Remembering Rudy

"Will those who never saw him dance think of him only as the Rock Hudson of ballet?"

June 1, 1994 By Stephen Greco

I had always been secretly proud that the person who restored the male to prominence and virility in modern ballet was a homosexual. That was Rudolf Nureyev, and the way he did it, basically, was by dancing sexier than everyone else. His mind and body seemed fused into one unprecedentedly passionate, expressive unit. When he danced, he was clearly both generous (with his body) and greedy (for love) -- exactly the way people should be in sex as well as in dance. But when he died last year of AIDS, Nureyev had been silent about his illness for almost a decade -- not the track record I would have expected of someone who, artistically anyway, had always made a practice of full disclosure. How could I continue to admire Nureyev's life if he cared so little about being honest about his death? I went to London to find some answers.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 17

They're doing next month's Nureyev tribute in London as a benefit for Crusaid, the British AIDS fund-raising foundation -- which I find curious, since Nureyev was so secretive about his illness. Or is secretive the right word? Nureyev didn't seem one to be ashamed of anything. In fact, one dance critic tells me that though Nureyev didn't want anything said about AIDS while he was alive, he instructed his doctor to "say anything you want" the moment he was dead. Maybe it's a Russian thing, the defiance of death.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 18

Everyone I ask seems to have a Nureyev story. This one saw him cruising the Tuileries with a boyfriend late at night. That one was a guest at a party in Marrakech where he danced naked on a table. I once attended a Park Avenue dinner party at which our host, who had once spent a night with Nureyev, invited everyone to "view the dance belt," which had been mounted in a plexiglas box. Yes, Nureyev did occasionally leave the behind as souvenirs.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 22

At the Performing Arts Library I view some films and tapes of Nureyev, the earliest being from the early '60s, when I was a junior high school student in Ellensville, New York, and not, alas, seeing much ballet. I am knocked out by the brilliance that is perceivable even on a small screen -- the

exaggerated technique, the madman risks, the ecstatic pleasure of performance, the confidence bordering on cockiness. No wonder he caused a sensation. The ’50s were barely over when he arrived in the West flaunting his body outrageously.

I review the facts. He was born on a trans-Siberian train in 1938, to Tatar parents; joined the Kirov Ballet in 1958 and quickly made a name for himself dancing virtuoso roles in the classics: *Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake*, *Giselle*, *Sleeping Beauty*; defected in Paris in 1961 while on tour; appeared with most of the major ballet companies of the Western world, including the Royal Ballet, where in 1962 he began his legendary partnership with Margot Fonteyn; performed around the world with Nureyev and Friends, from 1974 through the 80s; was director of the Paris Opera between 1983 and 1987; appeared in the movies *Valentino* and *Exposed*; kept a number of homes all over the world, including rather grandly appointed apartments in New York City (at the Dakota) and Paris (on the Quai Voltaire) and a villa outside Monte Carlo; made lots of society friends, including heiresses (Douce Francois), tycoons (Stavros Niarchos), movie-stars-turned-novelists (Monique van Vooren) and princesses (Her Royal Highness Princess Margaret); had at least three major love interests: the late dancer Erik Bruhn, writer/director Wallace Potts and photographer/author Robert Tracy; was diagnosed with the AIDS virus in 1984; died in Paris on January 6, 1993; was buried in a Russian Orthodox cemetery outside of Paris, in St. Geneviève des Bois.

I keep wondering how he’ll be remembered. In 1965, he was the greatest dancer in the world. Now that he’s being claimed as an AIDS poster boy, will those who never saw him think of him only as the Rock Hudson of ballet?

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 23

Let me thing; when did I see Nureyev last? I guess it was in 1992, when he came to New York City to conduct a gala performance of American Ballet Theatre’s *Romeo and Juliet* at the Met. He had lost weight and seemed almost too weak to keep his arms in the air, yet his performance was heroic -- more so, certainly, than the one he gave onstage at the Met four years earlier, as Albrecht in the Royal Ballet’s *Giselle*. He was, what, 50 then? He could have chosen to make the role all flared nostrils and billowing cloak and let us remember the rest. But no. He attempted -- unwisely, I thought at the time -- jumps and spins with which an old man clearly had no hope of dazzling an audience. Huffing and puffing, he made us think more about his exhaustion than Albrecht’s. I certainly wasn’t the only one who didn’t know where to look.

