

December 5, 2004

'Margot Fonteyn': Leaping Beauty

By TONI BENTLEY

AMONG the great female dancers of the 20th century, only a few transcended their immediate careers and personalities to become true epic creatures of dance history. Anna Pavlova (1882-1931) brought the ballerina of 19th-century Russian ballet to the West and gave us a vision and thus a deep yearning for the woman as sylph -- beautiful, silky, impossible. Margot Fonteyn (1919-91) gave Pavlova's sylph a woman's body and an English accent. No less than Admiral Nelson, she personified the very best of British bravery. In her tiny tutu, rhinestone tiara and pink pointe shoes, she remained the jewel of the empire when the empire was no more, and became muse to the choreographer Frederick Ashton in such ballets as "Cinderella," "Ondine" and "Marguerite and Armand." She redefined the 19th-century classics -- "Swan Lake," "Sleeping Beauty," "Giselle" -- with her faultless line, presenting images of such integrity that a simple pose could pierce your heart. Fonteyn offered physical symmetry as a moral force.

MARGOT FONTEYN

By Meredith Daneman.

Illustrated. 654 pp. Viking. \$32.95.

Meredith Daneman's "Margot Fonteyn" has captured what few know: the heartbreak behind the heroine. Daneman, herself a former professional dancer and the author of four novels, has written the definitive book on this icon beloved of balletomanes around the world. She has also captured on the page the power of nobility radiated by her subject, a woman so dedicated, so self-effacing, so stubborn and so loving that her story manages to attain by its tragic ending the same effect as one of her performances.

Fonteyn was born Margaret Evelyn Hookham in Reigate, Surrey, May 18, 1919, to an engineer father whose family prided itself "on its lower-middle-class orthodoxy and utter lack of exception" and a Brazilian-Irish mother. Like all interesting lives, hers includes a multiplicity of stories.

There is the love story between the quiet, dark-haired, little English girl called Peggy, who refused any nourishment but baked beans on toast for years on end, and the intelligent, headstrong, adoring mother, Hilda (or Nita, as she preferred to be known), who sent her magical child to her first ballet class at 4, and nurtured, encouraged and supported her for nearly 70 years. Despite numerous lovers, the daughter did not move from under her mother's protective roof until she was 26. Lincoln Kirstein once remarked that for all the many biographies of ballerinas someone should tell the stories of "the mothers" -- for, almost without exception, every great ballerina has had a formidable mother behind her and a distant, or nonexistent, father: you do the Freud. The theater has always been a place where mothers and daughters without husbands or fathers find refuge and flourish.

THEN there is the story of the founding of British ballet by an unlikely coterie of dreamers who were transformed by the theatrical vision that Diaghilev's Ballets Russes introduced to Europe in the years before World War I and who decided to plant classical ballet in British soil. Complete with the English ballet star Robert Helpmann as resident court jester, this coterie featured dedicated British dancers; Constant Lambert,

the gifted composer and conductor who gave British ballet its musical roots; and Frederick Ashton, all guided and goaded by a woman of steel resolve and absolute conviction, Dame Ninette de Valois (born Edris Stannus in County Wicklow). It was de Valois who in 1933 placed the hope of British ballet upon the 14-year-old shoulders of "Little Hookham."

The newly christened young Margot Fonteyn began her life backstage with the same youthful precocity she evidenced to the public. At 16, she lost her virginity and shortly thereafter seduced the virgin Michael Somes, one of her future partners. She then entered into a tumultuous, passionate and painful affair with the brilliant, exasperating Constant Lambert. An educated man -- he gave his young mistress a copy of "Lady Chatterley's Lover" (though years later Fonteyn, in her telling, upgraded the text to "Ulysses") -- Lambert was a prodigal wit, a terrible drunk, an eager lover, and, oh yes, married. Well, actually married, then divorced, then remarried to a third woman, all in the eight years that young Margot was in his thrall. She spent more than one late evening searching the back streets of London for her inebriated lover. But, in a foreshadowing of the dynamic that years later was to dominate her marriage, she adored him.

After Lambert there were relationships with Roland Petit and Helpmann, and even "a few days" with Graham Greene, though her busy touring schedule ended things abruptly. "It is just as well that we never started that affair as we would have had very little chance to continue it," she wrote in a letter to Greene. Along the way there were two abortions.

At the center of Fonteyn's story and, she emphatically claimed, her life, was Roberto Arias (called Tito), an international lawyer and the charming son of one of Panama's leading political families, whom she married in 1955, in her mid-30's. Their marriage presents a fascinating portrait -- echoing the relationships of Hepburn and Tracy, Callas and Onassis, Duse and D'Annunzio -- of a goddess of the stage who offers both solace and subservience to a seemingly less worthy man. But since when did love adhere to any rules of "worthiness"? Perhaps a woman of such talent, generosity and beauty can rarely feel conquered and must fabricate her own subservience; a brilliant, narcissistic man is the ideal foil for such a delicate fiction. Or perhaps ballerinas, after spending years poised on a pedestal, simply cannot understand the politics of equality in the bedroom.

