

FROM: **AMERICAN BALLET THEATRE**
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FREDERICK ASHTON

Frederick Ashton was born in 1904 and spent his childhood in South America. He studied with Leonide Massine and Marie Rambert, who also gave him his first opportunities as a choreographer.

A Tragedy of Fashion, a commission in 1926, was his first ballet to be staged – as part of a revue entitled *Riverside Nights*. In 1928, he joined Ida Rubinstein's company in Paris, where he also came under the influence of Bronislava Nijinska from whom, he acknowledged, he learned his craft. He came to England in 1929 to choreograph for Rambert and the Camargo Society. He also danced with the Rambert Company in both the classics and modern works, and partnered Tamara Karsavina, Lydia Lopokova, and Alicia Markova, at the same time pursuing a successful career as a dancer in musicals and revues.

In 1931, he created his first work, *Regatta*, for Ninette de Valois' Vic-Wells Ballet, and four years later was invited to become Resident Choreographer. Ashton remained De Valois' associate until 1948 when his position as Associate Director was publicly recognized. In 1963, he succeeded Dame Ninette as Director of the company (now called The Royal Ballet), a position he held until he retired in 1970. In 1935, Ashton began his association with Margot Fonteyn, creating the Bride in *Le Baiser de la Fée* for her. Among the ballets he has since made with her in mind are *Nocturne*, *Horoscope*, *Dante Sonata*, *Symphonic Variations* (his first ballet for the Covent Garden stage), *Daphnis and Chloë*, *Ondine*, and *Marguerite and Armand* (for Fonteyn and Nureyev). Ashton's choreography has caused an unmistakably lyrical style to emerge in British ballet. In addition to comic and dramatic ballets and those of "pure" dance, his innate sense of theatre is always apparent.

Of nearly 100 ballets, many have been landmarks, including *Cinderella*, *Daphnis and Chloë*, *The Two Pigeons*, and *Birthday Offering* for the company's Silver Jubilee. In addition to the inspiration of Fonteyn, he created *The Dream* for Anotinette Sibley and Anthony Dowell. *La Fille Mal Gardée* has been a

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brilliant success throughout the world, often mounted by Ashton himself.

More recent full-scale ballets have been *Rhapsody*, created for Mikhail Baryshnikov, in honor of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother's 80th birthday; *Verdi Capricci*, premiered on April 19, 1983, the opening night of The Royal Ballet's season at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York; and before that, *A Month in the Country*.

During 1985, Ashton choreographed a solo for Merle Park, *La Chatte Metamorphoses en Femme*, for a gala in honor of Fanny Elssler in Vienna and supervised London Festival Ballet's revival of his *Romeo and Juliet*. Ashton first worked in opera in 1934, when he staged Virgil Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts*, in the United States. In 1953, he staged Gluck's *Orfeo* at Covent Garden, with Kathleen Ferrier singing the title role in her last appearance. Benjamin Britten's last opera, *Death in Venice*, also includes dances choreographed by Ashton. In 1981, he created choreography for the Nightingale and the Fisherman (on Natalia Makarova and Anthony Dowell) for Igor Stravinsky's opera *Le Rossignol* for the Metropolitan Opera's triple-bill Stravinsky Centenary evening. In September 1983, this production, with designs by David Hockney, was taken into the repertoire of the Royal Opera at Covent Garden.

Frederick Ashton was made a CBE in 1950, and knighted in 1962. In 1970, he became a Companion of Honour, and in October 1977, he was invited by The Queen to become a member of the Order of Merit. France admitted Ashton to the Legion d'Honneur in 1962 and Denmark made him a Commander of the Order of the Dannebrog in 1963. Recognition of his achievement came in 1959 from the Royal Academy of Dancing, which gave him its Queen Elizabeth II Coronation Award; in 1972 from the Carina Aria Foundation in Sweden with its Gold Medal; and with honorary degrees: as Doctor of Letters in the Universities of Durham (1962) and East Anglia (1967), and as Doctor of Music in the Universities of London (1970) and Oxford (1976).

On August 19, 1988, Frederick Ashton died in his sleep at his country home in Eye, Suffolk. He was 83.