

Ballet dancer was one of our greatest exports

Rowena Jackson

b March 24, 1926
d August 15, 2024

Ballet dancer, Rowena Jackson Chatfield, has died aged 98, on the Gold Coast near Brisbane where she and her husband, Philip Chatfield, also a celebrated dancer, lived close to family in recent decades. (Philip died there, also in his 90s, in 2021.)

Rowena was our first and most celebrated dancer abroad who, together with fellow countrymen Alexander Grant and Bryan Ashbridge, put New Zealand firmly on the map of world ballet.

An oral history of Rowena Jackson recorded by Hugo Manson in 2001 opens with the question: "What did you have for breakfast, Rowena?" This is Hugo's stock-in-trade way to test the microphone, adjust volume settings, and put the interviewee at ease before embarking on a life profile with date and place of birth, and so on.

Rowena tells Hugo what she's eaten for breakfast and then in easy conversation continues to explain at some length the health benefits of different food groups and which combinations give optimal nutritional value. This is more than a mic test, as it gives the listener instant insight into the cheerful personality of a logical and clear-thinking woman with disciplined life habits, ever ready to help others aiming for their best in any endeavour.

The youngest of five children and the only girl, Rowena was born in Invercargill in 1926. That was the year Anna Pavlova brought her company to New Zealand. There was plenty of "fancy dancing" around, but only a minimal awareness here of ballet. Many thousands saw Pavlova perform and never forgot it, opening a pathway to visiting companies in following decades.

A doctor recommended the young Rowena be sent to dance classes to help with breathing as she had a tendency towards bronchitis. The family moved to Dunedin (her father was a morse code operator with Post & Telegraph). Rowena attended classes with Rosetta Powell, who had danced in Pavlova's company, and Stan Lawson, a tap dancer, singer and comedian, member of the entertainment division of the New Zealand Army.

Rowena's talent for acrobatics and her determination to do her best, coupled with her mother Lily's insistence that she practice dancing for an hour each day after school, soon saw the child on the road to success. Two visiting companies, Covent Garden Russian Ballet and the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, were sources of inspiration – with Anton Dolin and Irina Baronova particularly impressed by her talent.

In 1939 a benefit concert in Dunedin raised funds for Rowena's further training and the family moved to Auckland. Rowena was academically bright, but she left school, Epsom Girls' Grammar, aged 14 and went briefly to Australia for coaching from Russian-trained dancers there.

Upon return she was awarded a scholarship by the Royal Academy of Dancing, but with the war years looming was unable to take up the offer. For four years, from age 15 to 19, she worked as a colourist in a photographic studio in

Auckland and did no dancing whatsoever.

It is tribute to her extraordinary determination that by 1946 she was on her way to England to dance. The following year she and Bryan Ashbridge, were joint winners of gold medals in the Adeline Genée awards in London, the New Zealanders out-dancing entrants from everywhere.

Those years of study were trying ("with neither encouragement nor criticism"), but she made it into the Sadler's Wells (later Royal Ballet) company. Her prodigious technique was attracting attention and she became renowned for her ability in many kinds of pirouettes (turning) that put her in a class of her own and into the Guinness Book of Records, with 121 consecutive turns. Most dancers are pleased to achieve 32, but here was the unstoppable girl from Invercargill turning with no hint of straying from the spot. "I guess my body was the right proportion to give me good balance," she modestly remarked.

The company toured extensively in post-war Europe – Germany, Scandinavia, Italy, but it was the devastation in Warsaw that moved Rowena most deeply. "The audiences didn't clap. Many Polish people were starving, they begged us for food from our lunch boxes."

Back in England Rowena confided to the Company director, Ninette de Valois, that she really felt drawn to do something more useful and wondered if she should give up ballet and train as a nurse, to do some good in the world. De Valois managed to persuade her that dancing a performance of calibre was a real way to do good and so she stayed.

Cyril Beaumont, leading English dance critic, gave encouraging counsel to Rowena, on the balance between technical abilities and the interpretation of roles, for which she was grateful.

