



## Bruhn, Erik (1928-1986)

by John McFarland

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Erik Bruhn (second from left) visiting backstage at the New York City Ballet. The group included (left to right) Diana Adams, Bruhn, Violette Verdy, Sonia Arova, and Rudolph Nureyev.

Erik Bruhn was the premier male dancer of the 1950s and epitomized the ethereally handsome prince and cavalier on the international ballet stage of the decade. Combining flawless technique with an understanding of modern conflicted psychology, he set the standard by which the next generation of dancers, including Rudolf Nureyev, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Peter Schaufuss, and Peter Martins, measured their success.

Born on October 3, 1928 in Copenhagen, Bruhn was the fourth child of Ellen Evers Bruhn, the owner of a successful hair salon. After the departure of his father when Erik was five years old, he was the sole male in a household with six women, five of them his seniors.

An introspective child who was his mother's favorite, Erik was enrolled in dance classes at the age of six in part to counter signs of social withdrawal. He took to dance like a duck to water; three years later he auditioned for the Royal Danish Ballet School where he studied from 1937 to 1947.

With his classic Nordic good looks, agility, and musicality, Bruhn seemed made for the August Bournonville technique taught at the school. He worked obsessively to master the technique's purity of line, lightness of jump, and clean footwork.

Although Bruhn performed the works of the Royal Danish Ballet to perfection without any apparent effort, he yearned to reach beyond mere technique. In 1947, he accepted an invitation to perform with London's Metropolitan Ballet. This experience would be the first step in his lifelong quest for growth as a dancer.

For the next decade, his career would be divided between starring with the Royal Danish Ballet and dancing as a guest artist with such leading companies as American Ballet Theatre, the Australian Ballet, and the Stuttgart Ballet.

On May 1, 1955, Bruhn partnered British ballerina Alicia Markova at the old Metropolitan Opera House in New York in his stunning debut as Albrecht in the Ballet Theater production of *Giselle* (1884, choreographed by Marius Petipa after Coralli and Perrot, with a score by Adolphe-Charles Adam).

A landmark ballet experience for audience members such as William Como of *Dance Magazine* and dance critic John Martin of *The New York Times*, this one performance elevated Bruhn to superstardom. From then on, he was the reigning prince in the world of ballet and was instrumental in changing the role of men in classical dance.

Bruhn's self-critical and brooding personality, however, kept him from enjoying his triumphs. Everyone may have loved him, but he loved no one--including himself. His reserve and tendency to over-analyze had been his burden and limitation as a child and shadowed his adulthood and maturity as well.

In May 1961, Bruhn was celebrated in a major article in *Time* and acclaimed for recent performances as

different as Jean the Valet in Birgit Cullberg's *Miss Julie* (1950, with a score by Ture Rangström) and Don José in Roland Petit's *Carmen* (1949, with a score by Georges Bizet).

He also virtually owned the roles of Albrecht in *Giselle*, James in *La Sylphide* (1836, choreographed by August Bournonville, with a score by Herman Severin von Løvenskjold), and Prince Siegfried in *Swan Lake* (1895, choreographed by Lev Ivanov and Marius Petipa, with a score by Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky).

At age 32, Bruhn was at the peak of his career, yet he felt stalled personally and artistically. He was desperate for renewal of some kind. This renewal came in the form of Rudolf Nureyev, a twenty-three-year-old Russian, who on June 17, 1961 announced his presence on the international dance scene by defecting from the Soviet Union in a headline-grabbing leap to freedom in Paris. Nureyev, all ambition and animal charisma, had said that of all the dancers in the world only Bruhn had something to teach him.

In a few short weeks, Nureyev found his way to Copenhagen to learn whatever Bruhn could teach him; ironically, Maria Tallchief, with whom Bruhn had had a brief affair and dancing partnership, engineered the introduction that would bring her own claim on Bruhn to an abrupt end.

As fate would have it, Bruhn and Nureyev, as different as Apollo and Dionysus, were fiercely attracted to one another. Although neither had any previous serious romantic attachments to men (Bruhn had been engaged to Bulgarian ballerina Sonia Arova for about five years before his affair with Tallchief), they formed an intense, turbulent, and profoundly transformative relationship that Bruhn later referred to as "pure Strindberg."

Until their dying days, each regarded the other as the love of his life despite the collapse of the sexual dimensions of their relationship by the mid-1960s.

In 1963, Bruhn began to experience severe stomach pain that repeated medical examinations failed to explain. Attributing the problem to psychosomatic causes, he decided to retire in late 1971 to reduce the stress in his life. Even after retirement, however, the pains continued and grew so critical that in 1973 he underwent emergency surgery that revealed a perforated ulcer.

In 1974, restored to health at age 46, Bruhn returned to dancing, but not as a regal Prince. In a production of *Giselle* featuring ex-lover Nureyev in Bruhn's former signature role of Albrecht, Bruhn scored an astounding success as Madge, the evil witch.

This triumph signaled the start of the second phase of Bruhn's dancing career. His versatility and acting skill enabled him to make a graceful transition from dancing Prince Ideal to performing vividly realized character parts such as Dr. Coppélius in *Coppélia* (1975, choreographed by Bruhn after the 1884 Petipa original, with a score by Leo Délibes), The Moor in *The Moor's Pavane* (1949, choreographed by José Limón, with a score by Henry Purcell), and the title role in *Rasputin--The Holy Devil* (1978, choreographed by James Clouser, with a score by St. Elmo's Fire Band).

The dancer's later triumphs brought renewed recognition of his uniqueness in ballet: his ability to combine flawless technique, intense character study, and total commitment to create stage performances that remained indelible to audiences.

Bruhn was appointed Artistic Director of the National Ballet of Canada in 1983, a position that he fulfilled admirably. By this time he had cemented a stable and fulfilling relationship with dancer and choreographer Constantin Patsalas, while Nureyev, his great but impossible love, remained a close friend.

Bruhn died of lung cancer in Toronto on April 1, 1986.

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### **About the Author**

**John McFarland** is a Seattle-based critic, essayist, and short story writer. He is author of the award-winning picture book *The Exploding Frog and Other Fables from Aesop*. He has contributed to such anthologies as *Letters to Our Children: Lesbian and Gay Adults Speak to the New Generation*, *The Book Club Book*, *The Isherwood Century*, and *Letters to J. D. Salinger*.