

Georgina Parkinson: A Dancer in Her Time / Making the Blueprint

BY BILL BISSELL

Editor's note: a version of this article was originally published in the Fall 2005 issue of Dance Now (UK).

Editor's update: Georgina Parkinson passed away on December 18, 2009.

See [Appendices](#) for more information



Georgina Parkinson today as ballet mistress, American Ballet Theater; photo by Roy Round, no date.

In any dance tradition the living dimension of performance practice inevitably rubs up against fixed notions of so-called “authentic” or “appropriate” interpretations of that tradition. Georgina Parkinson negotiates this collision of interests as part of her work as ballet mistress at American Ballet Theater. Dancing in the dialectic between traditional and contemporary ballet has been a core narrative guiding her remarkable progress as a dance artist.

Parkinson came of age in a time and place that are among the most remarkable in ballet history. Yet she balances her gratitude for being a member of that generation with a refusal to be either nostalgic about it or ignorant of current trends in practice and performance.

A former principal dancer with the Royal Ballet in London, Parkinson was steeped in a particular ballet legacy that shaped her identity as a performer.

Her mature artistry was cultivated within a specific lineage commonly referred to as the “Royal” style. Moreover, Parkinson came of age and flourished as a dancer as part of a generation, circa 1955-75, that marked a golden era in British ballet history. Yet the traditions that raised her did not limit her as she entered her second career as a coach and regisseur. To the contrary, they gave her a solid foundation from which to embrace change wholeheartedly.

Parkinson matriculated artistically within the confines of the Royal Ballet family—first as a student at the school and then as a fifteen-year-old member of the company. The arc of her life story as a dancer is one that is both remarkable and, to a certain degree, one shared by thousands of women who enter the ballet world—a young obsession that becomes a career, forged as much from circumstance and good luck as from planning. The important elements of the story are familiar: a young child with parents who recognize their daughter’s talents and support her ambitions; a self-critical artist always struggling with her own assessment of her capacities as a dancer; a career dominated by strong artistic directors and choreographers that frequently strands a dancer at the conclusion of her performing career without preparation for ending her stage life and, consequently, renders her unable to answer the questions “What now? What next?” While it includes these familiar attributes, however, Georgina Parkinson’s story remains remarkable because it recounts a particular and significant transition, from performing as a principal dancer for a foremost European dance company to assuming duties of ballet mistress at American Ballet Theater.

Despite her extraordinary story, a level-headed attitude comes through in Parkinson's manner, one which echoes the matter-of-fact beginning to her life in dance. As a schoolgirl in postwar Britain, she remembers, it was her feet which first brought her attention at the convent school she was attending in Brighton where her family lived. "The nuns noticed that I had very big insteps," Parkinson recalls. "They'd never seen anybody with insteps like that so they called my mother, who came to the convent. I remember being in the parlor with the nuns, who told me 'Point your feet.' It was decided that I should start to take private lessons because they felt that with such beautiful feet maybe I should dance."

