Rudolf Nureyev

Early in 1964 excitement was growing in the Australian dance world: Rudolf Nureyev was coming to perform with The Australian Ballet. Already we knew that Nureyev, born in 1938 on a train hurtling through the Russian countryside, had made a dramatic escape to the West in 1961 while on tour with the Kirov Ballet in Paris. We knew too that following his defection he had very quickly established an admired partnership with Margot Fonteyn at The Royal Ballet in London.

Fonteyn was already well known to Australian audiences having made several guest appearances in the 1950s. Nureyev too had been to Australia earlier to visit his friends, Danish dancer Erik Bruhn and Bulgarian-born ballerina Sonia Arova, who were guesting during The Australian Ballet's inaugural season in 1962. But this time Nureyev was to dance here, and with Fonteyn. 'None of us could believe they were coming,' recalled Noël Pelly, the company's press representative at the time.

The 1964 season opened in Sydney in April and I remember standing in a long queue for several hours outside the now demolished Elizabethan Theatre in Newtown, an inner Sydney suburb. I wanted to secure standing room tickets in the gods, the highest part of the theatre and the farthest from the stage. As a student at the time they were the only tickets I could afford. I saw all three programs—the Romantic classic *Giselle*, the full, four act *Swan Lake*, and a mixed program of divertissements in which Nureyev appeared with South American ballerina Lupe Serrano in two pas de deux, including that from the ballet *Le Corsaire*.

Nureyev had first danced *Giselle* in Russia in 1959 and it was the first ballet he danced with Fonteyn after his defection. Their performances had instantly won accolades from the British press and we saw why in that opening season: an astonishing rapport existed between the two dancers. *Swan Lake* too gave us an insight into a partnership that would flourish for many years to come. But it was the pas de deux from *Le Corsaire* that showed us why Nureyev's dancing was such a shock to the Western world. It was so powerful, so sensual, and technically like nothing we had seen before. I can still recall the moment he came on stage, running in from an upstage corner, pausing, and then provocatively lifting his two hands to his shoulders. I remember his solo variation with its explosive jumps and turns, and I especially recall the way he threw himself passionately to the ground beside Lupe Serrano in the final pose. Even from up in the gods his presence was magnetic. The tumultuous applause went on and on until we were treated to an encore.

Australians were incredibly lucky to see Nureyev dance so soon after his defection and to see the partnership with Fonteyn so early in its evolution. Nureyev would return to Australia several times in later years, perhaps most significantly to stage his production of *Don Quixote* in 1970 when he performed the leading male role of Basilio beside Lucette Aldous as Kitri, the leading lady. Nureyev had first noticed and admired Aldous in a performance of *Giselle* in London in 1962 when she was dancing with Ballet Rambert. Later he personally invited her to return to Australia to perform with him. The star studded Australian cast of *Don Quixote* also included Robert Helpmann in the title role, and the production had what Colin Peasley, who played the role of the foppish Gamache, has called 'the charm and sunshine of Spain.' Nureyev also had an eye for detail in his production and even had Aldous take castanet lessons so that when dancing with castanets in her hands her movements looked authentic.

Nureyev's *Don Quixote* was filmed in 1972 in disused hangars at Essendon airport in Melbourne. Both the live performances and the film showed Aldous as a very feisty Kitri and also another side of Nureyev's talent. Basilio is a barber and as such he is a commoner. The role allowed Nureyev to perform with a certain humour and charm that could not be a feature of his performances in more aristocratic roles. But stories about the filming abound. Almost all the dancers who performed in it mention how hard they worked and how Nureyev demanded so much of them—their working day started very early in the morning and often continued late into the evening. They all recall too how Nureyev insisted on using live animals and real fruit and vegetables in the marketplace scenes, despite the fact that filming took place in a summer heatwave. Over the course of the filming, the fruit and vegetables began to deteriorate and rot, giving off a decidedly unpleasant odour.

But Nureyev was a gypsy at heart. He went wherever dance called him and by the end of his life owned properties in seven locations around the world. He kept up a lasting connection with London's Royal Ballet, where his career with Fonteyn had begun,

but he maintained a particular fondness for Paris, the city that gave him refugee status, thus allowing him to travel widely. He became director of the Paris Opera Ballet from 1983 to 1989 and staged a number of works for them, including his own versions of nineteenth century Russian classics such as *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty* and *La Bayadère*. He also felt an affinity with Vienna, where in 1966 he first produced his version of *Don Quixote*, having also staged *Swan Lake* there as early as 1964. The Viennese granted him citizenship in 1982 and named a street after him—Rudolf Nurejew Promenade.

From the time of his first performance in Milan in Kenneth MacMillan's *Romeo and Juliet* in 1965, Nureyev also maintained a close connection with the ballet company of La Scala. In 1966 he staged *The Sleeping Beauty* for the company and went on to produce most of his revisions of the great Russian classics there. Nureyev's own production of *Romeo and Juliet* was staged in Milan in 1980 when he partnered illustrious Italian ballerina Carla Fracci. He continued to dance with Fracci in many other productions at La Scala, including in *Giselle* and *Don Quixote*.

His influence in Milan was exceptional and, in May 2018, La Scala staged a gala performance to honour the 80th anniversary of his birth and the 25th of his death in 1993.

But what exactly was it about Nureyev that astounded the Western world in the 1960s and beyond? In Australia, even in 1962 when Nureyev was simply visiting, company dancers recall watching Nureyev do an evening warm-up class with Bruhn and Arova before those two guests artists began their performances. It was a private warm-up and company dancers were not allowed near the stage. But they would go up into the flies, the space over the stage, and watch from there. Colin Peasley, then a corps de ballet dancer, recalls, 'This is when we saw what dance was all about. Rudi was the most charismatic dancer you have ever seen in your life. He had a huge effect on men in the company. He wanted to expand the possibilities of dance.'

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In his choreographic revisions of the old Russian classics Nureyev aimed especially to give more opportunities to male dancers, and he often did so by inserting new solo variations in ballets where he thought male dancing had been a little neglected— in his production of *Swan Lake* for example.

He also dwelt on the interpretations that might be given to male characters in well known ballets. With *Giselle* he believed that the roles of the village girl Giselle and the nobleman Albrecht were of equal importance and he honed his own interpretation of Albrecht to reflect that belief. He also wanted to develop his own technique as much as he could. Ray Powell, ballet master for The Australian Ballet over several decades, recalled that Nureyev would say to him in class, 'You give me knitting,' meaning small, beaten steps. He wanted something he felt he didn't get in Russia—fast footwork that would expand his technical prowess.

Nureyev was temperamental and sometimes impossible according to Bill Akers, The Australian Ballet's director of productions during the Nureyev era, and there are many stories about his fits of anger and his outlandish behaviour. Peter Bahen, Australian Ballet administrator from 1967 to 1983, recalls that Nureyev once drove his car, with Bahen in the passenger seat, straight down a flight of steps to reach the building where he was staying in Marseille. But Akers has suggested that not everyone was privileged to see the other side of Nureyev, his generosity to those he loved—to Fonteyn as she struggled with the cancer that ended her life, for example. Nureyev paid her medical bills. And he stresses the respect and reverence Nureyev had for the art form that was his life. Nureyev searched for perfection in ballet. He was the man who changed the art form forever.

Michelle Potter
is an independent dance writer, historian and curator with a doctorate in Art History and Dance History from the Australian National University.