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Dame Margaret Scott, who left Ballet Rambert and became the guiding force in Australia's rapid rise in the world of dance – obituary

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Dame Margaret Scott at the Australian Ballet School in Melbourne in 2004 Credit: The Age/Fairfax Media

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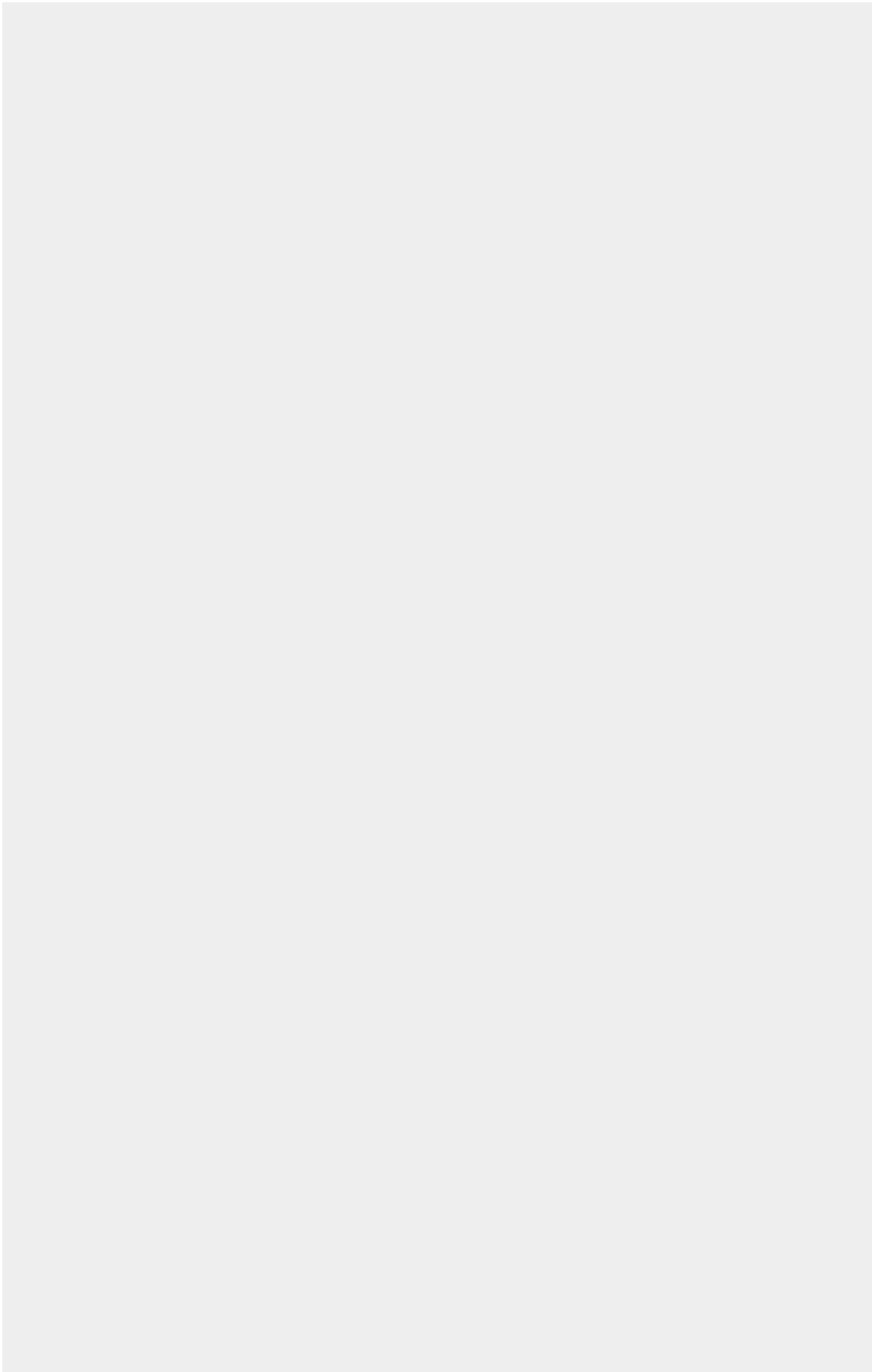
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Dame Margaret Scott, who has died in Australia aged 96, was the formative director of the Australian Ballet School, from whose hands most of the leaders of the continent's extraordinarily rapid ballet success story have emerged.

