

Rudolf Nureyev

By Barrie Renwick

Put simply: Ballet is a classic artistic dance form with precise movements performed to music to express a story. The history of ballet emanates from Europe where in several countries each has a world-class ballet company. Among them, in recent times, the Kirov (now Mariinsky) of Russia produced the greatest number of dancers of whom several became recognized world-wide as famous names: one, its danseur Rudolf Nureyev, was and continues to be considered the greatest male ballet dancer of his generation in the world.

Rudolf, fourth child and only son of his parents, was born March 17, 1938, aboard a Trans Siberian Express train his father's newly appointed the Muslim faith, a minority to peasant status. When the Rudolf's father got ordered to Rudolf, his mother and his central area for safety. That poverty. Rudolf enjoyed music active part in Russian peasant returned from war to find his resisted the father's attempts for change. Their standoff lasted until Rudolf left at age seventeen for ballet lessons through aegis from the Kirov Ballet Academy, Leningrad, which recognized his dancing ability.



near Irkutsk, Siberia, en route to job. The family were Tartars of group relegated in Soviet society Second War began in 1939, serve in defending Ukraine. sisters retreated to a more move mired them in a life of dire as a child, and he grew taking dancing. Later, his father son lacked manly interests and

Rudolf, a slim, muscular, broad-chested 5-foot 8-inch tall male dancer, adapted to ballet so quickly that in three years he attained status with the Kirov Ballet Company. In a remarkably short time dancing in Russia, he became the best-known Russian male dancer, a favourite with ballet patrons, although less so with his colleagues and managers because of his unpredictable off-stage moodiness and temper tantrums. Even so, Rudolf's sensation status and extraordinary ability promoted him to a meaningful role in the 1961 Kirov Company tour to Paris and London.

Because of Soviet wariness, KGB agents shadowed Kirov members on tour. Youthful Rudolf flouted rules, associated with foreigners, mingled in gay bars, and his conduct generally drew his minders' mistrust. Following the Paris engagement, and as the company assembled to board its flight to London, Rudolf was told he was re-called immediately to Russia for a special performance, which Rudolf interpreted as a fate of permanent detainment. He nimbly slipped away from the minder, found on-duty Paris police, claimed political asylum, and thwarted the return order.

Nureyev, now exiled as a defector, was quickly adopted into the Grand Ballet du Marquis de Cuevas, and he became a sensation in Paris. Soon, on a tour to Denmark with this ballet company, Rudolf met his Danish ballet counterpart, Eric Bruhn, who later became his long-time live-in partner.

Margot Fonteyn, prima ballerina of the Royal Ballet, London, invited Nureyev to partner her in the pas de deux of a special London performance in the 1960s. Despite her being nineteen years older than Rudolf, the pair danced so engagingly together they cemented a performing relationship that entranced their patrons. For the two, it also spawned the spirit in each as Nureyev said, “as one body, one soul.” They often paired later to dance in productions.

Typically the male, premier danseur, is in support of and secondary to the prima ballerina, but despite Fonteyn’s acknowledged position and her immense popularity vaulted him favoured, hailing them both, as they performed together many friends until Fonteyn’s death. Yoko Morishita and others subsequent performances, the overarched accolades offered courted by numerous ballet companies in the world, some he joined for a time, as in America and in Paris, others he performed with as a guest. These performances through ongoing years added to his fame and made him wealthy.



Though Rudolf had fame and wealth, his mercurial bouts of moodiness, his explosive tantrums, his frequency of trolling gay bars for male companionship following Bruhn’s death were all ominous signs of a troubled personality. These and other aberrant personal traits: the obsessive preoccupation with absolute perfection in performance, his occasional inappropriate tardiness at performance times, his flamboyant dress code in public, may have progressively coalesced over time, beginning with his miserable childhood; amplifying through a stressful period perfecting ballet poses; accelerating with the irrevocable trauma of defection; and later culminating in the ultimate consequence of being entrapped, living in an unfamiliar culture speaking a different language. Topping that, he was a gay inveterate troll for sexual satisfaction. As well, his statelessness complicated travel, and to overcome that annoyance, he eventually took Austrian citizenship. He kept several lavish homes dotted around the world to serve as a balm for the unresolved personal complexities he dealt with.

As he aged into the 1980s Rudolf formed his own company, Rudolf and Friends, to tour and perform popular ballets. As his dancing skills began slowly deteriorating, his artistic perseverance pivoted his talent toward becoming a choreographer. That work proved satisfying and highly successful. Nureyev continued a busy schedule of tours in spite of a nagging unwell feeling, which he continued to dismiss. It was an unrecognized early sign of AIDS, a little-known disease at the time. His appearance gradually altered and his stamina waned as the months passed, until the virus overwhelmed his system. He died, aged 54, January 6, 1993, in hospice outside Paris. As Rudolf requested, his burial was in

the Russian Cemetery in Sainte-Geneviève-des-bois, a suburb of Paris. He rests with loyalty to Russia but contempt for its Soviet.

In 1996 French sculptor Mme. Renée Mayot created a laudatory medal commemorating this famous ballet dancer for members of the Association of Friends of Rudolf Nureev. The piece is bronze 81 mm in diameter and was struck at the Monnaie de Paris.



The medal obverse shows the familiar portrait of danseur Nureev looking upward in serious concentration during his bravura male solo dance as Conrad in the ballet *Le Corsaire*. A two-word legend above expresses his talents: Dancer, Choreographer. In the right field below are Rudolf's name and the years of his life. His name, the legend and the inscription are spelled in French.

On the reverse, Rudolf appears in an arabesque ballet pose as the pirate Conrad over a background of silhouette-like images of his various poses that take place during his solo. The sculptor's name is in the exergue below.

Attributions: portrait of Rudolf – Youtube; the image of him with Margot – Google.

Afterword

I've written this article to give the reader, who may be unfamiliar with Nureev's career, a brief understanding of his life its accomplishments and tribulations. The material comes mostly from secondary sources: recorded memories and thoughts of friends, colleagues and theatrical workers. Facts presented are unverified. The paragraph about his "troubled personality" and "aberrant personal traits" expresses my own opinion derived from my reading of many independent reports. Clearly, public acceptance of Rudolf's artistic accomplishments far overshadows his personal shortcomings. In part, this laudatory medal confirms it for the Association of Friends of Rudolf Nureev. Any particular significance

the ballet *Le Corsaire* has as the theme for the Association medal is unrecorded in material I viewed.

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