charrat’s *Jeu de cartes* (1945), David Lichine’s *Oedipe et le Sphinx* (1948) – in which Babilée partnered Leslie Caron – and Léonide Massine’s *Mario e il mago* (1958), a collaboration with film director Luchino Visconti.

When the Petit company visited London in the late 1940s Babilée’s performances stunned the young ballet student Kenneth MacMillan, who would later become Britain’s leading dramatic choreographer. “He was the first man I saw really jump high,” said MacMillan – the Frenchman’s high-sprung spins and swift footbeats set a new standard for male athletic technique.

Much in demand, Babilée moved between companies in an unorthodox career driven by creative opportunity. He rejoined the Paris Opera Ballet briefly in 1953, then, discouraged by the repertoire, moved on with Petit’s Ballets de Paris, before launching his own troupe, Les Ballets Jean Babilée, from 1955 to 1959. He created some ballets, including *L’Amour et son amour* and *Till Eulenspiegel*, for Petit’s Champs-Élysées Ballets in the late 1940s, and briefly directed the Ballet du Rhin, Strasbourg in 1972-3. In his later years Maurice Béjart created a gym-based ballet, *Life*, for him, which he reprised aged 73; his last dance performance was in 2003, aged 80 in Josef Nadj’s *There is no heaven*.

Possessing a deep, velvety voice as well as a photogenic face (he looked, said Croce, like “a slightly creased Cocteau drawing”), Babilée combined dancing with an acclaimed move into theatre and New Wave cinema. He had major roles in Michel Drach’s *Amélie* (1961), Georges Franju’s 1961 *Pleins feux sur l’assassin* and Jacques Rivette’s 1976 *Duelle (une quarantaine)*. He also acted on stage for Peter Brook in Jean Genet’s *Le Balcon*.

His sister Sarah Clair produced a biography, *Jean Babilée, ou la danse buissonnière* (the adjective means “truant”), in 1995, and in 2000 a documentary, *Le Mystère Babilée*, was made by Patrick Bensard.

Jean Babilée, who died in Paris four days short of his 91st birthday, was appointed a

Commander of France's Ordre des Arts et Lettres, an Officer of the Order of Merit and Chevalier of the Légion d'honneur.

He married, first, the ballerina Nathalie Philippart, his co-star in Petit's *Le Jeune homme et la mort*, with whom he had a daughter. In 2000 he married the film-maker and choreographer Zapo, who survives him.

Jean Babilée, born February 2 1923, died January 30 2014



More stories

More from The Telegraph