It was through a fateful combination of an unlucky injury and luck in love that she was diverted from a career as a leading dancer with the Ballet Rambert in London to Australia, where she became a key motivator in the establishment of a ballet scene to rival Britain's in its energy and skill.

For the past 30 years Australian ballet has been led by Margaret Scott's pupils, many enjoying global careers, including choreographers Graeme


Murphy, Ian Spink and Meryl Tankard, Australian Ballet's directors David McAllister and Ross Stretton (who also briefly directed the Royal Ballet), and her successors as head of the Australian Ballet School, Marilyn Rowe and Lisa Pavane (formerly a major ballerina of English National Ballet).



Dame Margaret in The Nutcracker: The Story of Clara in 1992 Credit: Steven Siewert/Fairfax Media via Getty Images

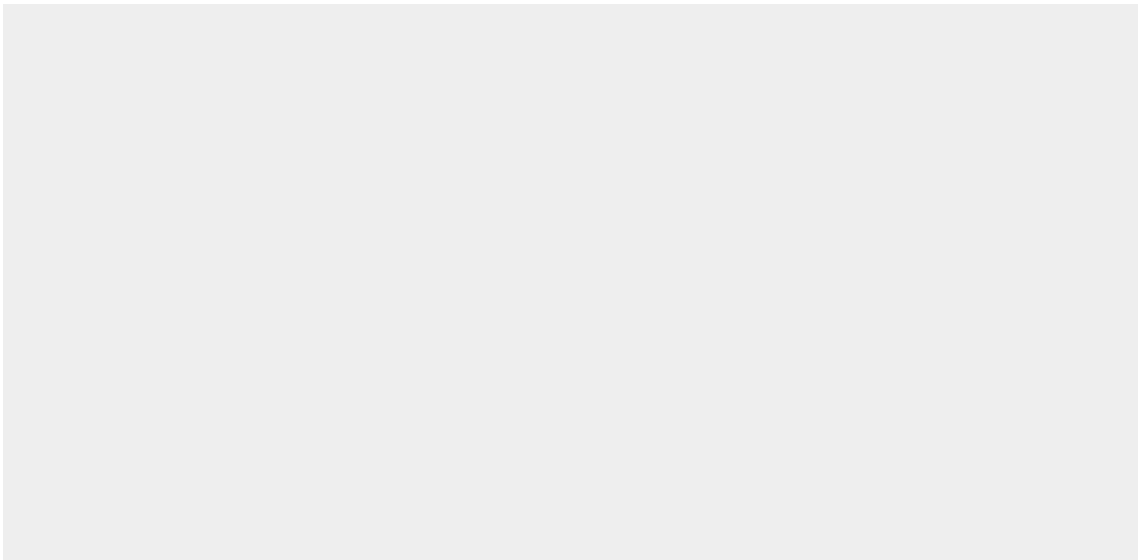
Scott told her 2014 biographer Michelle Potter: "Talent is its own force. You can't make it, you can't fake it, and you can't break it."

