

[See all Opinion](#) ▾

Janine Charrat, ballerina and choreographer – obituary

[📁 Gift this article free](#)

Janine Charrat during rehearsals in Paris, 1952 Credit: RDA/Getty

Janine Charrat, the ballerina and choreographer, who has died aged 93, was one of France's most renowned creative figures, but regrettably became better known through a catastrophic incident on stage in which her costume caught fire as she danced, engulfing her in flames.

Janine Charrat was being filmed for television in 1961 in her own ballet about a woman interned in a mental asylum, *Les Algues* ("The Seaweed"), when as she entered the scene with a lit candelabra her skirt caught the flame. She received 70 per cent burns to her body.

Lying in hospital, she assured French reporters, "I will dance again." She was photographed smiling in her hospital gown with her nurses helping her to rise up on her heavily bandaged toes and was back at work within four months, refusing to show the world any signs of distress.



Janine Charrat in hospital in the wake of her accident Credit: Jean-Claude Sauer/Paris Match/Getty

Janine Charrat's misfortune drew enormous media interest. She had been known as an enfant prodige since the age of 12, when she acted the leading role in an acclaimed 1937 psychological thriller, *La Mort du Cygne* (released in the US as *Ballerina*). Jean Benoît-Lévy's tale about a young ballet student who jealously engineers serious injury to the rival of her idol required extraordinary acting and dancing skill in its child lead, and the young Janine Charrat, playing fearlessly alongside Paris Opera Ballet's prima ballerina Yvette Chauviré, was unanimously praised.

Born on July 24 1924 in Grenoble, Janine Charrat was the daughter of a fire brigade colonel and at first wanted to be an actress. She started dancing classes with the oriental dance teacher Jeanne Ronsay, was choreographing from the age of seven and giving dance recitals at 11.

Her performance in *La Mort du Cygne* brought her the patronage of the Paris Opera Ballet director Serge Lifar, who had choreographed the film's dance sequences, and he sent her to ballet training with Paris's famed Russian teachers, Olga Preobrajenska, Lyubov Egorova and Alexandre Volinine.

Janine Charrat's juvenile performances caught the attention of the French critic and impresario Irène Lidova, who swept the girl into the circle of brilliant young talents who she proclaimed would overhaul moribund French ballet. These included exciting young graduates from the Paris

French ballet. These included exciting young graduates from the Paris Opera ballet school, such as Renée “Zizi” Jeanmaire, Colette Marchand and Jean Babilée, and the choreographer-dancer Roland Petit.

In 1945 Lidova helped Petit launch the Ballets des Champs-Élysées from the stellar young group. With her first adult work the 19-year-old Janine Charrat demonstrated her remarkable choreographic talent, a ballet to Stravinsky’s score *Jeu de Cartes*, in which Babilée’s astonishing performance as the baleful Joker became legendary.

Janine Charrat stood apart from her generation in being both the only female ballet choreographer in France and the only leading French ballet choreographer not to have emerged from the Paris Opera academy. Jean Cocteau called her a “solitary wanderer who goes beyond the stars”. Her key creations often explored themes of fate and mortality, such as the all-male ballet *’adame Miroir* (1948), in which a sailor faced death in a hall of mirrors, a Faust ballet *Abraxas* (1949), *La Femme et son ombre* (1948), and the extraordinary *Le Massacre des Amazones* (1952), in which the female warriors – charismatically led by Janine Charrat herself – are massacred by the wild horses they want to tame.

In 1951 she left Petit’s wing and launched *Les Ballets Janine Charrat*, later renamed *Le Ballet de France*. She immersed herself in contemporary culture for her introverted creations, working with major creative figures of the day, including Jean Genet, Edgar Varèse, Darius Milhaud, Fernand Léger and Pierre Balmain.

A typical Charrat ballet featured a complex female lead for herself, such as *The Little Match Girl* in 1952 – its theme of a girl’s fascination with fire being uncomfortably prescient – and *Les Algues*, the fateful ballet in which she would later be injured.

When Janine Charrat toured to London, her double achievement as dancer and choreographer in *Les Algues* was the talk of the town on its showings at the Stoll Theatre in 1954 and Sadler’s Wells in 1960. The leading British critic Peter Williams considered her role as the mentally unbalanced Catherine “one of the great female dramatic roles of our time” and praised her “aqueous limbs, like the seaweed from which the ballet takes its title – a gorgeous piece of dancing and a profoundly moving piece of playing”. The future Royal Ballet choreographer Kenneth MacMillan acknowledged her influence on his own development.

In the 1950s she maintained parallel lives, as a classical soloist – her dancing

of Giselle was considered remarkable – as the protagonist of her own ballets, and as a busy international choreographer, creating ballets for Brussels, Vienna, Geneva, Milan, Buenos Aires and the Marquis de Cuevas in Paris. She was often drawn to theatrical experimentation with classical subjects and music, creating ballets about Persephone, Hecuba, Phaedra and Salome, and demonstrating a noted musicality in settings of music by Beethoven, Bach, Debussy and Stravinsky, among others.


She toured her company to the United States in 1957, where the New York Times critic hailed “an authentic talent of a high order”. In 1961 she collaborated with her old colleague Maurice Béjart, co-choreographing the flamboyant medieval epic Les Quatre Fils Aymon.

After the Les Algues fire later that year, Janine Charrat became director of the Geneva Ballet but abandoned administration after two years to resume performing and choreography, frequently to adventurous new music. She also became a regular choreographer in Vienna State Opera productions. She made her last work when only 45.

Janine Charrat’s dual artistic life took its toll – both her marriages were short-lived and her choreography was eclipsed in celebrity, if not necessarily in merit, by that of Petit and Béjart. In the 1980s she emerged as a mentor to the new generation of French choreographers as the dance director of Paris’s Pompidou Centre, but her 70-plus ballets are lost.

Janine Charrat, born July 24 1924, died August 29 2017

Join the conversation

Show comments 

The Telegraph values your comments but kindly requests all posts are on topic, constructive and respectful. Please review our commenting policy.