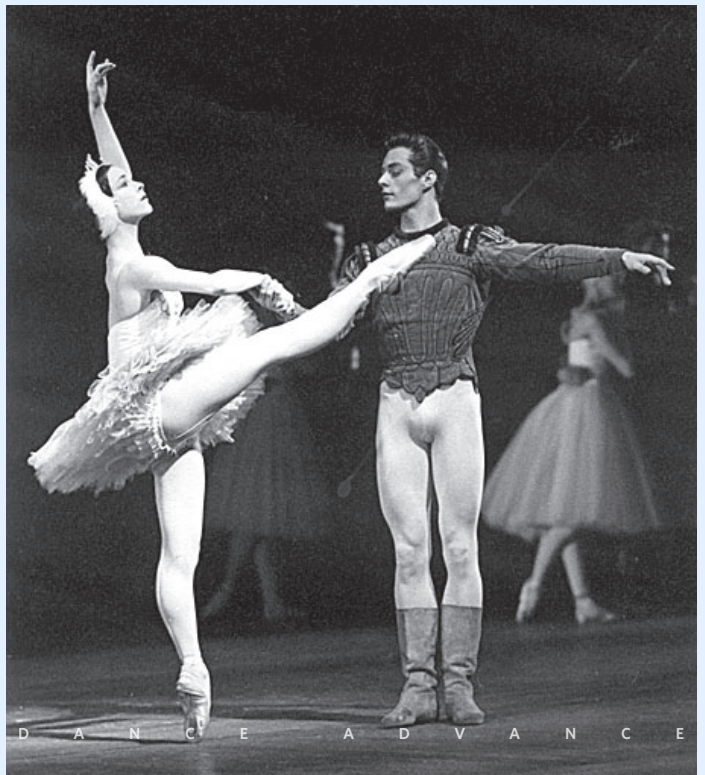
Parkinson began her lessons in the back of a bicycle shop with teacher Audrey Kent who had studied at the Royal Academy of Dancing. Yet ballet didn't occupy all her time. "I was also taking skating lessons, horse riding and I did elocution lessons. I liked all my extracurricular activities." When Parkinson left the convent school in order to attend "a proper grammar school," her mother suggested that she try out for the Sadlers Wells Ballet School (precursor to the Royal Ballet School).

Winifred Edwards, a "great teacher" according to Parkinson, taught the audition class. "I would kill to see what my audition looked like. I mean I cannot imagine! Everybody was there, Dame Ninette de Valois of course—all the hierarchy of British ballet was sitting at a great long table. And a teacher gave us the class, and I was in a little blue Janssen swimming suit."

During this, her first trip to the capital city, Parkinson also saw her first professional ballet performance. Prescient, perhaps, of her own future in working with contemporary ballet and the narrative works of Kenneth MacMillan and Frederick Ashton, she did not see one of the nineteenth-century classics but instead a touring performance of *Miss Julie* by the Royal Swedish Ballet.

Her life forever altered, Parkinson's other extracurricular activities fell away as the young dancer became obsessed with dance. "I lived in Brighton, and the school was in London, so I went up on the train every day on the 7:11 am and came back by about 6:30 pm. And I did that for three or four years, until it was time to take my school certificate. Well, of course, I had to drop all my singing lessons, skating lessons, and piano lessons. It was just dance."

After receiving her certificate, matriculating into the upper school and the "graduate" course required that she reside in London. Her family relocated there so she could live at home. Though the household faced hard times—her father was a bookmaker and lost everything during this period—good luck shined on Parkinson when, shortly after her graduation from the lower school, the Royal reached into the school and took her, at age fifteen, into the company. "With these things there's always an element of luck—the company was really hard up for dancers, so they simply took me out of the graduate class and into the company. I was underage so on my first tour I had to have a chaperon. So I started way down; I wasn't even on the first step of the ladder."



Georgina Parkinson as Odette in *Swan Lake*, partnered by Brian Laurence, graduation performance, Sadlers Wells Ballet School; photo by *The Times of London*, 1955.

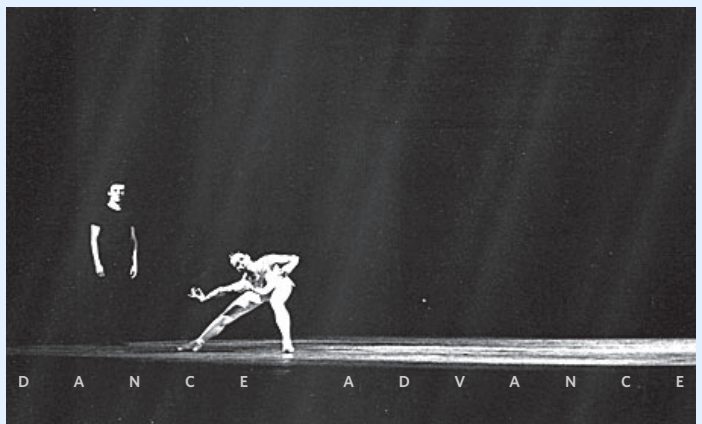
Though it took awhile to adjust from being the best in the school to being one of many young women in the corps de ballet, Parkinson remembers that at the Royal “you always felt that people were looking out for you and helping you and you felt very safe.”

