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The Brando of Ballet

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Tamara Zakrzhevskaya/WNET New York and BBC

Rudolf Nureyev near the Vaganova Academy in Leningrad, circa 1960.

By TONI BENTLEY  
Published: December 2, 2007

The Nureyev family of the small industrial town of Ufa in the Soviet republic of Bashkiria was so poor that at the age of 5 little Rudik had no shoes. He was carried to school by his mother on her back. He was called a “beggar” by the other children. One day he fainted from hunger. Fifty-two years later, at a packed auction at Christie’s in New York, a single pair of [Rudolf Nureyev’s](#) used ballet slippers sold for more than \$9,000. John Dryden called dancing “the poetry of the foot,” and rarely before had a pair of feet so defined, and symbolized, this poetry. Every male ballet dancer for the past five decades has been dancing in the space, the vast terra infirma, charted by Nureyev’s well-worn shoes.

NUREYEV  
The Life.

By Julie Kavanagh.  
Illustrated. 782 pp. Pantheon  
Books. \$37.50.

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“Everything I have,” he said, “the legs have danced for.” At his death, in 1993, he left an estate worth \$21 million — an unprecedented fortune in a scandalously underpaid profession, and a sign of his unparalleled fame. During a career of more than 30 years, those not very long legs carried this astonishing man, with one of the great chiseled faces of the 20th century, a powerful body and a dark soul, across the stages, the modern altars, of the world.



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[Dance: The Nureyev Nobody Knows, Young and Wild](#) (August 26, 2007)

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Jacques Pavlovsky/Sygma — Corbis  
Rudolf Nureyev at the Palais des Sports in Paris, 1974.

Nureyev was never, technically, the best classical male dancer of his era — [Mikhail Baryshnikov](#) was more agile, [Peter Martins](#) was more fluid, Fernando Bujones had better line and feet, and others were superior partners — but he led the way for them all. In his jumps, with the look-at-me preparations that signaled a heroic event (which they usually were), his turns (always a little hopping and hair-raising), his lavish, yearning reaches and his magnificent presence, he was without question the most spirited dancer. His magnetic allure (to both sexes) made him omnipotent. He didn't walk onto the stage. He strutted with the air of a prince and a prowler, the pride in his own beauty offset by a knowing humor. He owned his audience before he even started dancing. Energy made flesh, he brought sex to ballet like no one had before — or has since. In doing so he brought the classical art form to which he indentured himself an audience of millions who might otherwise not have been interested. In this alone, his legacy is lasting and enormous.

Julie Kavanagh, a British dance journalist who trained as a dancer and the author of “Secret Muses: The Life of [Frederick Ashton](#),” has written a superbly researched biography of Nureyev, 14 years after his death and nine years after publication of the one other significant biography, by the American writer Diane Solway. Solway's biography was subtitled “His Life.” Kavanagh's, with the grandiosity of authorization by the two foundations that bear Nureyev's name, is subtitled “The Life.” His life, the life: either way, it was an extraordinary one.

Its “most romantic” event, Nureyev liked to say, was his birth, in 1938, in a train hurtling across Siberia. Born in movement, he never stopped. Both his mother, Farida, and his father, Hamet, were Tatars, Mongolian Muslims and devoted Communists. Nureyev insisted that he had always hated his father, a political officer in the Red Army and decorated war hero whom he would denounce as a brutal “Stalinist.” Solway's biography includes a story Nureyev told to another dancer about the time, when he was a young child, that his father beat him after he got an erection while he was being scrubbed in the public baths. While acknowledging Hamet was strict, distant and disapproving of his son's early passion for dancing, Kavanagh tries, somewhat unpersuasively, to cast doubt on the charge that he was abusive. “Other family members find this hard to believe,” she writes, and quotes one childhood friend saying he never saw Hamet beating or swearing at Rudolf. Family and friends are always so reliable in matters like these.

