

RAYMONDA, A BALLET

Presented by George Kurti Plohn



Rudolf Nureyev dancing with Margot Fonteyn

Raymonda is a ballet in three acts, on music by Alexander Glazunov. Initially choreographed by the very famous choreographer Marius Petipa (the renowned *Maître de Ballet* (Ballet Master) of the St. Petersburg Imperial Theatre in 1897.

Among the ballet's most celebrated passages is the *Pas classique hongrois* (a.k.a. *Raymonda Pas de dix*) from the third act, which is often performed independently.

One of the most famous renditions of this ballet remains the traditional one, among them Rudolf Nureyev's version for the Paris Opéra Ballet, a documentary about which we are going to see today.

Synopsis

The story of *Raymonda* takes place in the Middle-Ages and is set in the south of France. Raymonda is a young noblewoman waiting for the return of her fiancé, Jean de Brienne, a knight who is on a crusade in the Holy Land. Meanwhile, however, the Sarascen (medieval Moslem) knight Abderachman appears on the scene and first of all pays her court but then uses force to try and make her bend to his will. Thanks to the warning and help of a ghost, the White Lady, who is thought to be an ancestor and patron saint of her family, she can withstand his demands long

enough for her true love to save her in a dramatic duel. This results in a joyful wedding feast.

Raymonda and Jean de Brienne are finally married and King Andre II of Hungary gives the newly wedded couple his blessing. In his honor, everyone at court is dressed in Hungarian fashion and perform a range of Hungarian-style dances, ending in an Apotheosis where everyone comes together in a knightly tournament. The choreographic concept of this classical dramatic ballet is based on the traditional form of the classical dance. The main characters as well as the whole ensemble are given the opportunity to show their virtuosity as dancers in solo and ensemble dances as well as in elegant divertissement scenes.

This DVD presentation of 1999 with the highly admired Corps de Ballet of the Opera National de Paris, is essentially an homage to the great Rudolf Nureyev in his appointment as Artistic Director of Paris Opera in 1983 with much of the DVD program's time devoted to the Paris Opera's leading dancers lining up to relate how Nureyev staged his magnificent new production of Marius Petipa's oriental ballet *Raymonda*.

Many of the dancers are testifying as to how they had been encouraged to stretch their technique and talent and how they had been shown new ways to interpret their roles. They spoke of his enthusiasm and of how stimulating it was to work with him. But they also remember his bad temper, at times, and his demanding management style: no breaks, only three chances to get a movement right or you were out, etc ...

Nureyev's production of *Raymonda* broke new ground, explored new areas. He wanted particularly to expand the male roles.

The interviews are of course interspersed with excerpts from the Paris Opera's productions of *Raymonda* and of the dancers in rehearsal.

It is more a documentary for ballet lovers.

Who was Rudolf Nureyev, this genius of ballet and what was the Nureyev Phenomenon?

Named Lord of the Dance, Nureyev is regarded as one of ballet's most gifted male dancers ever. In addition to his technical prowess, Rudolf Nureyev was an accomplished choreographer. He produced his own interpretations of numerous classical works, including *Swan Lake*, *Giselle*, *Raymonda* and *La Bayadère*

He was born into a Tatar family on a Trans-Siberian train near Irkutsk, in Siberia, while his mother was travelling to Vladivostok, where his father, a Red Army political commissar, was stationed.

As a child he fell in love with dance and was encouraged to dance in Bashkir folk performances where his precocity was soon noticed by teachers who encouraged him to train in Saint Petersburg.

Nureyev entered the Vaganova Ballet Academy at the age of just 17 staying there for only 3 years whereas dancers who will become principal dancers later on often enter the Vaganova school at 9 and go through the full 9 years of dance education.

Upon his graduation after only 3 years, while all the other went through a 9 year study, Nureyev joined the Kirov Ballet (now Mariinsky). And so was Baryshnikov who passed only three years at the Vaganova school of St. Peterburg like Nureyev.

Now, paradoxically, both Rudolf Nureyev and Mikhail Baryshnikov became masters of perfection in dance, and also Mikhail Baryshnikov, chose to defect to the West. He was always holding Nureyev in high regard.

Nureyev moved immediately beyond the corps level, and was given solo roles as a principal dancer from the outset. Before long Rudolf Nureyev became one of the Soviet Union's best-known dancers. Nureyev and the ballerina Nina Kurgapkina were invited to dance at a gathering at Khrushchev's dacha,^[18] and in 1959 they were allowed to travel outside the Soviet Union, dancing in Vienna. Not long after, he was told by the Ministry of Culture that he would not be allowed to go abroad again.

By the late 1950s, Rudolf Nureyev had become a sensation in the Soviet Union.