The company culture at the Royal was like a family, and the company’s dancers were cultivated within a particular kind of repertory—one that was based on a company style exemplified in the work of particular choreographers closely associated with British ballet, most notably Frederick Ashton. During her years at the Royal, Parkinson was able to work closely with Ashton, on *Monotones* and *Enigma Variations*, as well as with Kenneth MacMillan on the creation of his ballets *Mayerling* and *Anastasia*.

“It was very different with each of them,” Parkinson recalls. “It was wonderful becoming a sponge for each of them. I think I felt more comfortable in the narrative works because I was able to use my own imagination. And that’s what Kenneth did—and Fred as well: they both gave you material, in different ways, and then it was up to the individual to flesh it out. It became a collaboration of minds.”



Georgina Parkinson, center, partnered by Keith Rosson with Michael Coleman (right), other dancers unidentified, in *Song of the Earth*, chor. Kenneth MacMillan, The Royal Ballet; photo by Roy Round, 1966.



Georgina Parkinson, center, in *Song of the Earth*, chor. Kenneth MacMillan; photo by Roy Round, 1966.

Both choreographers, so identified with the Royal Ballet, were quite distinct in their approach to choreography. “Kenneth would be more explicit about what steps he wanted than Fred who would just ask you to do something” Parkinson remembers. “Fred would say ‘I don’t like that. Try this.’ But Kenneth would know exactly what he wanted—up to a point. If there was a pas de deux, he’d want you to try it. Or if you did something wrong and he’d catch it and love it, then he would put it in. It was a truly creative process that not only included the choreographer and the dancer but also included the designer, the costumes, and the music. It was a complete experience: you became very much a part of the production that they were creating.”

This effort to become a “sponge” went beyond the time spent in the studio. Parkinson’s last role created with MacMillan was Empress Elizabeth in *Mayerling*, a ballet set in Imperial Vienna on the eve of World War I. “I don’t think there was a book on that period that I didn’t read. I absorbed myself in that character; it was just thrilling,” she recalls today. Tellingly, Parkinson speaks of the process in a literary way, describing how “Kenneth wrote me the steps and then through the steps I was able to hold my own personal opinion about the Empress. So that’s really what I call creation.”

Yet the narrative frame of MacMillan’s ballets did not prevent the dancer from delving deeply into other genres. “Even if [the ballets] were abstract like [Ashton’s] *Monotones* it was up to us to do the steps Fred set on us and to make it grow from there, to absorb the atmosphere, the music.”

Parkinson's close involvement in the creation of new ballets with choreographers who were at the forefront of the European scene anchored her career. In her own characteristically sanguine words, she affirms that "It was one of the best parts of being a dancer in my time." This fertile aspect of artistic life at the Royal Ballet exerted a far-reaching impact on Parkinson as she ended her performing career and migrated to New York, where she had to come to terms with a very different national ballet culture.

"What I [initially] missed in New York after my move was a certain lack of creativity compared to what I'd had when I was with the Royal," Parkinson remembers. "Ashton and MacMillan alone taught me things about myself and the way I danced that I didn't know. They pushed and stretched [me]." In her years at the Royal, Parkinson was not typecast as a particular kind of dancer. "I was never told," she reflects, by way of example, "'Oh, she's lyrical,' or, oh, she's this [or that]." She feels that she "was challenged on all sides" and asserts that this eclectic background "certainly helped me when I came to America."



Georgina Parkinson backstage at The Royal Ballet for *Raymonda*, Act III, chor. Rudolf Nureyev; photo by Roy Round, 1967.



