



Mikhail Baryshnikov dancing with Twyla Tharp's American Ballet Theatre in 1983 Photo: Beatriz Schiller/ArenaPAL

# FIRST CLASS

Dancing boys need role models – and these are some of the best. We ask leading artists to name the greatest male dancer they have ever seen, on stage or screen.

## MALE

Mikhail Baryshnikov. Misha's incredible musicality, astonishing technical abilities, exceptional personality and wonderful artistry made him so great.

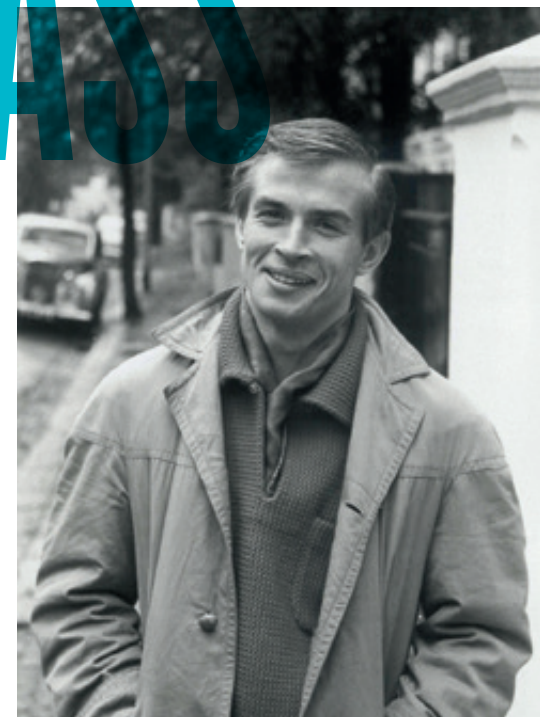
**LI CUNXIN**

Artistic Director, Queensland Ballet and RAD Vice President

I go with my first inspiration: Fred Astaire. Everything he did and in particular his films, made a great impact on myself and I know many others. Astaire was born in 1899 and died in LA in 1987 and was one of the greatest tap dancers of all time. He worked at an extraordinary time, with dance being so popular. Whilst this was the era of luxurious dance films, his talent was so immense and his attention to detail so accurate, that the whole film industry moved to accommodate him: new scripts, his choreography, newly written scores. I don't think this has ever been done before or since. He was able to bring to film not just his skill in tap and his choreography but also his unique grace, rhythm and style, creating an imagery and extraordinary legacy that can never be forgotten. He inspired during his own lifetime and beyond.

**DARCEY BUSSELL**

RAD President



Rudolf Nureyev in 1961 Photo: GBL Wilson/RAD

It is hard – even impossible – for me to answer this question as I love the diversity of dance. I would say that I am very sensitive to dance musicality and the organic approach to movement. When I see a dancer using dance vocabulary in a natural way to bring me into his world (could be in any style: narrative, conceptual), when I feel it is his nature to dance in his own period of life and that he has something to say, then I am interested. From the dancers I saw, I would distinguish Mikhail Baryshnikov and Jean Babilée. They both brought dance alive. Whatever choreographic style they were dancing in was contemporary – there was no frontier between styles, just art.

**NICOLAS LE RICHE**

Dancer and choreographer





Kings of the Dance and below, Fred Astaire  
Photo: Sergei Misenko



# 'The whole film industry moved to accommodate Astaire'

DARCEY BUSSELL

There's never been anyone like Fred Astaire. He was one of the best dancers I ever saw, and I learned so much from watching him. It's his line that was so incredible – quite wondrous. His choreography is so good – there's always sense behind it, a sense of what it's trying to say. His dances could be witty, or sad, romantic or naughty – he never did a dull movement.

Astaire's body was incredible, it spoke a lot, and he could do anything. He had it all – but he didn't always use it all, all the time. He will never tarnish – the man was unique.