Fonteyn first fell in love with Arias at Cambridge when both were only 18. He was attending the university; she was dancing at the Arts Theater. "It was terrible for a woman to be more in love," she wrote later, "with a man than he was with her." But they would not marry for another 18 years, after he divorced his first wife (with whom he had three children). The Fonteyn-Arias 34-year marriage was punctuated by his frequent absences and numerous infidelities, which he made no attempt to conceal, countered by her unerring devotion and, eventually some infidelities of her own. The sexy-son theory -- which postulates that women are driven biologically to love womanizers to maximize their sons' chances of also being attractive to women -- takes a pirouette. Fonteyn's mother had the final word: "Tito is the child Margot never had."

The poignancy of this love story reaches its apogee in 1964, when Tito was nearly murdered by a political foe who was said to be a cuckolded husband. The numerous bullet wounds left him hospitalized for a year and a half and immobile for the remaining quarter-century of his life. From that day forward, Fonteyn took on perhaps her greatest role, as the saintly wife of the paralyzed playboy. For more than two decades, like a British Belle de Jour, she pushed Tito's wheelchair, fed him and enticed pretty girls to keep him company.

Fonteyn frequently claimed that she bored her husband, who was known to weep watching her dance but in her dressing room would only say "You know I not like ballet." As Colette Clark, a close friend who worked with Fonteyn on Royal Academy of Dancing galas, put it: "People said it was such a tragedy, his being shot. Of course it wasn't a tragedy, because she got what she wanted. Someone to look after and love and lavish

with all the devotion and strength of her marvelous character."

But it was not all martyrdom for Margot. In 1961, just as her career as the prima ballerina of the Royal Ballet was beginning its inevitable decline, a gorgeous young Russian dancer took a flying jete west and reignited not only his profession but Fonteyn's career. Rudolf Nureyev was 19 years her junior -- truly a "sexy son" -- but the partnership quickly moved into legend, where it remains. "At the end of 'Lac des Cygnes,' " Nureyev explained, "when she left the stage in her great white tutu I would have followed her to the end of the world." And we yearned to follow her too.

While the extent of their physical consummation remains unclear (he said yes they did; she said no they didn't; Daneman says yes they did), they were, without question, madly in love onstage and off. Inseparable "tea junkies," they held hands, laughed, giggled like young lovers. One can only imagine the consolation this passionate man provided Fonteyn in the midst of her imperfect marriage. Some disapproved of the alliance, but most of the world embraced their pairing as one of enormous romantic and archetypal power. "He brought her out," de Valois said, "and she brought him up."

SPEAKING years later of Fonteyn, Nureyev said: "That's all what I have. Only her." Their stupendous partnership and her renewed career -- they were in demand all over the world -- also paid the endless bills for Tito's care: an afternoon of swimming cost \$700. And so Fonteyn danced on and on as if she were wearing the Red Shoes. In those later years she brought to the fore one of her deepest gifts as a dancer: her ability to be entirely still. "This is where her submission came in as her greatest power," the eloquent French ballerina Violette Verdy explains, "waiting in the music. She would fill her ears and her heart with it." To witness such composure and brimming life in a state of utter calm is a movement like no other, reserved only for the truly great dancer.

When Fonteyn left her home with Tito in Panama on her frequent tours -- politically tone-deaf, she used the excuse of "artistic exemption" for her trips to South Africa and Pinochet's Chile -- Anabella Vallarino, the socialite with whom Tito was having an affair when he was shot, would move into the house as his shadow wife and move out again before Fonteyn's return. On the day of Tito's death in 1989 this reclusive woman committed suicide by swallowing a bottle of chlorine. The Arias family closed in around Margot in an attempt to keep this final tragic indignity from her. She would live for only two more years herself, having already been found to have a "rogue cancer" that left her dragging her left foot behind her. But she refused the suggested amputation; she was justifiably proud of her exquisite legs and the most perfectly proportioned of women would not succumb to asymmetry -- some lines could not be crossed. She died calmly, though in great pain, her beautiful body distorted by cancer.

A final poignant note: Fonteyn's ashes were not interred at Westminster Abbey as many thought they should be, but rather, as she instructed, at the foot of Tito's tomb in an ill-kept cemetery outside Panama City. Hers is the smallest stone, Daneman reports, in the entire cemetery. Dame Margot Fonteyn literally took her humility to the grave.

Toni Bentley is the author of "Winter Season: A Dancer's Journal" and "The Surrender: An Erotic Memoir."