



Ashton, Sir Frederick (1904-1988)

by Douglas Blair Turnbaugh

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Sir Frederick Ashton may be described as the choreographer who most fully defined British ballet in the twentieth century.

He was born on September 17, 1904 in Guayaquil, Ecuador of English parents. In Lima, Peru, at the susceptible age of thirteen, he saw Anna Pavlova dance. In the great ballerina, he recognized exquisite feminine qualities that he felt within himself. Pavlova became a template of the personality he was to become.

His father was repelled by Ashton's effeminacy. However, his siblings were not. "I was buggered by all of my brothers," Ashton recalled, adding that he "rather enjoyed it" with Charlie, the brother who later paid for his ballet lessons.

When he was fourteen, Ashton was sent to school in England. In London, he saw Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. He soon began to study dance with Léonide Massine, one of the Ballets Russes' leading choreographers.

After a brief career dancing with the Rubinstein Ballet in Paris, Ashton returned to England. Encouraged by Marie Rambert, he began creating ballets for her Ballet Club and the Camargo Society, as well as dances for revues and musical comedies.

Ashton's first great success, *Façade* (1931), still in active repertoire, epitomizes the combined qualities of wit, fantasy, elegance, and sophistication that distinguish him from all other choreographers. These qualities give Ashton a place in ballet akin to that of Oscar Wilde in literature.

In 1934, Ashton staged the Virgil Thomson-Gertrude Stein opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* in Hartford, Connecticut. The following year he was invited by Ninette de Valois to join the Vic-Wells Ballet as dancer and choreographer.

Ashton remained with this company, which successively became the Sadler's Wells Ballet and then the Royal Ballet, for the next 35 years. He was its artistic director from 1963 to 1970, the years in which the company was most successful. In his company, Ashton discovered his alter ego in ballerina Margot Fonteyn, for whom he created leading roles for 25 years.

Although he could not perform the ethereal ballerina roles he created for Fonteyn, Ashton did choreograph and perform great comic travesti roles, notably the Ugly Sisters in *Cinderella* (1948) and Widow Simone in *La Fille mal gardée* (1960). Ashton's hilarious performance as the older Ugly Sister, with Robert Helpmann in a high-camp turn as the younger Ugly Sister, has become legendary, and these are now coveted roles.

Another of Ashton's great comic inventions is Bottom, the peasant weaver changed into an ass by naughty Puck in *The Dream* (1964, based on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*). Not only does the male

dancer performing the role wear an ass mask, but he dances en pointe to give the effect of being hoofed.

Love is an essential theme and human relationships an important thread in all of Ashton's ballets, which are filled with tender moments. Although his oeuvre cannot be described as homoerotic, his creations are often the realization of a gay man's fantasy of being the goddess Pavlova, of being adored and lovingly partnered by a heterosexual man.

This subtext was not recognized by the general public, but it did reflect Ashton's own life. The choreographer's emotional life focused on the unattainable and the unsuitable, and it often wreaked havoc in his ballet company, as when, in the case of the heterosexual Michael Somes (Fonteyn's principal partner), the beloved enjoyed and exploited favoritism to the point that other dancers signed a petition of protest.

Ashton, like so many other famous gay men of his epoch, including Cecil Beaton and Noël Coward, was necessarily discreet, but he was not closeted. The British high society in which he moved enjoyed the scintillating company of flamboyant gay artists.

Ashton was a member of the circle of gay men who surrounded Queen Elizabeth, the late Queen Mother, whom he taught to tango. When she heard that Ashton, a formidable mimic, did imitations of her, she retaliated by imitating his own queenly manners.

For services to British ballet, Ashton was created a C.B.E. (Commander of the Order of the British Empire) in 1950 and was knighted in 1962. He died in his sleep on August 19, 1988, aged 83.

Regarding his sex life, Ashton remarked, "I was always the loser." However, his true love was ballet, and his happy, life-long affair with dance produced masterpieces that remain among the most popular ballets in the world.

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About the Author

Douglas Blair Turnbaugh is Representative to the U.S.A. and Membre Conseiller of the Conseil International de la Danse/UNESCO. A contributor to *New York Magazine*, *The Atlantic*, *Playbill*, *Advocate*, *RFD*, *James White Review*, *New York Native*, *Performing Arts Journal*, *Ecrits sur Nijinsky*, among others, he is author of *Duncan Grant and the Bloomsbury Group*; *Private: The Erotic Art of Duncan Grant*; *Strip Show: Paintings by Patrick Angus*; and *Beat It: 28 Drawings*. He has been awarded the Nijinsky medal (Poland) and the Diaghilev medal (Russia). His *Serge Diaghilev* is forthcoming.