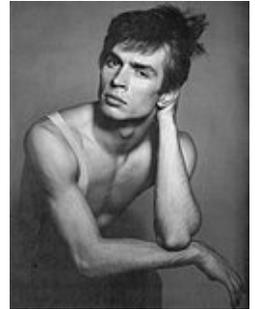




Nureyev, Rudolf (1938-1993)

by Douglas Blair Turnbaugh

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A portrait of Rudolph Nureyev by Richard Avedon.

Enfant terrible, *monstre sacré*, and *dieu de la danse* are just some of the terms that describe the incomparable dancer, choreographer, and ballet director Rudolf Nureyev.

Rudolf Hametovich Nureyev was born on a train somewhere in Siberia, about 1900 miles from Vladivostock, on March 17, 1938. The son of Muslim peasants, he was a small, malnourished, and highly sensitive child, bullied and tormented by other children.

The young Rudolf's proficiency at folk-dancing brought him to the attention of two exiled ballerinas living in Ufa. They gave him classes and introduced him to the opera ballet company there.

When Rudolf's father returned from service in World War II, he regularly beat his son for studying dance. The child dreamed "of a savior who would come, take me by the hand and rescue me from that mediocre life." However, he was rescued not by some prince, but by his own protean talent supported by unyielding will power.

What seemed an impossible dream of studying ballet at the fabled Kirov school in Leningrad came true. At age 17, he enrolled in the Leningrad Ballet School, where he was an outstanding dancer but a rebellious student. He refused to join the Communist youth league, and he studied English privately. After graduation in 1958 he became a soloist with the Kirov Ballet.

Three years later, while on tour with the Kirov Ballet in Paris, he learned that he was to be sent back to the USSR for flouting Soviet security regulations. As a consequence, he sought political asylum in France, making what came to be known as the great "leap to freedom."

He was subsequently convicted of treason in absentia by a secret Soviet trial. He lived most of the rest of his life at risk of being kidnapped or assassinated.

Nureyev's defection made headlines throughout the world. Overnight, he became a superstar. His physical beauty and sexual magnetism, coupled with his athletic ability, excited men and women alike. His seductive personality made him the darling of international society.

Moreover, his bravura dancing, especially his stupendous jumps with multiple turns in the air, and his great risk-taking, changed the way male ballet dancers danced. His fame and charisma attracted new audiences to the ballet.

Nureyev made his American debut in 1962, appearing to great acclaim on television and with Ruth Page's Chicago Opera Ballet. Later in 1962 he joined London's Royal Ballet as permanent guest artist. In so doing, he revitalized the company. Partnered with Margot Fonteyn, he gave new life to such classics as *Giselle* and *Swan Lake* and introduced such contemporary ballets as Sir Frederick Ashton's *Marguerite and Armand* (1963).

As artistic director, he formed his own touring companies and transformed the national ballet companies of Australia and Canada from provincial to world class.

In 1983, he found the artistic base for which he longed when he became artistic director of the Paris Opera Ballet. He remained in this position until 1989, when he resigned. However, he served as premier choreographer of the Paris Opera Ballet until his death.

Among his most successful works of choreography are his stagings of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Manfred*, and *The Nutcracker*.

Nureyev also choreographed (and co-directed) a lavish film ballet of *Don Quixote* (1973). This work has recently been restored and presented as part of PBS's "Great Performances" series.

An indefatigable performer, Nureyev for many years danced almost every day, sometimes with performances back-to-back. He appeared in cities throughout the world and attracted a large and diverse audience. As a result, he amassed a fortune, which he invested shrewdly, but also spent lavishly on houses and works of art.

One of Nureyev's great contributions to ballet had to do with his sexual openness. Completely comfortable with his own sexuality, Nureyev expended no effort in presenting a heterosexual image on stage or off. Hence, he was able to concentrate on expressing music and choreography as it seemed appropriate to him. His openness helped liberate other male dancers from the obsession with maintaining a heterosexual image.

Nureyev's sex life was as legendary--and frenetic--as his dancing. His sexual partners ranged from hustlers to the rich and famous. The large size of his penis was not only the subject of gossip, but it was also confirmed by photographs taken by Richard Avedon.

Nureyev's most intense affair was with the Danish dancer Erik Bruhn (1928-1986). Bruhn possessed an elegant, refined, classical style, quite different from Nureyev's feral qualities. Yet in 1961 Nureyev felt that Bruhn was the only living dancer who had anything to teach him.

He sought out the older dancer and fell in love with him. Although the dour Bruhn responded physically to Nureyev, the intense and turbulent relationship that ensued was not a happy one, perhaps because Bruhn suffered from professional jealousy and anxiety. As Nureyev's star rose, Bruhn became reclusive and alcoholic.

The dancers' physical relationship ended in the mid-1960s, but Nureyev never ceased loving Bruhn.

Nureyev also had a long-term relationship with director and archivist Wallace Potts in the 1970s. In 1978, Nureyev was briefly infatuated with a young dancer, Robert Tracy. Tracy moved into Nureyev's New York apartment, where he stayed until evicted thirteen years later, treated, as he said, "like a lackey."

Nureyev and Tracy were both diagnosed with the AIDS virus in 1983. When he learned that the dancer had left him nothing in his will, Tracy filed a palimony suit against Nureyev's estate and received a settlement of about \$600,000.

Nureyev died in Paris of AIDS-related complications on January 6, 1993. He left the bulk of his fortune to establish foundations to promote dance and medical research.

The greatest dancer of his time, Nureyev thrilled millions of people with his artistry. He also gave the world a new and glamorous image of a sexually active gay man.

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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.