Ivan Nagy - obituary

Ivan Nagy was one of the great 'danseurs nobles', who was adored by Margot Fonteyn and discovered Carlos Acosta

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Ivan Nagy, who has died aged 70, was one of the great ballet danseurs nobles, and was adored by ballerinas such as Margot Fonteyn and Natalia Makarova.

He was also artistic director of English National Ballet in the early 1990s, and despite a turbulent relationship with its board, was responsible for talent-spotting the young

Carlos Acosta and launching his stellar British ballet career.

At ENB, the elegant, self-effacing Nagy was overshadowed by his coming between two more publicly assertive directors, Peter Schaufuss and Derek Deane — but all three were unceremoniously ousted from office, none of them able to cope with the mismatch between their artistic ambitions and the company's mission to provide crowd-pleasing ballet.

Nagy inherited a large deficit run up by Schaufuss, who had driven up ENB's creative reputation at risk to the box office. In the boardroom storms that resulted, a new

chairman, Lady (Pamela) Harlech, summarily dismissed Schaufuss. Nagy, then director of Cincinnati Ballet, was expected to calm the waters .

He brought in a sugary new Nutcracker production by Ben Stevenson, which satisfied the ENB board's demand for a reliably popular Christmas treat; but other repertoire choices reflected his American career rather than British box office taste, and did not impress either public or critics.

Frustrated by Pamela Harlech's demand that he stick more closely to familiar classics, Nagy told the board in January 1993 that, despite making inroads on the deficit, he did not want to renew his contract in September: "I said if they want a marionette, go to a marionette shop and buy one. I'm not a marionette." He was ordered to leave at once without completing his final summer. Five ENB directors were forced out over a dozen years; though they did not always look kindly on the organisation, they remained friendly with one another.

Ivan Nagy and Natalia Makarova in 1978 (TIME LIFE/GETTY)

Ivan Nagy was born on April 23 1943 in Debrecen, Hungary, and studied at the Budapest State Ballet Institute. Aged 17 he joined the Budapest State Opera company, and like many Eastern bloc dancers gained the chance to travel by winning a medal at the international Varna competition in Bulgaria. A judge was the Washington National Ballet director, the influential Englishman Frederic Franklin, who invited Nagy to be a guest artist. This brought him on a tour to London, where he met a London Festival Ballet dancer, Marilyn Burr, whom he would later marry.

On tour in 1966, Nagy seized the chance to seek political asylum in the United States. After brief spells at the Washington Ballet and New York City Ballet, he spent 10 years as a principal at New York's more classical American Ballet Theatre. There he swiftly built an exceptional reputation . The leading American critic Arlene Croce wrote: "Nagy has a way of filling a role superlatively without actually doing the steps." He was "the company's best actor in classical roles", as well as Natalia Makarova's best partner, she judged, able to convey a special weightlessness to any ballerina when he lifted her.

Even after the arrival of the newly defected Soviet superstar Mikhail Baryshnikov, many prima ballerinas preferred performing with the courteous Hungarian. Nagy described his own approach as "being a little in love with my partners... You have to give up some of yourself."

When Margot Fonteyn invited him to be her partner on a seven-week Australian tour, he insisted on addressing her as "my lady". She responded by calling him "Sir" — even though he told her that in Hungarian the word meant "pubic hair".

The Russian star Natalia Makarova called him "my Prince Charming", adding: "[He] patiently tolerated the whims I tend to inflict on those close to me... His gallantry was a moral support to me."

Nagy also made a memorably romantic partnership with the luminous young American ballerina Gelsey Kirkland in Kenneth MacMillan's Romeo and Juliet and in Antony Tudor's The Leaves are Fading; in recent years the two reunited to coach top students at Kirkland's academy in New York.

When he decided to retire from dancing aged 35, a stellar queue of prima ballerinas mourned that he was leaving the stage much too early. Nagy, however, insisted: "I've peaked. I could never bear to watch myself going downhill."

After three years' teaching and consulting, Nagy served as artistic director of Chile's Santiago Ballet (1982-86) and Cincinnati Ballet (1986-90) before being appointed English National Ballet's director in 1990. His first priority was to hire new leading dancers, since several ENB stars had quit with Schaufuss.

Nagy was a productive shopper for young talent at ballet competitions, hiring a roster of superb ENB artists, including not only the teenaged Acosta but also his Cuban compatriot José Manuel Carreño and the young Estonian pair Thomas Edur and Agnes Oaks. While this policy at an "English National" ballet company was initially controversial, Nagy's finds became much-loved resident stars of the British ballet scene in the 1990s and 2000s.

He also won ballet-lovers' thanks for bringing to British stages rare visitors such as the exceptional ballerinas Trinidad Sevillano, Ludmila Semenyaka and Marcia Haydée. But his eye for dancers was superior to his eye for repertoire.

After leaving ENB, Nagy returned to Chile to run the Santiago Ballet briefly. A cosmopolitan man, at one stage he kept four homes: in Santiago, Cincinnati, Majorca and London.

He retired to Spain 15 years ago, but had recently been coaching at the Budapest Opera, where he was working when he died. He is survived by his wife and their two daughters.

Ivan Nagy, born April 23 1943, died February 22 2014

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