Yet, as the Mariinsky Ballet was preparing to go on a tour to Paris and London, Nureyev's rebellious character and a non-conformist attitude made him an unlikely candidate for a trip to the West, which was to be of crucial importance to the Soviet government's ambitions to portray their cultural supremacy.

After a representative of the French tour organizers saw Nureyev dance in Leningrad in 1960, the French organizers urged Soviet authorities to let him dance in Paris, and he was allowed to go.

But Nureyev was seen to have broken the rules about mingling with foreigners, which alarmed the Mariinsky's management and the KGB agents observing him. The KGB wanted to send him back to the Soviet Union. On 16 June 1961 the Mariinsky group had gathered at Le Bourget Airport in Paris to fly to London. At that point an agent took Nureyev aside and told him that he would have to return to Moscow, for a special performance in the Kremlin. Nureyev became suspicious and refused. Next he was told that his mother had fallen severely ill and he needed to come home immediately to see her. Nureyev refused again, believing that on return to the USSR he was likely to be imprisoned. With the help of French police and a Parisian socialite friend who was engaged to the son of the French Minister of Culture Andre Malraux – Nureyev got away from his KGB minders and asked for asylum. The KGB tried to discuss it with him but he chose to stay in Paris.

Within a week, he was signed up to perform in *The Sleeping Beauty*. Next on a tour of Denmark he met Erik Bruhn, soloist at the Royal Danish Ballet^l who became his lover, his closest friend and his protector until Bruhn's death in 1986.

In the meantime, Soviet authorities made Nureyev's father, mother and dance teacher write letters to him, urging him to return, without effect.

Although he petitioned the Soviet government for many years to be allowed to visit his mother, he was not allowed to do so until 1987, when his mother was dying and Mikhail Gorbachev consented to the visit.

Nureyev's first appearance in the United Kingdom was at a ballet *matinée* organized by the Royal Ballet's Prima Ballerina Dame Margot Fonteyn in 1961. His first appearance with the company was partnering Margot Fonteyn in *Giselle* on 21 February 1962. Fonteyn and Nureyev would go on to form both a professional partnership and a long lasting love affair. Nureyev once said of Fonteyn, who was 19 years older than him, that they danced with "one body, one soul". Together Nureyev and Fonteyn premiered Sir Frederick Ashton's ballet *Marguerite and Armand*, a ballet danced to Liszt's Piano Sonata in B minor, which became their signature piece.

He continued to perform regularly with The Royal Ballet until committing his future to the Paris Opera Ballet in the 1980s.

Nureyev is described as either bisexual, as he did have heterosexual relationships as a younger man, or gay. He had a turbulent sex life, with numerous bathhouse visits and anonymous pickups. Nureyev and Erik Bruhn, the celebrated Danish dancer, became a couple and the two remained together off and on, with a very volatile relationship for 25 years, until Bruhn's death in 1986.

In 1973 Nureyev met the 23-year-old American dancer Robert Tracy and a two-and-a-half-year love affair began. Tracy later became Nureyev's secretary and live-in companion. According to Tracy, Nureyev said that he had had sex with three women in his life, he had always wanted a son, and once had plans to father one with Nastassja Kinski.

The dancer tested positive for HIV in 1984, but for several years he simply denied that anything was wrong with his health. However, by the late 1980s Nureyev began a marked decline and entered the final phase of the disease in the spring of 1992. He was hospitalized in Paris, and was operated on for pericarditis, an inflammation of the membranous sac around the heart. At that time, what inspired him to fight his illness was the hope that he could fulfill an invitation to conduct Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* at an American Ballet Theatre benefit on 6 May 1992 at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. He did so and was elated at the reception.

In July 1992, Nureyev showed renewed signs of pericarditis but determined to forswear further treatment. His last public appearance was on 8 October 1992, at the premiere at Palais Garnier of a new production of *La Bayadère* that he choreographed after Marius Petipa for the Paris Opera Ballet. The ballet was a personal triumph although the gravity of his condition was evident. The French

Culture Minister, Jack Lang, presented him that evening on stage with France's highest cultural award, the *Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*.

Nureyev re-entered the hospital in November 1992 and remained there until his death from cardiac complications at age 54 on 6 January 1993. His funeral was held in the marble foyer of the Paris Garnier Opera House. Many paid tributes to his brilliance as a dancer. One such tribute, may be the most important, came from Oleg Vinogradov of the Mariinsky Ballet in Saint Petersburg, stating: "What Nureyev did in the west, he could never have done here.

Nureyev's grave, at a Russian cemetery in Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois near Paris, features a tomb draped in a mosaic of an oriental carpet. Nureyev was an avid collector of beautiful carpets and antique textiles. As his coffin was lowered into the ground, music from the last act of *Giselle* was played and his ballet shoes were cast into the grave along with white lilies.