I WILL BE THE GREATEST DANCER IN THE WORLD!

I will be the greatest dancer in the world!
Alexandra looked at her classmate in disbelief.
- But you have no training!
- I'll learn and I'll leave Ufa! You'll see!

Standing on top of the hill where they would often go together to watch the view over Belaya River and the trains heading towards the West, the eleven-year old boy had suddenly flown away out of their friendship. He was filled with a vision that overshadowed their bleak life in Soviet Bashkiria. Alexandra’s friend had escaped into another world, a bigger one than she could ever dream of and where there would be no room for her.
Rudolf Nureyev was born to his destiny.

The audience salutes an unforgettable performance and gives a standing ovation to a phenomenon: NUREYEV. After endless curtain calls with Margot Fonteyn and the corps, the dancer is now standing alone, motionless center stage surrounded by flowers, one arm extended to the public. With a slow circular movement of the arm and the torso, he sweeps the whole theater, finally bowing before the cheering public. He looks exhausted and happy, expressing pride and gratefulness at the tribute to his dancing. The scene takes place at Paris Opéra, at Covent Garden, at the Met, at Vienna Opera, at La Scala…

The path between the two scenes has been long and arduous. To be born a year before the outbreak of World War II on the Transsiberian train is indeed an original way of making a special entrance into the world. The whole life of Rudolf Nureyev is a mixture of contrasts, of incredible opportunities and deep tragedy, characterized by constant struggle.

All over the world Nureyev has become a brandname for dance. He did become the male dancer, the great dancer, the greatest dancer of the 20th century. His name evokes fame, freedom, success, audacity, scandal, passion. People have become dancers, choreographers, photographers, designers, writers because of him. He has inspired painters, sculptors, film makers. His dancing has enlightened thousands of people in their everyday life. He gives a sense of purpose and clear determination to anyone who has a dream.

Nureyev had an iron will and was totally dedicated to his art. He became the highest paid ballet dancer in the world, he made ballet popular, he became the rock-star of ballet, he changed male dancing in the classics making the part of the male dancer the equal of the ballerina; he created a new approach to ballet erasing the differences between classical ballet and modern dancing. He insisted on acquiring all styles of dance: he had Maurice Béjart, Murray Louis, George Balanchine, Roland Petit, Kenneth MacMillan, Frederick Ashton, Martha Graham, Rudi Van Dantzig, among others, making ballets for him. No other dancer danced with so many ballerinas. For almost three decades, he danced and staged the Petipa repertoire, created new ballets, filmed several of his productions, dancing an average 250 performances a year touring with at least 30 different companies and his «Nureyev and Friends» group until 1991 the world over. Even illness did not deter him from his superhuman schedule.

2013 marks the 20th anniversary of his death, It is an opportune moment to pause and reflect on the personality and the career of this extraordinary artist. It is impossible to describe in a few pages all the details of his hyperactive life. How did Rudik, the boy from Ufa become Nureyev, the legendary dancer?

He was born in the Soviet Union in 1938, and spent his first years in Ufa, the capital of Bashkiria, near the Ural mountains. These years were marked by hunger, poverty, bleakness. He was the 4th child of Tartar parents for whom the Revolution had opened the opportunity to study. Nureyev’s father, Hamit, hoped his only son would become a medical doctor or an engineer so he was not too happy when he found out that his son wanted to spend his life leaping like a frog! According to Nureyev, like my father, my mother was officially against but supported me unofficially…

Rudik discovered folk-dance at kindergarten and loved it immediately. On New Year’s Eve 1945, Nureyev’s mother managed to get herself and all her children into the local Opera House on one single ticket. From the top gallery the little boy saw the world of ballet revealed to him as he watched the Bashkirian legend Song of the Cranes and decided he wanted to spend his life in this magical realm.
Performing folk-dance with a group of children, he met Anna Udeltsova, once a ballerina with the Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes. She taught Rudik the basics of classical training and was the first to spot the ten-year old boy’s exceptional talent. The atmosphere at class and during the rehearsals of the amateur performances was often electric when Rudolf was attending. He often left the girls in tears, like the young Sveta Baishave, his first partner ever: you are horrible. I don’t want to dance with you!

- You idiot! one day you’ll regret that!

Sveta Baishave became a dancer with Ufa Opera and is now a ballet teacher in Belarus. She came to regret her words...