Nureyev referred to his childhood as his “potato period,” when that vegetable was the main sustenance and “six people and a dog” lived in one room, freezing throughout the long, bitter winters. “At night,” he said, “I could never stretch out completely.” Needs born in deprivation will rarely be satisfied by any reality, and the whole globe could not, in the end, accommodate this ravenous man's need to “stretch out.”

After seeing his first ballet at age 7 he became instantly obsessed, and despite tremendous odds against him he eventually made it to the famed Vaganova Academy in Leningrad, the school that produced Pavlova, Karsavina, Fokine, Nijinsky, Balanchine and later Makarova and Baryshnikov. Arriving at age 17, Nureyev was not as well trained as his classmates, and his sense of inadequacy fed a fanaticism about class that never left him. I remember watching him at the [School of American Ballet](#) decades later, always with a woolen cap on


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his head to keep the heat in the furnace, standing at the barre with such focused concentration that his tendu almost seared the floor, making him the center of the room. He was possessed, lacking the filter of self-possession coveted by most dancers.

Accepted into the [Kirov Ballet](#) in 1958, he immediately began to make a mark, as both a dancer and a very bad boy. During his debut in “Don Quixote,” the last intermission extended to almost an hour while he refused to finish the ballet wearing the short trousers he likened to “lampshades.” He had seen photographs of Western dancers and, like them, wanted to wear just tights. And Nureyev in tights was a sight to see — no wonder they wanted him to keep the lampshades on!

Taken into the home of the celebrated teacher Alexander Pushkin and his dancer wife, Xenia, he was coddled and educated in all things theatrical. He lost his virginity, at 21, to the possessive Xenia — and possibly slept with Pushkin as well. Before long, a fourth was added to the ménage, Teja Kremke, a handsome young East German student at the Vaganova Academy whom Nureyev called his “first crush.” He later claimed that Kremke taught him “the art of male love,” though several male lovers told Kavanagh that he usually skipped the “art” part. Kremke also took the earliest films of Nureyev dancing and was a lone voice in encouraging the young dancer to leave. “Go! Get out!” he said. “Don’t stay here or no one will hear of you!” Well, that didn’t happen.

On June 16, 1961, Nureyev defected in Paris, and fame was thrust upon the 23-year-old dancer in a worldwide news media frenzy. Despite Kremke’s encouragement, there is ample evidence that Nureyev’s defection was not a premeditated act but a spontaneous one, made in impossible circumstances. Because of his already well-established renegade behavior in Russia, the K.G.B. had been keeping a close watch on him in Paris while he socialized with French dancers. Afraid that he would defect, they appear to have, in part, precipitated his defection. On the morning he was to fly to London with the company to continue the tour, he was told at the airport that he was flying back to Moscow to dance for Khrushchev. Then he was told his mother was ill. He knew that it was a trap and that if he returned to Russia he might be sent home to Ufa and forbidden to travel again.

After receiving last-minute whispered instructions from a friend he had made in Paris, he took “six steps exactly” (the famed “leap to freedom” was, in fact, a short walk) away from the K.G.B. agents guarding him and toward two undercover French policemen who were waiting. When the agents grabbed their man, one of the Parisian officials, in a wonderful moment of French diplomacy, said indignantly, “Ne le touchez pas — nous sommes en France.” (“Don’t touch him — we are in France.”) The deed was done. Nureyev left his country, his family, his friends and his beloved Pushkin forever.

Kavanagh cites a chilling K.G.B. file from 1962 discussing methods to lessen Nureyev’s “professional skills,” including directives to “break one or both” of his legs. A few years later he was tried in absentia for treason, found guilty and given the (apparently) light sentence of seven years in prison. While none he left behind were arrested, his friends and family were persecuted for years as a result of their association with the now-criminal dancer.

