Harold King, likeable director and choreographer who set up the sparky London City Ballet with the Princess of Wales as patron – obituary

Telegraph Obituaries

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The Princess Of Wales visiting the studios of the London City Ballet in 1986: Harold King is on her left Credit: John Shelley Collection/Avalon/Getty Images

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Harold King, the choreographer and ballet director, who has died aged 70,

was a remarkable outlier in the British arts scene, creating an independent classical company, London City Ballet, with such verve and charisma that he scooped the devoted patronage of the Princess of Wales.

From 1983 until her divorce from the Prince of Wales in 1996, when she relinquished most of her charities, Diana would preside over dazzling occasions around the world for King's modest troupe, the first ballet company she patronised.

With her unfailing support, the fearlessly charming King pulled off a

democratic mission of providing popular ballet for Britain's neglected provinces, in high aristocratic style. His breezy South African personality, classless and amusing, opened doors to the seemingly impossible.

London City Ballet galas frequently boasted attendance by both world ballet stars and international royalty – including the King and Queen of Norway and Queen Noor of Jordan – and the diminutive King seemed to thrive as the David among the Goliaths of the much larger subsidised flagship ballet companies.

Repeatedly refused subsidy by the Arts Council, King turned LCB's hand-to-mouth existence into a reminder that British ballet had begun in the 1920s with just such tenacious and buccaneering individuals. When LCB collapsed in June 1996, overwhelmed by market conditions, there was great sympathy in the dance world, which felt that King's dynamism and evangelical talents needed encouraging, rather than crushing by bureaucrats.

King and the Princess of Wales in 1986 Credit: John Shelley Collection/Avalon/Getty Images

Harold Samuel King was born on May 13 1949 in Durban, the younger of two sons of Manuel and Hettie King, an Orthodox Jewish family. He studied at

the University of Cape Town ballet school, graduating at 16 into the city's ballet company, CAPAB (the nursery also of the great Sadler's Wells Ballet choreographer John Cranko). There he met his future wife, Marian St Claire, a Lancastrian Ballet Rambert trainee.

In 1970 the young couple went to Britain, where they married and found work in Peter Darrell's Western Theatre Ballet, which as Scottish Theatre Ballet (later Scottish Ballet) had just relocated to Glasgow. There, they made friends with a former Royal Ballet dancer, Michael Beare.

London City Ballet was a joint venture between the three. In summer 1978, following some years of unstable employment, King made crucial contacts assisting the ballet promoter Victor Hochhauser in gala seasons with Fonteyn, Nureyev and other stars. King made a host of lifelong friends who would offer themselves as patrons, contacts or guest stars whenever he asked.

The ballerina Svetlana Beriosova was the first patron, when in August 1979 King launched "Lunch Hour Ballet" – the audience munched their sandwiches – at the Arts Theatre, Leicester Square. He directed the eight-strong London City Ballet, starring Marian St Claire and Beare. From its instant popularity, King conceived a flexible touring company, patronised successively by Maina Gielgud and Beryl Grey.

Dancy with guests including Wayne Sleep and Prince Andrew at a gala dinner in aid of the City Ballet of London in 1998
Credit: Tim Graham

King, deciding he needed a royal patron, rang Buckingham Palace to invite the new Princess of Wales to his rehearsals. She duly visited the company's rented studio in December 1983.

"She squatted down on the floor, and talked to all the dancers. She accepted coffee in a paper cup," King recalled. "All the other ballet companies were green with envy. But everybody is approachable, if you approach them in the right way. I like talking people into believing what I believe in."

Once the Princess had agreed to be Patron, King took to his eye-wateringly glamorous new orbit with ease. His ballet of Carmen (starring his wife) was premiered in Oslo in February 1984 before Norway's King and Queen, as well as the Princess on her first solo engagement.

London City Ballet danced not only in modest towns all over Britain but also in the Royal Palace in Muscat, a ballroom in the Arab Emirates, and aboard the Queen Mary II. Once, when King's South African dancers encountered visa difficulties for Jordan's Jerash Arts Festival, he telexed Queen Noor directly to resolve them.

His mission was simple: "What is it that makes children become ballet dancers? They go and see it. Where do they see it? They don't go to Covent Garden – they come to see London City Ballet in their home town."

Initially the finances were similarly simple – King split the takings with a host theatre 75/25, and doled out the week's profits to the dancers from a Mackintosh's Toffee tin. But a box office business model needed great publicity, and ballet critics' personal admiration for King was not generally matched by the enthusiasm of their reviews.

He raised impressive new soloists such as Kim Miller and Jack Wyngaard,

and there was much goodwill for brave new productions such as the young choreographer Matthew Hart's big Cinderella.

With Countess Lichfield in 1998 Credit: Tim Graham

The reality, however, was that LCB had half the dancers of English National or Birmingham Royal Ballet, which restricted its classical potential. The company could impress in one-act works such as Balanchine's Donizetti Variations, MacMillan's Solitaire and Ashton's skating ballet Les Patineurs – The Daily Telegraph's Kathrine Sorley Walker called LCB's 1993 performance of Les Patineurs "a joy". But the LCB's popular classics paled alongside the larger companies' stagings.

By 1995 the ballet industry was roiling with leadership crises, subsidy cuts and declining sponsorship, and LCB was deep in debt. In 1996 the Board gave King a fortnight to find £250,000, and the Princess's divorce and withdrawal from the majority of her charities dealt the coup de grâce.

He launched a similar new company, City Ballet of London, for a short time, but financial stability eluded it, and essentially his life's work was over.

From 2001 he took leadership roles at Spain's Ballet de Zaragoza, and later the Cape Town City Ballet, though both broke down. The British ballet world rallied to bring him back to London, where he became a resident of the St Pancras Almshouses and made thousands of friends on Facebook.

Although King's choreography was overshadowed by his long identification with London City Ballet, in the 1990s he created appealing youth ballets for the London Children's Ballet – A Little Princess and Mrs Harris Goes to Paris, and, for the London Studio Centre, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. Recently he had begun planning a production about the Bluebell Girls.

Harold King's marriage to Marian St Claire was dissolved in the mid-1980s and in 1988 she married Michael Beare.

Harold King, born May 13 1949, died January 7 2020

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