Georgina Parkinson in *Raymonda*, Act III, chor. Rudolf Nureyev, The Royal Ballet; photo by Roy Round, 1967.

With the benefit of her perceptive hindsight, Parkinson remains her own artist. She came to understand that regardless of all the influences at work on her artistic development it was still, ultimately, the challenge of what she could bring to the mix that would make the real difference and define her own gifts. The years spent at the Royal Ballet analyzing and provoking herself as a performer have become her best resource in working with new generations of dancers at American Ballet Theater.

In the role of coach and ballet mistress at ABT, empathy for and practical knowledge of a range of ballet genres are essential. Parkinson works with a diverse pool of dancers who perform in both traditional and contemporary idioms. Importantly, her own relationship with the classical ballets of the nineteenth century was pivotal in defining her response to choreography created on her by living choreographers. The classics, she reflects, “were more of a challenge to me technically. I never felt—apart perhaps for a period when I did *Swan Lake*—the ownership that I did [over roles by MacMillan, Ashton, or even with Andree Howard].” (Parkinson was a last-minute replacement for Lynn Seymour in Howard’s *La Belle Dame sans Merci* very early in her career and later worked with the choreographer on *La Fete Étrange*. She describes Howard as a “wonderful woman” but a choreographer who was “crazy, dotty, all over the place” and, as a result, the experience made it difficult for the young dancer to find her way into the work. Parkinson’s memory of Howard is perhaps salvaged by the fact that the choreographer got along with Parkinson’s husband, photographer Roy Round, like a “house on fire.”)

As they are at ABT, the classics at the Royal Ballet “were the backbone to everything we did. The full-length ballets were our heritage.” Yet Parkinson came to feel that while the classical repertory could offer the satisfaction of technical accomplishment, creating roles in new works by MacMillan, Ashton, Nijinska, and others brought the fulfillment of discovering expressive and self-created meanings. “I could hide,” Parkinson explains, “behind the character of Winifred Norbry” [in *Enigma Variations*] in a way that was very different—less transparent—than in the classic repertory. “It wasn’t me who was on show, it was Winifred Norbry.”



Georgina Parkinson as Winifred Norbry in *Enigma Variations*, chor. Frederick Ashton; photo by Leslie E. Spatt, 1968.



Georgina Parkinson as Myrta in *Giselle*, The Royal Ballet; photo by Roy Round, c.1966.



Bronislava Nijinska with Georgina Parkinson during the reconstruction of *Les Biches*, chor. Bronislava Nijinska, The Royal Ballet; photo by Roy Round, 1964.

In the classics, “I was always nervous that I wouldn’t make the last pirouette of the day. I never felt completely free when I was doing classical ballet. I mean in *Swan Lake* you can feel pretty free but there was nothing to hide behind. I was stronger than I thought, but never entirely confident when I went on stage in the classics. There was always a doubt in my mind.”

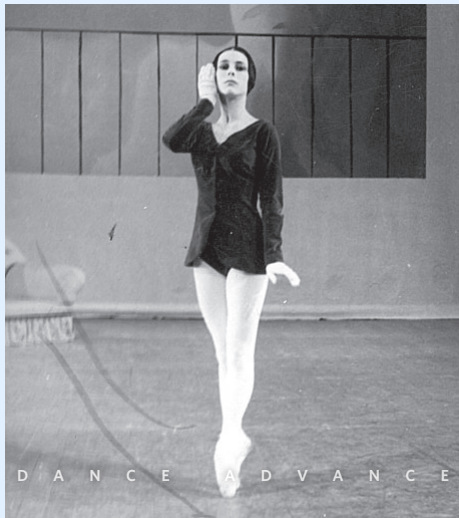
As successful as her career was in the classics, particularly in *Swan Lake*, Parkinson kept encountering more intimate and challenging ways of working choreographically. Though she remains particularly identified with—and attached to—the work of MacMillan, perhaps the pivotal artistic collaboration in her career was with Bronislava Nijinska and the revival of *Les Biches* at the Royal Opera House in 1964.