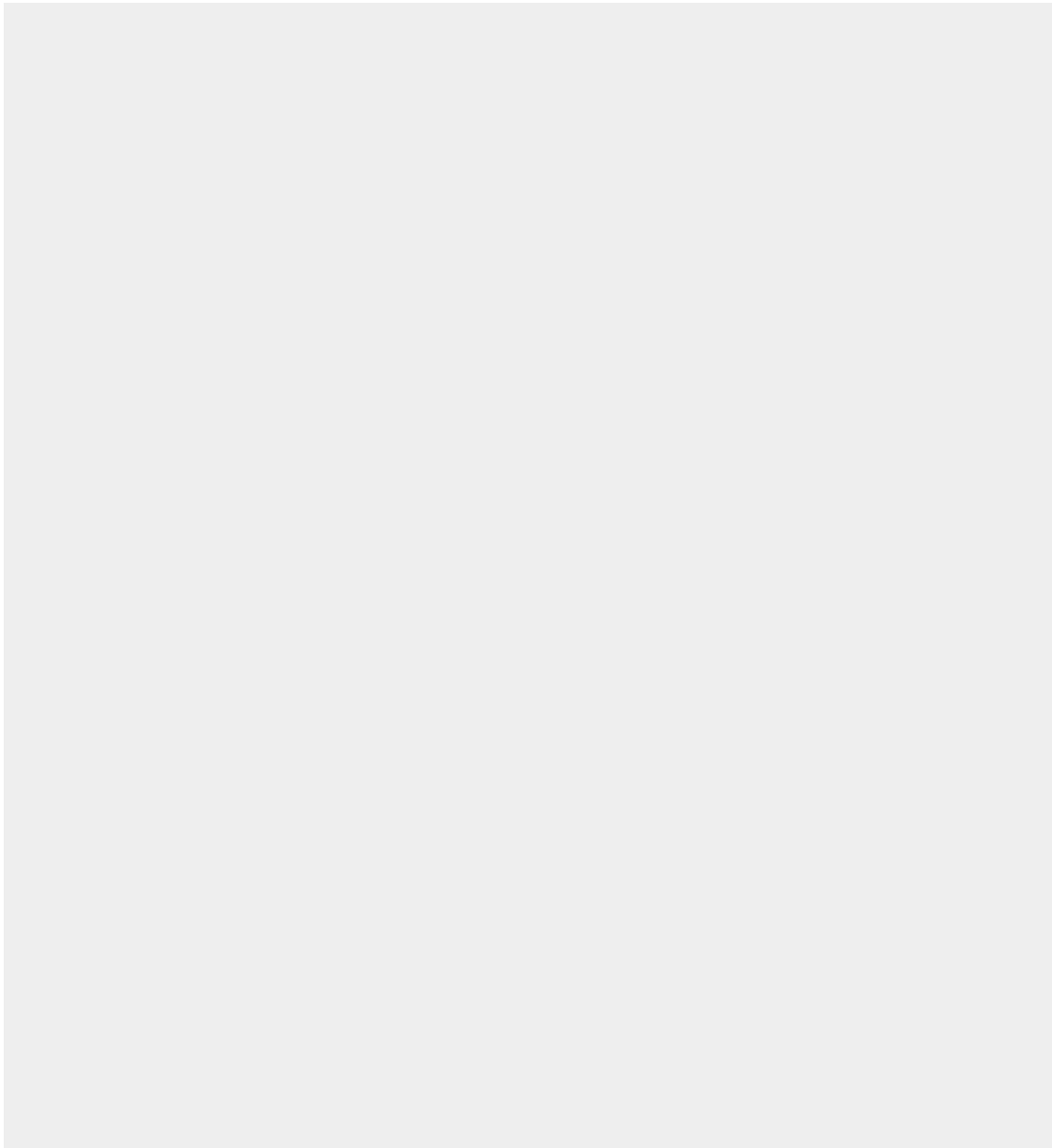
She trenchantly deplored "the aggression of the untalented", and declared that Australia's geographical isolation from the West was not a weakness but its strength. "I think our isolation has kept it pristine ... You don't know how good you are, so you work much harder. You're free from all the clichés and current fashions, so you develop your own thing. I think [Australian ballet style] is free, open, extremely versatile, unique and honest."



