

LIFE FULL COLOUR

Dame Beryl Grey made her name as a teenager, danced in Cold War Russia and China, and deflected a prawn thrown by Nureyev. She reflects on a trailblazing career with [Nadine Meisner](#).

Grey in the studio and (right) as the Lilac Fairy with Robert Helpmann and Margot Fonteyn in *The Sleeping Beauty* (1946)
 Photos: Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis; Frank Sharman/ROH/ArenaPAL



There is nothing grey about Dame Beryl Grey: long-lined, dashingly elegant, ebony-haired.

Somehow she never did go grey – but more of that later. Approaching her ninth decade (she was born in 1927, in Highgate, London), she seems hardly to have slowed down, operating from her demure home-base in an unsuspecting East Sussex village. She no longer has to devote time caring for her husband, the Swedish osteopath Sven Svenson, who died aged 100 in 2008. But she still does her daily barre, remains a Vice President of the RAD and, when not at a performance, is writing her memoirs, racing to meet her publisher's deadline.

And what a trailblazing life! Touring during the war years, she was the Sadler's Wells Ballet's own version of Ballet Russes' Baby Ballerinas, soon to become an outstanding, boundary-breaking dancer. She was also a remarkable artistic director who led London Festival Ballet (now English National Ballet) on its first tours of China and Australia and left it with a regular London venue (the Coliseum) and a home alongside the Royal Albert Hall.

Actually she was not born Grey, but Groom. The new identity came from Ninette de Valois, founder of Sadler's Wells Ballet, who had already transformed Peggy Hookham into Margot Fonteyn. De Valois had also wanted Beryl to be Iris, but this was a change too far. And then there was the question of Beryl's height, although obviously de Valois couldn't alter that. Today, being 5ft 7 (or thereabouts) is no longer unusual, but back then it did cost her roles, even if some choreographers exploited it in darkly dramatic parts. She personified falsehood as Duessa in Ashton's *The Quest* (1943), Ashton telling her 'you must be proud of your height and make the most of it, not the least of it.' She was the central figure of Death in Massine's Scottish-inspired *Donald of the Burthenes* (1951). Although not a popular success, it turned Beryl permanently from being brown to black-haired, after she decided to use dye rather than wear a wig and liked the effect.

From the start she had an impressive technique. Her first teacher, Madeleine Sharp, a pupil of Phyllis Bedells, was 'a great teacher, make no mistake about it.' Teachers of young children, in Grey's eyes, have the greatest responsibility since 'you can't eradicate faults that have been acquired early on.' Aged three, she began classes because her cousins were going and she was an only child. (Dame Gillian Lynne was a fellow pupil.) Encouraged by Sharp, she did all the Graded RAD exams. 'In those days the exams were jolly tough and the examiners were tough, but it was marvellous.'

The only exam she didn't take was the advanced grade, because she was too young. Sharp decided to enter her for an RAD scholarship, to give her access to the teaching she needed. But on the day she had mumps. She was inconsolable. Not even her favourite treat of a cream meringue, brought by her father on his return from work, could cheer her up. However, she auditioned for a Sadler's Wells Ballet School scholarship, since her parents could not afford the required dancewear extras. To her surprise, de Valois just made her bend and point her feet and then asked if she had a little solo. So she did 'The Birdcage' with Sharp providing her straw hat in lieu of a cage and humming the music. Despite the unpromising circumstances the result was a unique contract, signed by de Valois and Lilian Baylis, for a child aged not quite 10: four years in the school with free training, then four in the company, starting at 10 shillings a week.



It fast-tracked her into a stage career. At 14, when the law considered her old enough to stop school, she joined the company and went touring all over the country. She remembers that she was one of the flowers in *The Nutcracker*'s last-act waltz and how, as they stood decoratively on stage during the divertissements, rain would drip down on them through leaking roofs. It was in a Cambridge *Nutcracker* that she danced one of her first solos – at a few seconds' notice – when a principal, Moyra Fraser, twisted her ankle. She could do it, because she 'watched everything, learnt everything.' She had been just nine months in the company, when, one morning, de Valois asked her to stand in that same night for an unwell Fonteyn in *Les Sylphides*. 'I'd never even done doublework, but Bobby Helpmann was wonderful.' The next day, with Fonteyn still indisposed, de Valois summoned her again and said she would be doing the first lakeside scene of *Swan Lake*. 'I thought she meant one of the big swans, so I said "oh, madam, which side?" And she said, "Don't be silly, dear, the lead of course.'" She must have made a good impression since de Valois decided to coach her for the full-length ballet and she made her debut, on her 15th birthday, at the New Theatre in St Martin's Lane, partnered by Helpmann. The youngest Odette-Odile later became the youngest Giselle, aged not quite 17.