Within months of his defection he was dancing everywhere, and the rest really is history — the history of an equally greedy and generous artist. The list of where and with whom he danced is a who’s who of ballet in the mid-20th century. Over the next three decades he appeared with virtually every major, and minor, company, including the [Royal Ballet](#), the [Paris Opera Ballet](#) (where he also served as director from 1983 to 1989), the Australian Ballet and [American Ballet Theater](#), and he worked with practically every active choreographer, classical and modern, including Frederick Ashton, Kenneth MacMillan,

Maurice Béjart, Martha Graham, [Merce Cunningham](#), [Paul Taylor](#), [Jerome Robbins](#) and, even at last, briefly, the one he wanted more than all the others: [George Balanchine](#). He danced with most of the eminent ballerinas of his time, from Natalia Dudinskaya, Yvette Chauviré and Carla Fracci to Lynn Seymour, Natalia Makarova and Sylvie Guillem. And then there was Margot Fonteyn.

Eight months after his defection, they danced together for the first time, in “Giselle” — then in everything, with Ashton’s “Marguerite and Armand” (based on “La Dame aux Camélias” by Dumas *fil*s) defining them forever. Thus began a partnership that will be remembered as perhaps the greatest in all dance history, not least for its erotic Oedipal overtones. Dame Margot Fonteyn was aristocratic, beautiful, enamored of her young lion, with a profound passion lurking behind the ladylike exterior — and, at 42, old enough to be his mother. He was wild, unkempt and impetuous, and needed to be loved with a fervor that matched her need to give love. Audiences treated them like rock stars, waiting in lines for days for tickets, scalping them at record prices and showering them with more than 20 curtain calls a performance. Colette’s Chéri and Léa had come to the ballet, though some, like John Martin, the dance critic for The New York Times, were less than approving. “She has gone,” he wrote, “to the grand ball with a gigolo.”

After hours, Nureyev was to be found in the company of Jackie Onassis, Lee Radziwill, [Andy Warhol](#), [Richard Avedon](#) (who shot a famous nude of him), [Mick Jagger](#), [Marlene Dietrich](#) (“that boy,” she called him) and [Peter O’Toole](#). Money became an obsession — Ninette de Valois called him “money mad.” He rarely picked up a tab, often had no cash on him and early on set new standards for fees for his performances. He established a residence in Monaco and offshore foundations in Luxembourg and Liechtenstein; he hated paying taxes. By the end of his life, he had seven properties: an apartment on the Quai Voltaire in Paris, a house outside London, an apartment in the Dakota in New York, a villa in the South of France, a house on St. Barts, an 18th-century farm in Virginia and Li Galli, three small islands in the Mediterranean on the Amalfi Coast that had belonged to Léonide Massine. He amassed a sizable collection of paintings, antique furniture and numerous Turkish kilims, reminders of his childhood. The starving son of Farida and Hamet could never get enough of anything — space, applause, money, sex. His dislocation was complete.

Offstage his conduct was unbecoming. His misbehavior, unsurprisingly, was often of the physical variety: punching (he was sued for cracking a teacher’s jaw), kicking, throwing and spitting, along with cursing and refusing anything he didn’t like — food, costumes, partners, tempos, choreography. He was totally unpleasant, yet totally charming, the old contradictory makeup of many illustrious artists and hooligans. Kavanagh dutifully recounts all the outrages, like the time he arrived at the opening night party of the Spoleto Festival at the house of the festival director, [Gian Carlo Menotti](#), as the guest of honor and, seeing that he had to wait in a buffet line, smashed a wine glass on the floor and departed in a flourish. Nureyev was the Brando of ballet, a solipsistic brute, an especially unusual character in a profession where obedience to a higher order and good manners are central to the art itself.

Kavanagh also documents, in equal detail, Nureyev’s very, very busy sex life. He slept with a number of women — the jury remains out on Fonteyn (many think yes, many think no, she said no, he said yes ... and no) — and liked on occasion to claim, erroneously, to have impregnated a few. But he was, in fact, a committed homosexual, and despite several long-term relationships — with Erik Bruhn, Wallace Potts (the saint to Nureyev’s sinner) and Robert Tracy — he was always sexually agitated, and bathhouses, clubbing and anonymous pickups were a regular part of his life.