Udeltsova educated Nureyev about Diaghilev era, about Nijinsky, Pavlova and Karsavina, about the history of dance and the origins of the Kirov Ballet in Leningrad: the mythical Maryinsky. The boy started dreaming about going to Leningrad. It became an obsession but he had to wait until he was 17 to discover the northern capital of the tsars. Meanwhile Rudolf went to study with Elena Voitovich, a graduate of the Vaganova Institute in Leningrad when she opened the «Ballet Studio» at the Ufa Opera to train young boys and girls for the Ballet corps. The Ballet Studio now contains a permanent exhibition devoted to Nureyev.

One day, Sania Hantimirova, a first-grade student at Vaganova Institute stopped in horror in the corridor when an 8th-grade boy walked out of Pushkin’s class, yelling and swearing like a truck driver. How could the great Professor tolerate such behaviour? It was the rebellious Tartar boy everybody was talking about in the school. She saw that the boy was crying out of rage. It took me years to realize that Pushkin had understood his student’s passion for dance and work and decided to ignore his outbursts of fury which were just the expression of his frustration at not achieving a movement to perfection. Such qualities are precious and very rare in a student, explains the former prima ballerina of Kazan Opera House, now a teacher at its Ballet School.

He completed the 9-year curriculum in just three years and entered the Kirov company as soloist in 1958. During the following three years, he performed the entire classical repertoire, memorizing all the parts for future stagings.

Nureyev has always been a hard worker. He would never give up. He was once asked where the secret of his «cabrioles battues derrière» lay. Nureyev seems to stop in the air, his body tracing an arch: I was unable to do that jump. So once, at the Kirov I decided to practice in a studio alone. As it is a jump backwards it is difficult to see oneself from behind! I noticed that if I would throw myself into the mirror, for a fraction of second I could see my back and correct what was wrong. I practiced until I was satisfied with the result. It took me a whole night. Of course Nureyev expected the same dedication from anyone he worked with.

His activities have been so intense and diverse that each place in the world would deserve a special chapter. Several cities emerge as the most significant places for his artistic achievements but in these pages we shall concentrate on Paris and Vienna only.

PARIS

Nureyev’s relationship with the French capital has been special ever since his first visit with the Kirov in spring 1961. He first appeared on May 19th as Solor in the Shades scene of La Bayadere. 45 seconds of the male variation were enough to bring the house down. He conquered the space, the stage, the part. It was breathtaking, overwhelming, not only because of the height and the power of the jumps but also because of his passion and magnetic presence. The Paris Opera audience was in a state of shock. Nobody had ever seen anything like it. From that evening on Nureyev became the idol of Paris, not only for the balletomanes, but as the word spread, everyone who was anyone wanted to see this new prodigy. He also danced Sleeping Beauty and Swan Lake where he showed refined artistry in his interpretation of the princes. His partnering was faultless revealing musicality, harmony and assurance.

During the Kirov season in Paris, Nureyev would always act independently meeting with French friends and spending his free time away from his Soviet colleagues, behaviour which was considered an offence by the KGB officials monitoring the tours. Just before boarding the plane to London, where the Kirov was due to guest for another month, Konstantin Sergeyev, the director of the tour, took away Nureyev’s boarding pass to London and gave him another one to Moscow, saying: You are due to dance at the Kremlin. Khrushchev wants you to dance for him. You’ll join us later in London. Suddenly the light Parisian spring atmosphere dissipated and heavy clouds were looming on the horizon. Nureyev understood this was meant as a punishment for his
“unacceptable” behaviour in Paris and should he go back, he would never ever be allowed abroad again. In a state of panic he grabbed a French friend’s arm crying for help. Suddenly he was told to go to a man – a policeman in civilian clothes - a few steps away from him and say in French « I want to be free ».

Nureyev became a legend with his « leap to freedom ». The event made headlines and was highly politicized. The USSR condemned the dancer as a traitor. The sentence pursued him until Mikhail Gorbachev granted him a special permission to return to Ufa in 1987 to visit his ailing mother. Nureyev’s decision was on purely artistic grounds : he wanted to be free in order to develop fully as an artist.