Georgina Parkinson with Bronislava Nijinska at a rehearsal of *Les Biches*, chor. Bronislava Nijinska, The Royal Ballet, costume after original design by Marie Laurencin; photo by Central Press Photos Ltd., November 30, 1964.



Georgina Parkinson as the Girl in Blue in *Les Biches*, chor. Bronislava Nijinska, The Royal Ballet; photo by Roy Round, December 1964.



Georgina Parkinson as the Girl in Blue in *Les Biches*, chor. Bronislava Nijinska, The Royal Ballet; photo by Roy Round, 1964.

Her encounter with Nijinska shouldn't have happened at all. "I was never scheduled to be in *Les Biches*" she explains. "Everybody who was working with her said, 'Oh, my God! She's so difficult.' I thought, who needs to work with a difficult woman who doesn't speak English?"

Yet luck again intervened. As she rehearsed alone in a studio for the demanding role of Queen of the Willis, Parkinson saw Nijinska and Michael Soames [a former principal dancer with the company] watching her in the doorway. She was surprised when her name showed up on the cast list the next day, and soon learned that she was called to audition for the role of the Girl in Blue. "Nijinska asked me to do the first bourrée across the stage with my hand on my face—and that was it: she fell in love right there, and she never left me alone."

The memory flows from Parkinson as she recalls the process of maturing artistically through her relationship with the seminal choreographer. "She coached me to my little finger. It wasn't the sort of relationship where I could sit down and chat with her because she didn't speak English very well—or if she did, she wasn't letting on. I didn't have the necessary technique to do what she wanted but through her belief in me, her knowing that I was the girl she wanted in that part, she produced unbelievable results."

"The whole point with the Blue Girl in *Les Biches* demanded the character to come alive. The character was within the choreography: the chic-ness, the style, the manner in which I performed, and the musicality—how she [Nijinska] used the music, where she wanted the emphasis. All of these elements were terribly important. Fortunately, I had real quality time, right up to the dress rehearsal, to work with her and develop the Blue Girl."

For Parkinson, working with Nijinska was "probably the greatest experience I've had in my whole career, of getting to the stage where I felt I could be proud of what I had to offer, and then doing it on opening night, and having the success that we all had with that ballet. It was just amazing." While she never worked with Nijinska again, learning *Les Biches* with the choreographer marked an important artistic milestone in Parkinson's career and in the growth of her artistic identity. "I can't actually put it into words what an experience like that was for me yet it defined what I think having a career as a ballerina is all about: the relationships, the work ethic, the commitment over and above anything else I was doing. I've been on symposiums and things like that to talk about Bronislava, and I never really get across how much that process meant to me. I've never had anyone believe in me to the extent that she believed in me."

The strong coaching and stage direction that she received from Ashton, MacMillan, and Nijinska, among others at the Royal, lead Parkinson away from fixating on particular ways of doing things. As a result, she fully understands the dynamics of change that characterize any artistic tradition; she understands that conventions change as tastes change, and that these mutations are what actually form the spine of continuity in the performing arts.

Parkinson has served for more than twenty-five years as ballet mistress for American Ballet Theater—a span of time that she sardonically calls “outrageous”—where her primary responsibility now is to rehearse principal dancers. Looking over her own significant performing history, I ask her about the danger of seeing particular roles through the lens of her own experience. “It’s a terrible risk,” Parkinson responds, “and you can’t do that, not in my opinion.” She is eminently sensitive to the range of dancers she works with, noting that “there are some [who] manage very well and have their own points of view” and that “you can see that and discuss it with them. If they really believe in what they’re doing,” she continues, “if they’ve really thought it through, I’ll let them do it and see how I feel, if it works or if it doesn’t. Of course, I keep the steps as they were taught to me. Yet, I think ballet becomes stale and dated if I’m asking dancers to do things the way I did it.”