**DAME GILLIAN LYNNE**

RAD Vice President

Baryshnikov was the first male ballet dancer I saw. I watched film from his time with ABT and Twyla Tharp, and from solo galas. Oftentimes our youthful memories prove disappointing when viewed with mature eyes – in his case his greatness was only magnified. The more I learned about ballet, technique, coordination, the more incredible he became. His energy, charisma, stamina: perhaps chutzpah is the only word to explain the electricity he emanated. He was a magnet; the audience couldn't look away even for an instant.

The first time I saw him live was when he collaborated with Mark Morris on the White Oak Dance Project. He was still physically able to do ballet but had

chosen to work with dancers and choreographers from completely different backgrounds. As a young girl I was somewhat disappointed – now I realise that this choice of something different, possibly uncomfortable and challenging, is the sign of an even greater artist. One cannot grow doing and learning the same thing. He has now moved on to theatre: to me he will always be an artist of the highest calibre, unrivalled even today.

My second choice is Mark Morris, because he combines intellectual rigour with humour, two things I value so dearly. As a performer I saw him twice: he was sublime. His grace and fluidity were disarming – he is a larger man and no one would assume he could move with such delicacy, nuance and flair. His musicality is impeccable. I consider myself so fortunate to have witnessed both these male dancers. On the surface perhaps they seem like polar opposites, whereas I think there is in fact so much that unites them in their greatness.

**SARAH LAMB**

Royal Ballet

I choose Vladimir Vasiliev of the Bolshoi Ballet. At a very impressionable age I was chosen by Asaf Messerer to be in *Ballet School* when the Bolshoi performed it in London. It started off with the juniors, went to the corps de ballet, and then all the principal dancers of the Bolshoi came on at the end. Vasiliev stood out and inspired me – I always wanted to be like him. There have been many since but I will always remember him.

What makes a great male dancer? Perfect partnering, virtuosity, a high elevation, a speed for pirouettes, a wonderful batterie, a perfect line, an ability to act and a sense of every style from Bournonville to contemporary. And being taller than me to partner the girls!

**WAYNE SLEEP**

RAD Vice President

I grew up with my younger sister, Demelza, who is a big fan of the classic MGM musicals. I was forced to watch them too – I resisted but now wish I'd paid more attention! There's something about Gene Kelly that caught my imagination. He's so easy and natural, and so relatable – he's very similar to my grandad in some ways. Fred Astaire was always in a top hat and tails, but Kelly was wearing trousers and a flat hat like my grandad's. A great dancer can't just dance – Gene Kelly makes it look as natural as breathing.

**XANDER PARISH**

Mariinsky Ballet

For me, it's a very difficult question. I've seen so many great dancers, and worked with some of them, especially in *Kings of the Dance*. This has been like a workshop for male dancers, dancing and creating new choreography. They represent an entire generation, including Roberto Bolle, Jose Manuel Carreño, Herman Cornejo, David Hallberg, Johan Kobborg and of course Ivan Vasiliev, who is still one of my favourites.

They are all great in both classical and contemporary works and I have a great respect for them all – *Kings of the Dance* was like a big family. We have travelled from Siberia to Buenos Aires, from London to the Ukraine. Sometimes people ask why I focus on male dancers – I think female dancers are more unpredictable. They have more issues with being together.

I love dancers with great personality – they may not be the finest technically. It's about who they are as a human being – not just onstage but offstage too. I will always love dancers who love their colleagues, unsnobbish, and totally dedicated to their mission. You can see their personality in the quality of their dancing.

From the past, I would love to have seen Rudolf Nureyev. We can still see, on film from when he was young, an incomparable style and technique. The style of male dancing has changed because life has changed – there's more freedom, more exposure to different choreography. Nureyev made classical ballet more acceptable worldwide. His influence is huge: as a dancer, choreographer and missionary.

**SERGEI DANILIAN**

Producer, Ardani Artists