Lindsay Kemp, dancer and choreographer who worked with David Bowie and Kate Bush – obituary

Telegraph Obituaries

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Lindsay Kemp as Salome at Toronto Workshop Productions, 1978 Credit: Reg Innell/Toronto Star/Getty

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Lindsay Kemp, the dancer, choreographer, mime, actor and theatrical maverick, who has died aged 80, was known for a flamboyant excess in his shows that inspired and launched some of the great British glam rock

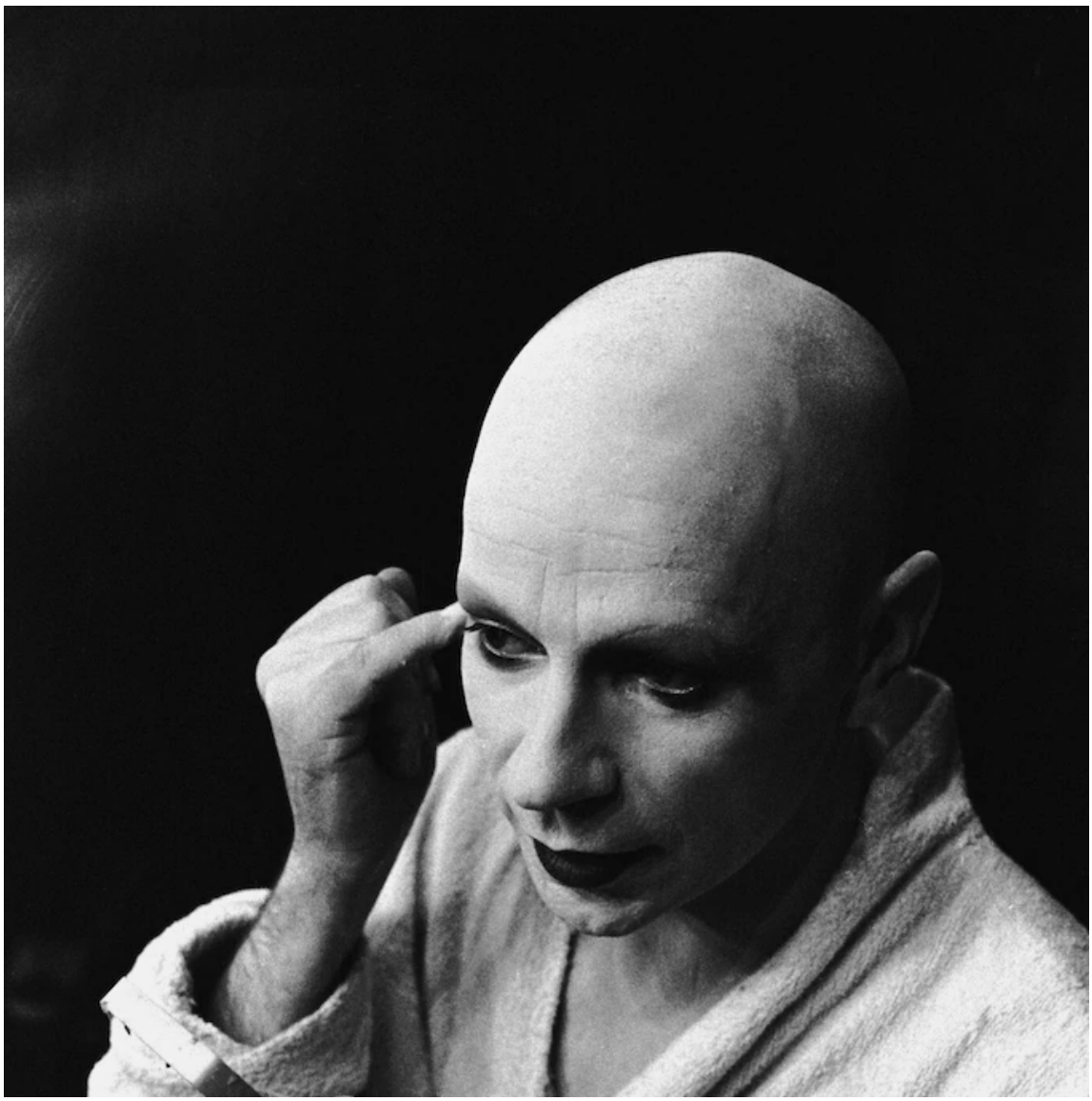
careers, notably those of David Bowie and Kate Bush.