Immediately after his defection, he signed a contract with the International Ballet of the Marquis de Cuevas and performed in Paris in The Sleeping Beauty and went on tour. The Soviets exerted pressure on Paris Opéra which banned him for several years during which the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées hosted the International Dance Festival. Nureyev often appeared with invited companies such as the Royal Ballet and the Australian Ballet. From 1967 onwards he was invited as a regular guest of the national theatre to dance the repertoire, create ballets such as Glen Tetley’s Tristan, stage his own productions, Manfred and Don Quixote before becoming the Director of the company in 1983. His contract was threefold as director, dancer and choreographer. What he achieved within his 6 year-term is overwhelming. He staged his final versions of the Petipa repertoire: Raymonda, Swan Lake, The Sleeping Beauty, Nutcracker; revised his Romeo and Juliet, he created new ballets Cinderella, Washington Square. He discovered new talents and made them étoiles : Sylvie Guillem, Isabelle Guérin, Laurent Hilaire, Manuel Legris and Elisabeth Maurin. He invited most contemporary choreographers to create or revive works for the company, such as Béjart, Petit, Forsythe, Van Dantzig, Graham, Cramer, Neumeier, Tudor, Lancelot, Taylor, Van Manen, Robbins, Tharp, etc. He made the company one of the best in the world, took the dancers to America after a 40 years absence and organized tours all over the planet. He restored some of the baroque repertoire inviting the French specialist, Francine Lancelot to stage Quelques pas graves de Baptiste and Bach Suite.

Although Nureyev was at first very much criticized for his choreographies based on Petipa, they have now become standard reference. His style was hard and difficult to assimilate, but now, with hindsight it has gained greater appreciation, said Elisabeth Maurin.

As Hélène Trailine, a renowned international ballerina, then Counselor to the programming, put it : I have never heard anyone praising a dance director in this house. Directing 150 dancers always ready to go on strike, reluctant to give up their routine, with so many different personalities has always constituted a challenge most dance directors have had to overcome. He always interrupted the flow of words of the French dancers explaining why they could not perform the steps he was demanding by a sharp : « Pas paaaarrrrrrrrrler, faiiiirrrre ! » (No talk ! do !)

Nureyev came with a vision and he knew exactly what he wanted. He gave their chance to every dancer of the company. Some grabbed it, some remained on the sidelines. He made no mistakes in his choices : his judgment was always accurate. The stars he named became international melodies: his judgment was always accurate. The stars he named became international melodies: Sylvie Guillem, Isabelle Guérin, Laurent Hilaire, Manuel Legris and Elisabeth Maurin. He invited most contemporary choreographers to create or revive works for the company, such as Béjart, Petit, Forsythe, Van Dantzig, Graham, Cramer, Neumeier, Tudor, Lancelot, Taylor, Van Manen, Robbins, Tharp, etc. He made the company one of the best in the world, took the dancers to America after a 40 years absence and organized tours all over the planet. He restored some of the baroque repertoire inviting the French specialist, Francine Lancelot to stage Quelques pas graves de Baptiste and Bach Suite.

In Paris his life came full circle. Appearing for the first time in the Shades scene of La Bayadere with the Kirov, Nureyev made his final public appearance on Paris Opéra stage some thirty years later after the premiere of his staging of Petipa’s full length ballet on October 8th, 1992 and he died three months later on Orthodox Christmas Eve, January 6th, 1993. He is buried in Sainte-Geneviève-Des Bois Cemetery, near Paris together with numerous Russian emigrates.

DAME MARGOT FONTEYN

Dame Margot Fonteyn, Prima Ballerina Assoluta of the Royal Ballet and President of the Royal Academy of Dancing was looking for artists to participate in its annual Charity Gala. The name of recently defected Nureyev came up. At first Dame Margot was not too enthusiastic about his insistence to dance with her. The more I hear of him the worse he sounds. He did not dance with her at the 1961 Gala but was a sensation in a solo Poème Tragique especially created for him at his request by Frederick Ashton.

Dame Ninette de Valois, founder and director of the Royal Ballet convinced Dame Margot to dance Giselle with the Russian « boy ». At 42, Dame Margot, after a magnificent career, was considering leaving the stage but decided to take up the challenge. Their performances of Giselle marked the beginning of a 16 year-long legendary and unique partnership in the history of dance in the 20th century. All their differences in age, schooling and culture dissipated in their devotion to dance and melted into a unique characterization of any
ballet. Together they danced all the classics, new works were created for them by Petit, Graham, Akston, MacMillan. Each appearance of the couple had a magical dimension to it. Together they were reinventing the stories and the characters at every performance, leaving the audience with a feeling of eternity.