When he defected, Nureyev stated that he had two goals: to study with Bruhn, and to work with George Balanchine. Both dreams were, in their fashion, fulfilled, but be careful, as they say, what you wish for. He called Bruhn, a brooding Dane 10 years his senior, the love of his life — “he’s so cold he’s like ice; you touch it and it burns you.” Their affair was marked by intense love, relentless competition, long distances and other lovers. Kavanagh reproduces, at length, some of Bruhn’s tormented love letters, and while moving in their misery they do the sensitive dancer, writing in a language not his own, no service. “My dearest and only one Human in the world,” he wrote, “You are the essence the focus of all my world take my life if you want you so dear to me. ...” The relationship ended with lasting affection, and Nureyev was at Bruhn’s deathbed in 1986.

The Balanchine connection was also a tortured affair. Nureyev had pursued Balanchine from the beginning, even going so far as to offer him two months a year of his time while most other choreographers were allotted only days. But this wasn’t really Balanchine’s style. He wanted all your time; he wanted, if you were lucky, your life. “When you are tired of playing at being a prince,” Balanchine famously told him, “come to me.” But the poor Tatar boy never tired of being the prince, and therein lies the essence of why these two huge figures in 20th-century ballet, from the same mother, the Kirov, were never to merge onstage. Though both lived by Balanchine’s philosophy — “More! More! What are you waiting for?” — they represented polar opposites in terms of ethics and thus aesthetics. Balanchine celebrated women (and the Divine), and Nureyev celebrated himself.

In 1979, 18 years after Nureyev’s defection, Balanchine finally invited him to appear in a staging of “Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme.” Nureyev called it “a gift from God.” The production was for the [New York City Opera](#) — they needed a fund-raiser, and Nureyev would sell tickets. But Balanchine became ill in the middle of the rehearsals, others finished the staging, and Nureyev’s long-dreamed-of collaboration became a cruel joke.

In 1984 Nureyev was diagnosed with H.I.V. He lived, danced and apparently continued to have unprotected sex for nine more years, never publicly acknowledging his illness, despite the rumors. In 1987, when Nureyev’s mother was dying, [François Mitterrand](#) — times had changed — helped the dancer secure a 36-hour visa. Nureyev had not seen his mother for 26 years. After the long trip to Ufa, he found her curled up in pain on an old ottoman in an empty room. She had had a stroke and did not open her eyes or speak. He stayed less than 10 minutes. After he left, his mother murmured, “It was Rudik.” Never allowed to travel, Farida had missed seeing her only son’s glorious career in the West. The Soviet government, he later said, had delivered the “last blow.”

Kavanagh’s exhaustive book is best when she’s writing about Nureyev’s first years of poverty and suffering and his last years of wealth and suffering. He feels human. But in between, when he was a meteor shattering all expectations onstage and off, and something definitely beyond human, the biography becomes a somewhat leaden laundry list of his prodigious comings and goings. The book reads more like the biography of a celebrity than an artist, and they are not the same thing. An artist has, in addition to the expensive houses and the tantrums, an emanation that is his art.

Finally, Kavanagh’s meticulous reporting of the adolescent antics and the transgressive sex life ends up overpowering any discussion of Nureyev’s art, demonstrating one of the perpetual difficulties of writing about dance and its practitioners. It is near impossible (unless you are Paul Valéry or Edwin Denby) to render the three dimensions of a dancer’s performance, however transcendent, as convincingly or dramatically as a dancer’s bad behavior in the wings. With Nureyev, the offstage offenses were as numerous as the onstage miracles, which all too often receive banal description. “Rudolf projected a powerful physical allure,” Kavanagh writes of his performance in “The Sleeping Beauty,”



“most apparent in the hunting scene, where beplumed and bedecked in lace and satin, he stalked the stage with real aristocratic command.”