Georgina Parkinson in *Romeo and Juliet*, chor. Kenneth MacMillan, The Royal Ballet; photo by Roy Round, c.1965.



Georgina Parkinson partnered by Eric Bruhn in *Daphnis and Chloe*, chor. John Cranko, The Stuttgart Ballet; photo by Roy Round, c.1962.

Parkinson balances a rigorous attitude toward tradition with characteristic modesty and a nuanced sense of respect for the artistry of choreographers and young dancers. She states, “My job as a ballet mistress is to help the choreographer do his work and to listen to everything he says to gather all the information so that you can put it in storage for when he’s not there. So you’re an enormous support system and help in that way. Of course the dancers trust me—which is something that you just have to earn and then they’ll do anything for you. But you have to come up with the goods. I mean you can’t mess around with them.”

Parkinson found her way to the ABT position via Hollywood when she responded to MacMillan’s request to set the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* on dancers—including Barishnikov—working on the film *The Turning Point* (1977), produced by Nora Kaye and Herbert Ross (who also directed). First under Lucia Chase and then, more permanently, under Barishnikov’s tenure, the British dancer evolved into a major coach and regisseur.

She was never devastated by leaving performing behind, perhaps because she had by 1979 amassed the rewards of a much-respected career, and the offer to move to ABT was so unexpected and significant as a transitional career move. Parkinson is the first to speak of how unprepared she felt initially, and how massive her responsibilities felt. “I think that my breakthrough as a ballet mistress came when I allowed myself to realize who I was, and how much knowledge I had, and how much experience of working with choreographers, and having ballets created on me, and struggling with the classics, and so on. I pulled on all of that.”

Parkinson is not a ballet mistress who sees the dancing image only through the prism of her own performances: “I need to let artists be free—I don’t want anybody doing Juliet like I did it in 1960. Dancers today are different. I give them the freedom to develop their character. Then I tell them if it works or if it doesn’t. So there’s always that conversation that goes on.”

Still, Parkinson encountered transatlantic differences in her move from London to New York: “The needs of the dancers here in the States were completely different. That doesn’t sound quite true, but that’s how I saw it: they were a different breed of dancer. The dancers in New York were more mature, they were hungrier, they were desperate for knowledge; they were from very eclectic backgrounds, all over the world. And they had, believe it or not, a certain confidence that we didn’t have—or I didn’t have, anyway—in their approach to their work. Many of them had a point of view that I later learned could be discussed. I was learning every minute of the day, and trying to figure out how to do the job the best I could.”

Parkinson embraced the move to New York and her roots became firmly planted into the new ballet world. “I grew enormously. I became attached to the dancers I was working for as I slowly recognized their needs. I recognized that they wanted respect for who they were. I found it really important to cultivate that and deal with them, each one, differently.”

“What I have to remember is not to say the one thing you never want to say to a dancer: ‘When I did it, I did such-and-such.’ It’s a mistake I think a lot of people make. You have to adjust your thinking, and be abreast of the times in which you live—aware of where the standards are going, where dance is going, and what the requirements are—which are all extremely different from the kind of environment that I was in at that formative age—which is why I love the dancers that I work with so much, because they’re so much more independent than I was.”

Parkinson is one of thousands of people throughout the ballet world whose work is not immediately visible to the audience, yet whose efforts form the essential foundation and framework of ballet culture—preserving and extending a tradition, giving support to new dancers and new interpretations of old steps or helping performers respond to new choreographic talent. In her own time, Parkinson declares, “The roles that were created on me were always within my capabilities, even as the choreography may have extended them. I didn’t have to try and do something technical that some other dancer had already done fabulously. I made the blueprint.”



Dance Advance | The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage | 1608 Walnut Street, 18th Floor | Philadelphia, PA 19103
phone: 267.350.4970 | fax: 267.350.4998 | www.pcah.us/dance | danceadvance@pcah.us
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Appendices

Appendix A:

Program: Memorial Tribute to Georgina Parkinson, Joyce Theater—New York, NY, March 29, 2010.