Nureyev described his encounter with Margot Fonteyn as his greatest luck. When dancing together they lived their characters in front of the audience and were totally involved in their dancing. Margot Fonteyn once said: When I see Rudolf dance, I do not see a person I know and work with every day, I see the dance. Ashton created Marguerite and Armand for the couple and it became a vehicle for the stars in which the choreographer wished no other interpreters than the creators of the ballet. The ballet finally entered the Royal Ballet repertoire only after the leading artists had passed away.

VIENNA

Vienna was the first capital of the Western world Nureyev discovered in 1959 with a group of young soloists of the Kirov invited to participate in the International Festival of Youth. Nureyev and Alla Sizova won the Gold Medal with the unheard mark of 10/10 in the Ballet Competition in which two other young dancers took part: Ekaterina Maximova and Vladimir Vassiliev! Roland Petit and his company were performing his new ballet Cyrano de Bergerac which Nureyev managed to see. He met the choreographer and told him he would like to work with him....

The Vienna Staatsoper under the direction of Egon Hilbert and Aurel von Miloss was the first theater to trust Nureyev and give him the staging of Swan Lake which he was invited to dance with Margot Fonteyn. Veni, vidi, vici. He came, he saw, he conquered. Although he first shocked everyone by ordering the dancers to lose weight and get fit to perform his ballet, the rehearsals went well and the premiere, on October 15th, 1964 scored a huge success and established a record that has yet to be beaten: 89 curtain calls which still list as the absolute figure in the performing arts in the Guinness’ Book of Records. Lord Snowdon immortalized the event with superb photographs which express Nureyev and Fonteyn’s exceptional partnership, Nureyev’s extraordinary jumps and his vision as a young artist. The ballet was revived and was saluted in 1996 by the Vienna press and the public as the best classical ballet produced in Vienna in years. Throughout his career Nureyev staged only two versions of Swan Lake: in Vienna in 1964 and in Paris in 1984. Undoubtedly, it is because Prince Siegfried was so close to his heart that he gave much of his inner self to creating the character in both versions. In 1964, Prince Siegfried is a hero in quest of absolute values, however immature. He nurtured hopes and yearnings which were those of Nureyev the artist who in his turn expected a great deal from his encounter with the West. On the other hand, the Prince of 1984 was conceived by a mature artist who had travelled far and wide on life’s journey, more human as a hero, a man who had lost his illusions. This is precisely why it is so invaluable and fitting to have kept both versions. They afford us the full measure of the evolution of Nureyev as choreographer and artist.

Swan Lake which was later recorded on film marked the beginning of a long-lasting cooperation between Nureyev and Vienna. He became a regular guest as a dancer and choreographer, staging the Petipa repertoire, performing his first performances of Apollo, Hans Van Manen’s Adagio Hammerklavier and Songs without Words, Rudi Van Dantzig’s Four Last Songs, who also created Ulysses for him. Nureyev choreographed his first ballet in Vienna: Tancredi in 1966. Aurel von Miloss had wanted him to do Prokofiev’s Chout but finally they chose Hans Werner Henze’s score which was the first time Nureyev would choreograph to contemporary music. 1966 was also the year he staged his first Don Quixote with Ully Wührer.

Nureyev took the Vienna Ballet on tour to Athens and Asia with his productions of Sleeping Beauty and Swan Lake. He was an inspiration for a whole generation of dancers. Gisela Cech recalls: Everyone was fascinated with him and his dancing and wanted to copy him. He took us all in his trail. Never did we work with such intensity, rigor and precision. He chose me as one of the four little swans and explained that they were not little but young swans. I learned enormously by just observing him. Gisela Cech was his partner for ten years and danced the whole repertoire with him.

Nov 27th, 1983 marked the 100th performance of Swan Lake in which Nureyev danced each act with a different ballerina: Gisela Cech in the second, Brigite Stadler in the third, Lilly Scheuermann in the fourth. No less than seven principals were cast in the performance.

His last Giselle with the company (1984) was also Elisabeth Maurin’s first performance of the role, then still a corps dancer. Vous dansez Giselle avec moi à Vienne, dans deux jourrrrrrs ! Demandez à Yvette Chauvirrrré ! (You dance Giselle with me in Vienna in 2 days! Ask Chauviré to coach you!). Yvette Chauviré had been his first Giselle in Vienna in 1966 !...
Vienna always liked anniversaries and has honoured Nureyev with special evenings such as his final performance of Swan Lake coinciding with his 50th birthday in March 1988. They arranged a surprise for him which deeply touched him. Suzanne Kirnbauer, one of his first partners, then directing the Volkstheater was asked to be the Queen Mother which she happily agreed to. What are you doing here? said the surprised Prince Siegfried kissing his mother’s hand.