In a tour to USA in 1947, to cement friendship after the war effort, dancers were dressed in designer clothes financed by the British Travel Board. They would change on the plane so as to arrive as walking advertisements for the British textile and design industry.

Margot Fonteyn danced a legendary Aurora in *The Sleeping Beauty*, and Rowena danced Bluebird. It is said the curtain calls in New York lasted almost as long as the ballet. (Rowena's family report that Bluebird remained her favourite role of the many she was acclaimed for).

There were challenges in the five-month tour, many one-night stays, (Equity became involved to protect dancers' rights), sometimes the stage was oiled meaning disaster for dancers, the temperature in Canada was a bone-chilling 20 below, so a carnation she was given was frozen. She did however find the light air of mountainous Denver meant she could spin even faster than usual.

In 1954 Rowena, with Ashbridge, were guest dancers in the Auckland Arts Festival, and their excerpts from *Swan Lake* had designs by Colin McCahon. A further tour in 1957 had New Zealanders thrilled at the chance to see her dance, but the tour was cut short due to Rowena's appendicitis requiring surgery.

Back in England, Rowena was praised for her performances of *Giselle*, *Swan Lake*, and *The Sleeping Beauty*. In 1958 she married

Philip Chatfield, fellow dancer, and they both toured with the full company of Royal Ballet to Australia and New Zealand in 1958/59.

Soon thereafter the Chatfields retired from performing and settled to family life in Auckland. Frank Poore of the Light Opera Club staged *Pink Champagne*, after *Die Fledermaus*, in His Majesty's Theatre and Rowena's famous pirouettes filled the theatre and rescued the company from near insolvency.

Poul Gnatt of New Zealand Ballet and Russell Kerr of Auckland Ballet Theatre were planning a United Ballet season in 1959/60. They persuaded the Chatfields to perform (Rowena was newly pregnant, but managed to keep that quiet). Her commitment to helping those who would dance was never in question, and that season was a triumph.

With son Paul and daughter Rosetta they had a happy family life, resourcefully running a coffee lounge, a hair salon and picture-framing business, as well as coaching and teaching. In 1973, Philip was appointed Director of the National School of Ballet in Wellington, with Rowena as associate tutor. Among those they coached were Martin James, Sherilyn Kennedy and Kerry-Anne Gilberd, all of whom went on to significant careers in ballet.

In 1975 Philip was appointed artistic director of New Zealand Ballet and Rowena took over as director of the school. Once again the company, near insolvency, was brought back into the black, with pedigree productions and full houses.

His own choreographies included *The Kiss*, *The Last Reunion*, and *He Tohu Aroha*, based on Māori dance imagery, to a score by Christopher Norton.

After their three-year term, the family moved back to Auckland where they continued teaching. In 1976 a documentary of Rowena was made and in 1985 Bob Parker hosted her in a *This Is Your Life* programme. (These and other films are available for viewing at Nga Taonga Film Archive in Wellington).

In 1983 RNZB director Harry Haythorne involved the Chatfields in the company's 30th anniversary gala which included *The Kiss* and *The Last Reunion*.

In 1993 Rowena and Philip moved to be near family on the Gold Coast, where their teaching and coaching continued at the Randsley School of Dance.

In preparing the book, *Royal New Zealand Ballet at Sixty*, in 2012-2013, Anne Rowse and I were pleased to be again in touch with Rowena and Philip. They had detailed recall of everything that had ever happened in their careers here. Maree White, dancer with RNZB recalls: "What impressed me was how effortlessly generous they were with their knowledge and spirit. They inspired me both in and out of the dance world."

Rowena was a New Zealander, who by her dancing and teaching, had surely done good in the world.

– by Jennifer Shennan
Sources: Hugo Manson oral history in Alexander Turnbull Library, Anne Rowse, Mary-Jane O'Reilly, Bronwyn Williams of RAD, Susannah Lees-Jeffries of RNZB, Garry Trinder of NZSD, staff at Nga Taonga Film & Sound Archive



Rowena Jackson as Odette, 1950s, date unknown.