Appendix B:

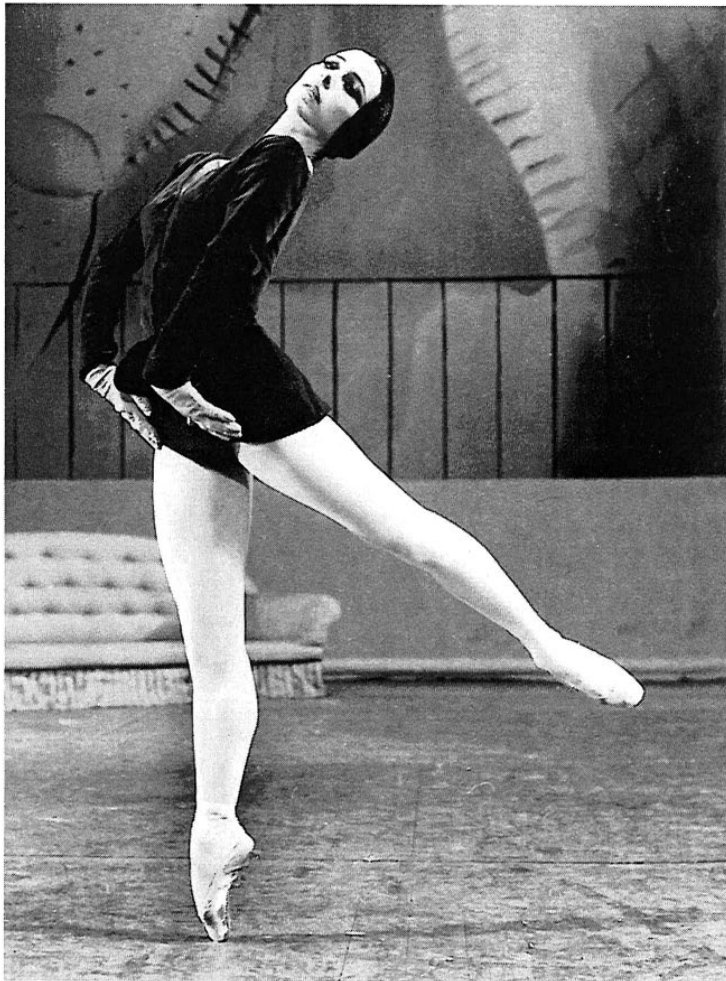
Obituary for Georgina Parkinson

Written by Anna Kisselgoff, *The New York Times*, December 18, 2009.

APPENDIX A:

Program: Memorial Tribute to Georgina Parkinson, Joyce Theater-New York, NY, March 29, 2010.

A Tribute to Georgina



**A MEMORIAL TRIBUTE TO
GEORGINA PARKINSON**

"Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety..."
- William Shakespeare
from *Antony and Cleopatra*

CONCERTO (Second Movement)
Composer: Dimitri Shostakovich
Choreographer: Sir Kenneth MacMillan
Performed by
STELLA ABRERA & MARCELO GOMES
ORMSBY WILKINS, piano

Speaker – KEVIN McKENZIE

Video – *The Early Years*

Speaker – SUSAN JONES

Franz Liszt: *Vallée d'Obermann*
DAVID LAMARCHE, piano

Video – *A Star Is Born*

Speaker – ROBERT HILL

Speaker – ANTHONY DOWELL

Video – *A Royal Ballerina Comes to ABT*

Speaker – JOHN MEEHAN

Video – *She Believed in Me*

Speaker – JULIE KENT

ROMEO & JULIET (Act III – Bedroom Pas de Deux)

Composer: Sergei Prokofiev

Choreographer: Sir Kenneth MacMillan

Performed by

GILLIAN MURPHY & DAVID HALLBERG

Speaker – TOBIAS ROUND

Photography by Roy Round;
additional photos by
Paul B. Goode, Rosalie O'Connor,
Jerry Ruotolo and Gene Schiavone

Special thanks to
Kate Lydon and Eric Wolfram
for producing the video shown this afternoon

Additional thanks to
Valerie Taylor Barnes, Bill Bissell, Dan Butt,
Alessandra Ferri, Frederic Franklin,
Dance Magazine, WNET Thirteen
and the Royal Ballet

AMERICAN BALLET THEATRE
Joyce Theatre - New York, NY
Monday, March 29, 2010 – 4:00 p.m.