Born Catherine Margaret Mary Scott on April 26 1922 in Johannesburg, the youngest of three daughters of John and Marjorie (née Heath-Bagley) Douglas-Scott, she was trained locally in the Royal Academy of Dancing classical syllabus by Ivy Conmee. After Parktown Convent in her home city she went to London at 17 for advanced training at the Sadler's Wells Ballet School, and on the eve of war was hired into the Sadler's Wells Ballet by Ninette de Valois.

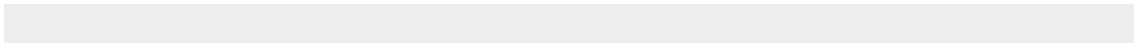
Margaret Scott spent three years touring war-torn Britain in the corps de ballet, but despite periodically performing alongside Margot Fonteyn and Robert Helpmann, the austerity and limited programming frustrated her. Seeking more variety, in 1943 she joined Ballet Rambert, where she danced more contemporary works and rose to principal rank.





Dame Margaret, centre, in *The Nutcracker: The Story of Clara* Credit: Steven Siewert/Fairfax Media via Getty Images

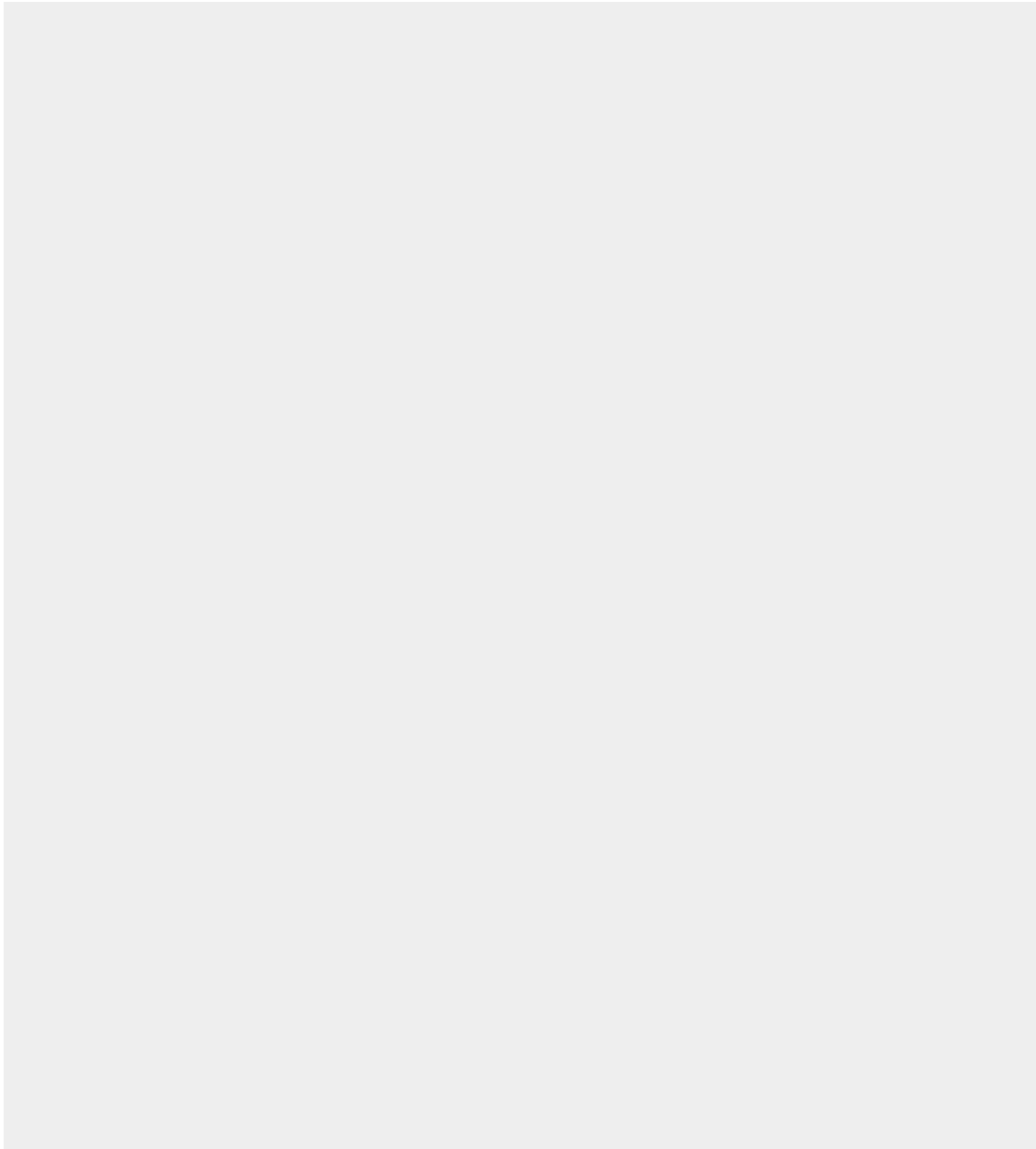
Her life changed overnight on Ballet Rambert's sensationally successful Australian debut tour in 1947. On opening night in Melbourne, the public showered the dancers with so many flowers that Margaret and another ballerina, Sally Gilmour, decided to take them to the Royal Melbourne Hospital the next day to give to patients.