So if you want the dish, you will not be disappointed. And if you want long, literal summaries of various ballets and choreography — including Nureyev’s own, much of which was of dubious value (Arlene Croce called him “a choreographer of staggering incompetence”) — you will find this too. You will also find some delightful nuggets from those who knew Nureyev. “He has a marvelous engine inside him, like a Rolls-Royce,” Frederick Ashton said. “I feel he’s a mixture of a Tartar, a faun and a kind of lost urchin. He’s the Rimbaud of the Steppes.” But amid all the reportage Kavanagh offers little of her own illumination of his genius, and amongst the foliage, the great sequoia is lost.

Furthermore, Kavanagh’s fondness for unattributed quotations makes for awkward reading. In addition to forcing readers to keep one thumb embedded in the endnotes, the practice undermines her authorial voice. “For a dancer who embodied freedom, bringing its ‘large, magical aura’ with him onstage,” she writes on one occasion, “it was only natural that he would want to ‘crash the gates’ between ballet and modern dance.” (The first quotation is from Arlene Croce, the second from the “Gruen transcript” — meaning either Nureyev himself or John Gruen, Erik Bruhn’s biographer, said it.)

There are also some notable omissions, despite Kavanagh’s nearly 800 pages. She offers no follow-up of events after his death concerning his family’s legal battles with his foundations, the much publicized auctions of his estate or the outcry by prominent AIDS activists after his death that in concealing his H.I.V. status he avoided an important opportunity to bring attention and money to AIDS research during his lifetime. And I was puzzled by her mere parenthetical aside, among the numerous performances she documents, of Nureyev’s famous 1978 appearance on “The Muppet Show.” His pas de deux with a giant pig in “Swine Lake” is only the enticing warm-up for the *pièce de résistance*: his scene in the steam bath, in a towel, with an understandably amorous Miss Piggy. (Go to YouTube for the denouement.)

In his final years, Nureyev insisted on literally, excruciatingly, dying before our eyes, giving performances so ragged and inept that audiences whistled and demanded refunds — which suggests something besides simple flouting of the cardinal rule that performers should know when to retire gracefully. He was ill, but the stage was his only real home, so he stayed there. He demanded, somehow, that we see the suffering human behind the Dionysian god. He continued to the end in that transparent recklessness that was his deepest gift as a dancer. Nureyev, like [Maria Callas](#) (as Clive Barnes once noted), popularized and changed his art form forever, with a combination of technique, dedication and respect for its tradition, while simultaneously blowing it wide open with a kind of divine individual desperation.

He spent much of the last months of his life on Li Galli, where he had built an underground mausoleum covered in tiles that spelled his mother’s name in Arabic motifs. He was found one day, by Carla Fracci, lying on the floor in an echo of his childhood, sleeping on one of his kilim carpets and eating potatoes. By the end of Kavanagh’s sad book, he feels like the loneliest man in the world.

“They pay us,” Nureyev once said, “for our fear.” Sure, vanity, self-indulgence and cruelty ran rampant throughout his short, tempestuous life. But he faced death with defiance not only when he was dying. In daring to be so vehemently, disobediently alive, he faced it, for us, every time he stepped onstage. Great dancing, unlike good dancing, is an experience of beauty laced with pity, a haunted happening in the shadow of our transience. Dancers are

willing slaves to the time and gravity that rule us all, and dancing is mortality in motion. Ultimately, even Rudolf Nureyev was not paid enough for his courage.

*Toni Bentley danced with the New York City Ballet for 10 years. She is the author of five books, including “Winter Season: A Dancer’s Journal” and, most recently, “The Surrender: An Erotic Memoir.” She is currently writing a book about Balanchine’s “Serenade.”*

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