



# FONTTEYN

## ICON

Ballerina assoluta, fashion heroine and RAD President, Margot Fonteyn was the ultimate ballet icon. To open our centenary special, **Anna Winter** traces her unique impact on dance.

Peggy Hookham was a solemn little girl with a thick page-boy haircut, a pet chipmunk and a penchant for vigorous character dance. Born 100 years ago in Reigate, Surrey, she was no starry-eyed Pavlova-in-waiting. While Frederick Ashton proclaimed that the itinerant Russian ballerina 'injected me with her poison' at first sight and compelled him to dance, a Pavlova performance made little impression on the grave-eyed girl who would become Britain's prima ballerina assoluta.

Yet by her teenage years, Peggy Hookham had been singled out by the formidable Ninette de Valois as the prized practitioner of the fledgling British ballet. Her identity changed at de Valois' bidding – the more glamorous moniker filched from a London hairdresser, one entry along in the telephone book from Mrs Hookham's Brazilian maiden name of Fontes. Since Peggy's mother had been born illegitimately to an Irish mother, the well-to-do Fontes family refused to lend their name to the burgeoning ballerina of the Vic-Wells company.

So Peggy Hookham became Margot Fonteyn, transforming over the years into Ashton's muse, custodian of the Petipa classics and an international star known way beyond balletic enclaves.

What was it that made this dancer in particular – and not her talented peers – such an icon? After all, her 'bad feet' and relative lack of virtuosity have been written about at length. Customarily self-effacing, Fonteyn readily acknowledged her flaws. Other ballerinas like Rosella Hightower and Maria Tallchief, she noted, could 'do things' that she could not. 'How incredibly lucky I was in my career to fall into your magic hands!' she wrote to Ashton in 1986. 'Imagine where I would have been otherwise with my no elevation, no extension, no instep and feeble pirouettes!' Indeed, Monica Mason, the former artistic director of the Royal Ballet, remembers watching Fonteyn's *Giselle* as a teenager, high up in the opera house gallery. 'What struck me was that she didn't seem to have much elevation. But what I got from the buzz around me was that the entire audience adored her, and the applause was such that I'd never heard in my life. Little by little I realised what an exceptional creature she was.'

The qualities that made Fonteyn exceptional were drawn out and developed by several instrumental figures. Her mother, from whom she



Fledgling into swan...  
Margot Fonteyn at ballet  
class in Ealing, c1925; and  
(opposite) in *Swan Lake*  
Photo: Baron



Theatrical poetry... Fonteyn as Giselle, 1937 and (opposite) in *Dante Sonata* with Michael Somes, 1940

inherited her dark Latina looks and striking eyes, took a determined approach to her daughter's training. Since Peggy had talent – enough for a viable professional career – the best teachers were sought out wherever the Hookhams moved, whether Shanghai or Louisville, as dictated by Mr Hookham's job as an engineer.

Eventually, unified family life was sacrificed on ballet's altar: mother and daughter left Mr Hookham behind in China so that 14-year-old Peggy could train in Chelsea with Markova's teacher, the gloomy and glamorous Russian émigrée Princess Serafina Astafieva. By 1934, Peggy had been accepted into the Vic-Wells ballet school. She caught the eye of its founder, Ninette de Valois, who was 'just in time to save the child's feet' with a change of shoe and intensive footwork practice, the clarity and speed of the latter being a quality firmly upheld by the redoubtable company director. The architects of British ballet certainly steered Fonteyn to stardom. Under de Valois' rule, her career flourished, often at the expense of peers like Moira Shearer and Beryl Grey. Ashton choreographed for her, and on the advice of Tamara Karsavina instructed her in the angled aesthetics of épaulement, while Fonteyn's intrinsic sense of measure tempered his swooping extravagance of movement into a poetic lyricism like no other.

The Vic-Wells' musical director Constant Lambert, an erudite bon viveur, imparted his knowledge of the arts and literature to the young performer, who felt the lack of her academic schooling keenly. (Lambert also pursued the adolescent Fonteyn sexually – their eventual affair ended disastrously, and she expunged almost all mention of him from her autobiography.)

Though Fonteyn allowed herself to be moulded, she also exhibited – in her own words – a certain 'bulldog tenacity' that enabled her to navigate the heights of a ballet career. Unlike Markova (in many ways a

greater virtuoso) she was grimly determined to produce Odile's famous 32 fouettés in *Swan Lake* – 'a bugbear,' according to her friend and biographer Keith Money, that she nevertheless pulled out of the bag night after night. 'She always brought it off,' remembers Mason, 'and it was brilliant, flashing and dynamic.'

The bulldog persistence sat alongside a seemingly simple, songbird musicality and a feline sense of grace, mischief and inscrutability. She endeared herself to British audiences from the beginning. Robert Helpmann, her flamboyant first partner, famously said that Fonteyn 'had the curious quality of making you want to cry.' It's a sentiment echoed by dance writer Judith Mackrell: 'Her face is so eloquent, so easy to read. There's something very touching about her that made it easy for audiences to identify with.'

In 1937, Fonteyn danced two of Markova's best-known roles for the first time: the Sugar Plum Fairy and Giselle. Her immediacy and charisma proved crucial during the Vic-Wells' arduous wartime tours: with works like Ashton's *Dante Sonata* and *The Wise Virgins*, the dancers brought much-needed beauty and hope into the bleak precariousness of everyday life.