France granted Nureyev refugee status and issued him travel authorizations until Austria offered him citizenship which was officially granted to him by Mayor Leopold Gratz on January 25, 1982.

Reaching the end of his career as a dancer he could not consider a life without performing and decided to follow Herbert von Karajan’s suggestion to become a conductor. Nureyev worked intensely during several months with his Viennese musician friends and made his début as a conductor with the Vienna Residenz Orchestra in Auersperg Palace in the Rosenkavalier Room on June 25, 1991 in works by Haydn, Mozart and Tchaikovsky. The concert was recorded on CD.

The city of Vienna honoured the memory of Rudolf Nureyev with the Rudolf Nurejew Promenade in Kaisermühlen inaugurated by the Mayor Michael Häupl on September 22, 1999. Since Nureyev died, many tributes to him (exhibitions, books, performances) have been organized in Vienna. He is warmly remembered with deep affection and admiration.

MANUEL LEGRIS

Nureyev, just appointed Dance Director at Paris Opera gave the young dancer one of his first soloist parts as one of Raymonda’s friends, the so-called « Ber-Ber » (Bernard et Béranger) and promoted Manuel Legris to « étoile » in New York during Paris Opéra Ballet tour in 1986 in Raymonda. This is the only time a dancer was named « étoile » outside the Paris Opera. Manuel Legris became an international star and danced all over the world and was a recurrent guest at Vienna Opera. Dominique Meyer, the Director of Vienna Opera appointed him dance director in 2010 and during the first season he showed an energy comparable to his mentor’s. The ballet company had eight premières including a new production of Nureyev’s Don Quixote. Manuel Legris worked day and night to present the company at its best, promoting the emerging young talents, harmonizing the dancers of no less than 24 different nationalities into one style. He instituted an annual Nureyev Gala to honour the memoir of the artist who exerted such sustainable influence on ballet. 28 years after the last Vienna Ballet tour abroad, Manuel Legris took them to Japan, France and Monaco where they scored a huge success. Manuel Legris can be proud of his work and of his company. Marina Yakovleva and Denis Cherevychko were invited recently to perform Nureyev’s Don Quixote at the Paris Opera. For the first time the Vienna Ballet will dance a three-week season at Paris Châtelet next summer. Nureyev would certainly be extremely happy about such exchanges. History repeats itself for the joy of the dancers and their public.

CONCLUSION

Born to Tartar parents in Soviet Russia, brought up in both cultures, Rudolf Nureyev had a universal vision from early childhood. He was obsessed with dance. He had an unquenchable thirst for learning. Passion was his drive, passion for dance, passion for life. He constantly wanted to expand his knowledge of every form of dance: modern, contemporary, baroque, but he was also a connoisseur of theater, music, fine arts and litterature. Dance was everything, his work, his love, his childhood dream, his pain. Once asked about his private life, he said: I have danced everything: all my joys, sadness, pain, happiness, everything. Why would the public want to know the details?

He was a true missionary of the dance and remained faithful to his Russian schooling spending over three decades instilling it in Western dancers. Margot Fonteyn inscribed these words on a book about Pavlova she offered Nureyev: Only you and she have loved ballet above everything else. Mikhail Baryshnikov said, "He had the charisma and simplicity of a man of the earth and the untouchable arrogance of the gods."

Nureyev’s legacy is immense and his soul can rest in peace in the realm of shadows, remember his words: I will remain alive as long as my ballets will be danced.

Hélène Ciolkovitch*
**Helene Ciolkovitch** is a dance historian with a French and Russian background, living in Paris. She is a member of the European Association of Dance Historians and works as a freelance conference interpreter. From 1965 onwards, she watched Nureyev dance at venues throughout Europe and followed his career worldwide. As Secretary General of "Le Cercle des Amis de Rudolf Nureev" (1997-2007), she was responsible for the Association's magazine and also organised many Nureyev-related events (seminars, photo exhibitions, film screenings, publications, etc.). Helene has also contributed to several books on Nureyev and has participated in symposia in France, Russia, Monaco and Switzerland. She has written for dance magazines in France, Germany and Russia and has acted as a consultant for a number of Russian-language documentary films as well as taking part in a recent French TV programme on Nureyev. Since 2005 she has been undertaking research in Russia with a view to producing an artistic biography of the dancer.