“I led them up the path of craziness,” Kemp said of his famous pupils. Bowie owed some of the creation of his groundbreaking Ziggy Stardust persona to Kemp, then his lover and mentor, and Kate Bush called him “astonishingly inspirational”, Kemp having given her dance lessons when no other school would accept her.

Kemp’s own remarkable stage persona was that of a white-faced transsexual Pierrot, flayed by life, laughing and crying in fantastical dream episodes,

usually with an erotic undertow. While the rock world and independent film makers such as Derek Jarman understood the potential of his rococo visual tastes, for many dance and theatre critics his choreographic style was more gimmicky than seriously interesting.

An instinctive collaborator rather than a sole creator (one critic said he was a man of many talents, few of them his own), Kemp made two powerful and controversial stage works in the 1970s, typically combining rudeness and poetry.



Lindsay Kemp in his dressing room during a run of Flowers at the Bush Theatre, London, 1974: the play was a florid celebration of homosexuality and transvestism Credit: Debi Doss/Hulton Archive/Getty

Flowers, A Pantomime for Jean Genet was a florid celebration of homosexuality and transvestism, created with "poor theatre" values – raw, violent and shocking – in which Kemp played a drag queen, Divine, in a salon of criminals, whores and angels.

Drawing on Genet's novel Our Lady of the Flowers, it premiered in Edinburgh in 1970 with a cast including young men recruited from Princes Street Gardens, and surfed on a wave of notoriety to London and New York stages in 1974. "The Broadway theatre has not previously seen such realistic simulations of masturbation and sodomy," commented an American critic. This did not deter some members of the public from making multiple visits.

Three years later Kemp co-created Cruel Garden, a rich, visionary contemporary dance-theatre production for Ballet Rambert with its dancer, Christopher Bruce, inspired by another homosexual writer, Federico Garcia Lorca, and set in an imaginary bull ring.

Combining the strengths of Kemp's ideas and Bruce's choreography, this was a major hit, and held up well in revivals 20 years later. But Kemp could

not find public funding for his own company, and he moved first to Barcelona, then to Livorno, where he settled and was lionised.

Lindsay Kemp with boa constrictor as he plays the title role in Salome at the Roundhouse, London Credit: Frank Barratt/Getty Images

Lindsay Kemp was born in Birkenhead on May 3 1938 to a working-class family and brought up in South Shields, Co Durham. He was 18 months old when his father, a naval electrician, Alfred Norman Kemp, was lost in HMS

Patroclus on November 3 1940, a night when the Germans' most successful U-boat captain, Otto Kretschmer – known as "Silent Otto" – torpedoed three British merchant vessels. Patroclus had gone to rescue survivors from Laurentic.

The infant knew neither his father nor his elder sister, a keen child dancer who died aged five, but whose wardrobe of costumes and shoes he quickly appropriated. His love of performing was encouraged by his mother, Marie (née Gilmour), and he claimed that his first performance stage was the coffins in the nearby undertaker's shop.

Young Lindsay qualified for an assisted place at the Merchant Navy's orphanage at Bearwood House, Wokingham, then known as the Royal Merchant Navy School, and was sent there aged eight. Within its extravagant exterior (Nikolaus Pevsner described the mansion as a "brazen" Victorian monument), the young boy developed his style of self-expression. "I first danced Salomé in the dormitory of my boarding school, naked except for layers of toilet paper," he recalled. He would later dance the role with a live boa constrictor.

Determined on stardom, he left school at 16 and returned north, attending Bradford Art College, where a classmate was David Hockney, who urged him to apply to London dance schools. National Service with the RAF intervened, though Kemp contrived to be invalided out as a "mental case" by proclaiming that he was homosexual and turning up to parade in eye make-up and Indian bangles.

