

Margot Fonteyn – the most famous of ballerinas

Margot Fonteyn's name dominated British ballet for more than 40 years. One of the truly great dancers of our time, she was the most famous ballerina of the second half of the century. For anyone who saw her, she is still the one against whom all others are measured.

Margot Fonteyn was born in England in 1919 - her real name was Peggy Hookham - and spent some of her childhood in China. When she was 14 her family returned to England and she auditioned successfully for the Vic-Wells ballet, making her debut in 1934 as a snowflake in *Nutcracker*; her first solo role was the Young Treginnis in de Valois's *The Haunted Ballroom*. When Markova, the company's first ballerina, left in 1935, Fonteyn worried with the rest of the dancers, and most of the audience, about who could ever replace her: over the next 3 years it became apparent that it would be she herself. By the time she was 16 her promise was unmistakable, and this is not just hindsight: it seems as if everyone who ever went to the ballet in the 30s wrote a book about it, and accounts published even before she had tackled any of the great classic roles forecast greatness for her.

By the time the war broke out in 1939 Fonteyn had danced Aurora, Giselle, and Odette/Odile, and - perhaps more importantly - had already created half a dozen roles for Frederick Ashton. After a stormy start caused by mutual incomprehension, she and the choreographer established a happy relationship which over the next 25 years produced most of her greatest roles and his greatest ballets. The company's nomadic wartime existence ended with the invitation to take up residence at Covent Garden, and their opening night performance of *Sleeping Beauty* showed how far Fonteyn, still only 26, had travelled on the path to prima ballerina. *Symphonic Variations* and *Cinderella* followed, and the seal on her progress from national treasure to international star was set by her triumph in New York on the company's historic opening night in 1949. The 50s saw her taking on Karsavina's role in *Firebird*, and creating Ondine and Chloe - the part in which Ashton said he most missed her when she gave up dancing. In 1956 she married Roberto de Arias, a diplomat from Panama, and for a time had to juggle her commitments as both ballerina and ambassador's wife. By about 1960, though, talk of possible retirement had begun to creep into reviews and interviews.

Then in 1961 Rudolf Nureyev made his famous leap to freedom in Paris, and de Valois, with her usual perception, invited him to London to dance *Giselle* with Fonteyn. Their first performance was a revelation, and the most famous partnership in the history of ballet was born. The tension arising from the 20 year gap in their ages, their opposing temperaments and their totally diverse backgrounds seemed to generate an electricity in the atmosphere whenever they appeared together, and Fonteyn - far from being overshadowed by her young Tartar - seemed rejuvenated: even her technique seemed to improve. Certainly her career was extended by at least 15 years, and we saw her in many new ballets, usually created to explore the dynamics of the partnership - the most famous probably being Ashton's *Marguerite and Armand*.

Fonteyn gave her final performance in the early 70s, and retired to Panama to live with her husband, who had been paralysed in a shooting incident. She died of cancer in 1991. Her musicality and her understated eloquence and elegance made her the perfect embodiment of what we have come to think of as the English style, whilst her modesty and dignity set the tone for the whole company in its developing years. Much of the existing film of her was made too late in her career to do justice to her technique, but fortunately she seems to have inspired photographers as well as choreographers and there are hundreds of ravishing photographs to witness to her quality. For a time the fame of her partnership with Nureyev rather overshadowed the rest of her career, but even had she retired in the early 60s without ever having danced with him, she would still be remembered as the greatest dancer we ever had.