There, Margaret encountered a young Australian scientist, Derek Ashworth Denton, her future husband – later an expert in animal consciousness (he founded the Florey Institute of Neuroscience and Mental Health).

Her private and professional lives were forced together when she was felled by a back injury on Ballet Rambert's 1949 tour of Australia. Her London career was temporarily over but her relationship with Denton blossomed, and after a year she eased herself back into performance with Melbourne's fledgling National Theatre Ballet.


In 1952 she returned to Britain, with Denton accompanying her, to join the rising Sadler's Wells choreographer John Cranko's celebrated season at the Kenton Theatre, Henley-on-Thames, and the Aldeburgh Festival. A fellow South African, Cranko created edgy character-ballets for her such as *The Forgotten Room*, in which she danced a woman who is killed by the book she is reading, and *L'Après-midi d'Emily Wigginbotham*, where she was a prim gallery-goer shocked by a sexy sculpture of a faun (designed by John Piper).





Dame Margaret in 2005 Credit: Fairfax Media via Getty Images

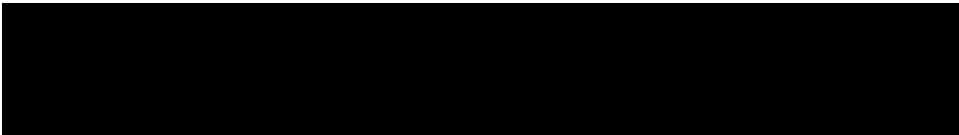
Meanwhile, Marie Rambert appointed her as ballet mistress at Ballet Rambert. However, in 1953 she and Denton married and decided to make their family home in Melbourne, where their sons, Matthew and Angus, were born.



For a few years Maggie Scott taught ballet locally in Toorak, but in 1958 began to lobby for a state-supported ballet infrastructure on British lines. In 1962 she was backed by the first governor of the Australian Reserve Bank, Dr Herbert “Nugget” Coombs, to prepare plans for a national school supporting the new Australian Ballet.


She led and shaped the Australian Ballet School from its 1964 opening until she retired in 1990. Potter’s biography, *Dame Maggie Scott: A Life in Dance*, was published to mark the school’s 50th anniversary.





Passionate about new choreography, she established the Dame Margaret Scott Fund for choreographers in 1992, assisting the creation of Alexei Ratmansky's international success, Cinderella. She retained a match-fit physique into late age and was a pivotal performer in Graeme Murphy's 1992 Nutcracker: The Story of Clara, playing the old Clara, a role she last performed in 2000, aged 77.


Margaret Scott was appointed OBE in 1977, DBE in 1981, and Companion of the Order of Australia in 2005. She was a regular jurist at the Moscow International Ballet Competition.



Her husband and sons survive her.

Dame Margaret Scott, born April 26 1922, died February 24 2019

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