After being rejected by Sadler's Wells Ballet School as unsuitable either physically or temperamentally, he took classes at Marie Rambert's school in Notting Hill Gate. There he met another nonconformist dancer, Jack Birkett, who – despite soon becoming totally blind – would be Kemp's love and longtime partner in his shows, Illuminations, Turquoise Pantomime, Woyzeck, Flowers and Salomé.

“Jack was Judy to my Mr Punch, Harlequin to my Pierrot, Titania to my Puck, Herodias to my Salomé – we were a couple of extravagant young dreamers, always entertainers,” Kemp wrote, on Birkett’s death in 2010.

Kemp with David Bowie in the early 1970s

After studying mime and expressionist movement with Marcel Marceau and Hilde Holger, Kemp offered mime classes at Covent Garden's Dance Centre, attended by "a lot of wannabe rock stars" as he put it. He taught students his own blend of the compressed and purposeful gestures of French and Japanese mime styles, designed to encourage them to unlock their stage presence.

But it was Kemp's bent for spectacular self-expression that struck the 20-year-old David Bowie when he saw him perform in 1967, and the singer instantly joined his classes. Within six months the pair were lovers, and had produced an avant-garde song-theatre show, Pierrot in Turquoise (filmed in 1970 by Scottish Television as The Looking Glass Murders), in which Kemp performed an emotional Pierrot in an extravagant, absurdist staging (with the blind Birkett as his sinister companion Brighella), while Bowie, as "Cloud", sat on a ladder singing his songs.

Soon after, Kemp found Bowie in bed with their female designer, and slashed his wrists. He was saved, and the blood apparently gave a dramatic extra frisson to his Pierrot costume in subsequent shows.

The Pierrot in Turquoise experience would inspire the Ziggy Stardust collaboration between them, which had two spectacular staged performances in the Rainbow theatre in Finsbury Park, London, in 1972 – even Elton John thought it was too camp.

For Bowie, the immersion in a fantasy alter ego that so appealed to Kemp became something of a millstone "My whole personality was affected," said the singer years later. "I really did have doubts about my sanity."

In the vibrant, promiscuous 1970s Kemp became hugely fashionable, enjoying the fruits of lucrative film appearances such as in Ken Russell's Savage Messiah (1972) and Valentino (1977), Anthony Shaffer's cult horror The Wicker Man (1973), Derek Jarman's Sebastiane (1976) and Jubilee (1978), and the Joan Collins vehicle The Stud (1978). "I earned a lot of money, but it went on costumes, scenery and cocaine," he told an interviewer.

He focused on being accepted in dance, but despite making two striking

productions for Ballet Rambert, The Parades Gone By and Cruel Garden, both with Carlos Miranda scores, Kemp was essentially a brilliant, idiosyncratic stylist who needed collaboration with stronger choreographers than himself.

Kemp in characteristic later performing mode

As critical approbation in the dance world eluded him, he had a period of heavy drinking and long bouts of depression, but a second wind came when his former student Kate Bush asked him to perform with her in a film, The Line, the Cross & the Curve, accompanying her 1993 album, The Red Shoes.

In the 1990s Kemp had success in Japan and on the Continent with stage creations such as Onnagata, Cinderella: a Gothic Operetta, Variété and Dreamdances, now playing himself as a shaven-headed guru in huge robes. Occasional tours to London showed British audiences a maverick creator whose undoubted charm was undermined by clichés and repetitiousness. “His sense of kitsch has aged badly,” reported The Daily Telegraph’s critic in 2002.

Still, Lindsay Kemp remained a man of personal modesty and, latterly, of good spirits, returning home to South Shields to perform in 2016. By the end his achievements were respected by big names across all fields of British entertainment.

Cruel Garden was filmed in 1982, two books were published about his company, and a documentary, Lindsay Kemp's Last Dance, was in production when he died. He was unmarried.

Lindsay Kemp, born May 3 1938, died August 24 2018

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