Fonteyn's innate musicality, however, transformed her relatability into theatrical poetry. 'Her musicality was beautiful,' notes Mackrell. 'It was natural for her to dance with and through the music, in a way that dancers coming from other traditions did not.'

Her sensitivity to music was matched by a Mozartian clarity of line – a perfectly felicitous and unaffected classicism that Mason observed during morning class. 'She liked to be on a certain place on the barre and sometimes I'd be standing behind her. The line of the arms! I'd gaze at the way she maintained this perfect line – keeping the elbow up – through the barre work. When we turned to face the other way, I knew she must be looking at me, or maybe she wasn't, and I tried to maintain my arm the way she did.'

This sonorously pure line was channelled through a perfectly-proportioned body, a physical fortuity that enabled her to distribute stress evenly and to balance with flamingo-like flair. And nowhere was impeccable balance so vital as in *The Sleeping Beauty's* famously exposed Rose Adagio. Originally staged for the Vic-Wells ballet in 1939 by former Mariinsky regisseur Nicholas Sergeyev, this version would be the west's





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closest copy of the Russian original. Princess Aurora was Fonteyn's first full-length role that hadn't previously been conquered by Markova, who left the Wells in 1935.

It proved a triumph for ballerina and company, grandly revived for the postwar reopening of their new home, the Royal Opera House, in 1946 – a fairytale of moral rebirth made real. Fonteyn's portrayal of her signature role exerted an enormous influence over other dancers. In her own debut as Aurora, Mason recalls that 'the most amazing thing happened. I thought I was Margot Fonteyn. I completely lost touch with me. Because I'd watched her make that entrance so many times, I thought I became her.'

Team player... from left: Fonteyn rehearsing with Nureyev and Ashton for the 1962 RAD gala; rehearsing *The Firebird* with Tamara Karsavina; with Shirley Grahame and Doreen Wells at Spoleto, 1964; Photos: Times; Douglas Elston; Carola V Waldenfels



Fonteyn's apotheosis as Aurora came in 1949, when the company toured to the USA. The opening night in New York is the stuff of theatrical folklore. Proclaimed 'the world's only valid legend' in the press the next morning, Fonteyn (who didn't need the final prince's supporting hand for her last balance in the adagio) subsequently featured on the cover of both *Newsweek* and *Time* magazine.

Nevertheless, she remained a team player, committed to the company rather than flitting off for greater financial rewards. Diva behaviour was not in Fonteyn's rep. Even during gruelling foreign tours, she led the company with selflessness and aplomb, says Mason. 'She remained this charming, wonderful, warm, laughing real person. To me Margot was a woman first who happened to be a ballerina. She was this graceful, gracious creature, always immaculately dressed. I saw her as sort of perfect.'

Still, she didn't initially take on her tenure as RAD president in 1954 with head-girl enthusiasm. According to Keith Money's book *Margot Assoluta*, Fonteyn protested that she didn't want the role but was instructed otherwise by de Valois. Nevertheless, she took to the presidency with diligence and determination. Not only was she an internationally-recognised, glamorous figurehead for the organisation, but she presented a new children's syllabus. In his celebratory ballet *Birthday Offering*, Ashton included a unique RAD step, pas de bourrée a cinq pas, as a sly reference to her new position.

She also set about organising gala matinée fundraising performances. For 1961's gala, she extended an invitation to the recently-defected Russian dancer Rudolf Nureyev. Though she declined his offer of partnership (re-marking that it would look like 'mutton dancing with lamb'), de Valois soon had other ideas. 'Into our midst leapt this tiger,' says Mason. 'He set the world on fire, he set all of us on fire and he clearly set Margot on fire.' During performances of Ashton's *Marguerite and Armand*, Mason watched a 'reborn Margot' from the wings. 'I couldn't take my eyes off these two extraordinary people. He was this youthful life force eating up the stage and she was this feminine, sexy woman. Magic happened between them.'

That magic endures. Even as technique and training have developed, Fonteyn's legacy lives on. Current RAD president Darcey Bussell recalls

being coached by Fonteyn for her debut in *Swan Lake*, instructed in 'placing, timing and stagecraft. She was incredibly artful about that.' Fonteyn's focus on narrative is something Bussell now instils into the young ballerinas she coaches, as well as the nuanced colouring of choreographic phrases. 'There was so much light and shade – she made the simplest thing fascinating.'

Like Bussell, Royal Ballet principal Yasmine Naghdi remembers touching the middle finger of the Fonteyn statue in the Royal Ballet Lower School, a student ritual said to bring good luck. In June, Naghdi will mark Fonteyn's centenary at Covent Garden in her debut as the Firebird. She's being coached by Mason, who in turn received teaching from Fonteyn, forming a direct line through Karsavina to Fokine.

In lowering the height of their arabesque, says Mason, today's dancers are shocked by the freedom this affords their upper body. Not that she's trying to reproduce the work of the Fokine or Fonteyn era, since 'everything is of its time.' For Naghdi, revisiting older ballets 'forces us to take a step back and experience a different way of portraying a role – especially today when the demands are for jumps and legs to be higher, to do more pirouettes and everything becomes more athletic. With this, we can step back in time but also make it current enough for our audience.' The Firebird's grand flight into the 21st century sounds a fitting tribute to Fonteyn, this abiding icon of classical ballet.