Audiences and critics loved the warmth which she beamed from the stage. De Valois too noticed that quality, adding: 'She was lovely, absolutely enchanting... very assured, very confident, with a beautiful

clean line and a fluent style.' Later, she would achieve success in tall-girl roles such as the Black Queen in de Valois's *Checkmate*, Myrtha in *Giselle* and the Lilac Fairy in *The Sleeping Beauty*. But Ashton made perfectly-tailored roles for her, such as the Winter Fairy in *Cinderella* (her least favourite role, because of the costume with its scratchy perspex 'icicles'). By 1957, though, shortly after Sadler's Wells Ballet had become the Royal Ballet, she had become frustrated, so decided to go freelance.

She wanted more opportunities – and they certainly arrived. She became the first western ballerina invited to dance with the Bolshoi in Moscow, partnered by the legendary Vakhtang Chaboukiani (injured during rehearsals, he was replaced by an excellent Yuri Kondratov). On the trip, which also included Leningrad and Tbilisi, she found true friends. Galina Ulanova was a rock of support when she became ill with food-poisoning; Maya Plisetskaya brought her fish-scaler to the theatre to roughen-up the soles of her shoes; Marina Semyonova and Asaf Messerer were inspirational coaches. 'They just lived for ballet, they were so completely dedicated. There was this wonderful unity between everybody – the corps, the soloists. And, of course, the conductor came to all my rehearsals, so you went on stage as one. Because once the curtain goes up, you are completely in the hands of the conductor.'

Russia was followed by an invitation to China, to guest in Beijing and Shanghai. 'It was,' she says, 'the exact opposite of Russia. In Russia, I had so much to learn. But in China, I had so much to teach, because

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they wanted to learn – and they learnt so quickly and worked so hard.’ She wrote books about both trips: *Red Curtain Up* (1958) and *Through the Bamboo Curtain* (1965). But she was a published writer even before that, contributing articles to the *Dancing Times* when she was touring the US with Sadler’s Wells Ballet in 1949.

She had long decided to retire from dancing before the age of 40. ‘I can’t bear to see dancers dancing for too long,’ she says. ‘Darcey Bussell was so sensible to retire when she did.’ In the event, the process was fairly gradual, eased in 1966 by taking on the directorship of the Arts Educational schools. She had, though, definitely stopped by the time she joined London Festival Ballet in 1968. She was stunned by what she found. ‘It was extraordinary: the dancers would decide among themselves who would perform what.’ She started tightening the lax rules, fired some dancers because they weren’t good enough, and of course immediately made enemies. ‘When I held my first audition



Such memories... Grey (left to right) at the Sunshine Gala in 1964; with her husband Sven Svenson in 1966; with Gerald Ohn in 1964 Photos: GBL Wilson/RAD/ArenaPAL



there were over 200 people and I think I took only one boy and one girl. I was so shocked by the standard. It made me realise how lucky I had been.' After Sharp, her teachers had included de Valois, Ursula Moreton, Nicolai Sergeev, all of whom were very strict. 'But these days you can't fail anyone.'

Her legacy for Festival Ballet included impressive productions. It was she who brought in Mary Skeaping's definitive production of *Giselle*. She invited Massine to stage *Le Tricorne*, *Gaîté Parisienne*, *Le Beau Danube*, and the rarity *Parade*, with its Satie music and Picasso designs. And by signing up Nureyev to perform with the company, she also provided the showcase for his spectacular *Sleeping Beauty* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

After 12 years, she left the company. It had taken her away from her son Ingvar during his teenage years and now her husband was getting older. 'Everything in London Festival Ballet was exciting,' she says, 'there was always some drama.' But maybe she was getting weary of these. There was, for example, the infamous Nureyev prawn episode after the company's opening night in Sydney. It was in a Chinese restaurant, when a furious Nureyev hurled a prawn at the critic Richard Buckle, only for it to land in Buckle's bowl, splattering the contents all over poor Dame Beryl. 'I was wearing a little black fur thing...' she says ruefully, adding, 'Rudi could be very kind, but also very cruel.'

Such memories for an autobiography... Although handicapped by macular degeneration, she is highly organised and disciplined, with a daily writing habit, a computer – 'heaven!' – and a clever machine which magnifies text. 'But it doesn't decipher my handwriting,' she says, with her slow, gracious laugh. What handwriting? Grey has recorded nearly all her life in detailed diaries, with daily entries of three or more dense paragraphs. 'When I married in 1950 my husband said "you must keep a diary", so I've kept one ever since.' She only stopped when he became ill 15 years ago. The result is hundreds of volumes, dotted round her house, that run from 1950 up to 2000. 'Don't you find,' she asks, 'you think, oh, yes, I did this and that and we met in this place... and actually you didn't at all?' Yes, that sounds familiar: Dame Beryl clearly has the remedy.