APPENDIX A, *continued*:

ABT
AMERICAN BALLET THEATRE



Front and back cover photos by Roy Round.

APPENDIX B:

Georgina Parkinson, Star at Royal Ballet, Dies at 71

BY [ANNA KISSELGOFF](#)

PUBLISHED: DECEMBER 18, 2009

THE NEW YORK TIMES

Georgina Parkinson, a ballet mistress and coach at American Ballet Theater whose compelling stage presence and brooding mystery had made her a bright young star of Britain's Royal Ballet in the 1960s, died on Friday in Manhattan. She was 71.

The cause was complications of cancer, said her son, Tobias Round. Ms. Parkinson lived in Manhattan.

Although her training was in the Royal's textbook classical style, Ms. Parkinson made her breakthrough in "Les Biches," an experimental work of 1924 revived for the Royal in 1964 by Bronislava Nijinska.

A dark-haired beauty of striking femininity, Ms. Parkinson nonetheless captured the strong androgyny of the central figure, the Girl in Blue. Coached for weeks by Nijinska, she was widely acclaimed for her unsettling portrayal in the ballet's commentary on social and sexual mores.

By her own account, Ms. Parkinson was more at home in 20th-century narrative ballets than in the 19th-century classics: she was Odette-Odile in "Swan Lake" and danced the title role in "Raymonda," in which Clive Barnes, writing in 1969 in The New York Times, called her "golden and glowing."

Georgina Parkinson was born in Brighton, England, on Aug. 20, 1938. As a child in a convent school, she took a ballet class every Tuesday. Noticing her talent, the school's nuns suggested to her parents that she pursue further training. After studying with a local teacher, she was admitted to the Sadler's Wells Ballet school and joined the Royal in 1957.

Despite her respect for the classics, she found her best opportunities in new works. She was in the original cast of Frederick Ashton's pure-dance "Monotones I" and showed off her dramatic side in his "Enigma Variations," inspired by the composer Edward Elgar.



Georgina Parkinson rehearsing dancers in New York in 2005.
Ruby Washington/The New York Times

APPENDIX B, *continued*:

Kenneth MacMillan created the role of the Austrian archduke's mother for her in "Mayerling" and cast her in many of his other ballets. Her Juliet in his "Romeo and Juliet" in New York in 1968 was a stricken heroine, doomed from the start.

In 1978 Ms. Parkinson was invited by Nora Kaye, a former Ballet Theater ballerina, to teach company class for Ballet Theater. By then, Ms. Parkinson had begun to perform character roles, which she continued to do later at Ballet Theater. In 1979 she returned for a year to London to be with her family.

Besides her son, Tobias, of London, who is married to Leanne Benjamin, a Royal Ballet ballerina, Ms. Parkinson is survived by her husband, the photographer Roy Round; a grandson, Thomas; and a sister, Maureen Seiger, of Tel Aviv.

In 1980 Ms. Parkinson returned to Ballet Theater as ballet mistress and continued in that role until recently. This fall she was asked to coach the actresses Natalie Portman and Mila Kunis in a new Darren Aronofsky film, "Black Swan," a thriller set in the world of New York City ballet.

Julie Kent, the Ballet Theater principal who worked most closely with her, said on Friday that Ms. Parkinson had helped her "develop my physicality to the point where I was able to express what was inside of me to a larger audience."

"I learned everything from her," Ms. Kent said.