THURSDAY, MARCH 10

On British Airway’s evening flight to London, I can’t sleep. Trying to formulate more questions for dancers taking part in the tribute. I keep hoping we will be able to get past that “he was a very private man” thing. What keeps coming to mind are the words of a friend I spoke with yesterday, a gay balletomane who was bitterly disappointed with Nureyev’s private approach to AIDS. “I’d feel the same about anyone famous who wasted the opportunity to change perception of the disease of have impact on AIDS coverage or help with fundraising,” my friend said. While Nureyev came of age during an era when famous gay men thought nothing of walking ladies to fancy parties, it’s

true he was also in a unique position. He could have been more open about it. What did he have to lose?

“All he wanted to do was dance,” is the cliché I keep hearing about him, as if that somehow explained why Nureyev should shun the role of HIVIP. You can both dance and have AIDS, I remind people. Look at John Bernd. Primarily a dancer of solo structured improvisations, he continued to study the body and its limits right up until his death from AIDS in 1988, when he was 36. And incorporated into a series of concerts so excruciatingly vital that anyone who saw them will forever be changed was not only Bernd’s growing incapacity but his conviction -- always visible in his work, but finally overpoweringly luminous -- that to live was to dance. Bernd had always had skin problems, but toward the end, what with exotic therapies and all, his whole body became blotched and flaky, and it was amazing to see his work begin to deal sharply with issues of exposure and decay. He grew skinny, and the work was about endurance and stamina. When Bernd was no longer able to rely on his mental composure yet chose to continue performing by taking a friend, the dancer Jennifer Monson, as a collaborator, even his memory lapses and physical dependence were incorporated into the work with an artistry I can only call great.

Now Nureyev danced plenty of nonstandard roles that could have been adapted to his situation. Or he could have used his influence to commission new ones or choreographed some himself. How gloriously those final appearances could have shone in the light of self-disclosure.

FRIDAY, MARCH 11

Royal Opera House, stage door. All we need is some perky music and we’d have the first scene of a ballet: technicians, stagehands, administrators, dancers, friends of dancers and one not quite jet-lagged journalist, all improvising a sort of scrunchy choreography on too small a set. I’m here to speak with Irek Mukhamedov, the darkly handsome Royal Ballet principal whose role in Sunday night’s tribute is to recreate roughly the first and last nontraditional roles Nureyev danced in the West: Sir Frederic Ashton’s sweepy, dramatic *Poeme Tragique* and the “Shall We Dance” polka from *The King and I*. While I’m waiting for the press rep to come and fetch me, a compact, young Asian dancer appears from backstage, bursting with a kind of princely, larger-than-life swagger, and gets into a row with a doddering guard over a quick, unauthorized call the dancer makes from the security desk. “The house phone is over there, sir,” the guard says with condescension that, when I hear the dancer’s instant reply, I understand is thinly veiled racism. “I know where the phone is, you bastard.”

“I knew he was ill,” says Mukhamedov quietly. We’re sitting backstage in an empty dressing room. "There were rumors going around the whole world about treatments in Russia, in Paris. But when we worked together he didn’t discuss it. I didn’t know it was AIDS until people started talking about it. Maybe he didn’t even tell himself. Of course he knew, but maybe he didn’t open himself completely to it, because if he had said to himself, ’I do have AIDS,’ then that would have been it.

"I think he always tried to carry on dancing -- carry on doing *something*,“ Mukhamedov continues. ”It’s really a tough life to dance like Rudolf did -- every day, eight performances a week, even nine

performances. Then a day for rest, then another week of nine performances. For me, it's possible sometimes to have rest. But Rudolf never wanted one. It was always dance, go; go, dance. Dance, travel; dance, travel."

The words are echoed by Darcey Bussell, another Royal principal, to whom I talk after lunch. On Sunday she's dancing Balanchine's *Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux* with rising star Zoltan Solymosi.

"He was brought up like that and wanted to keep it going," Bussell says. "He didn't want to go out of the limelight. He had this amazing presence. You looked at him. And he loved to be looked at -- but that's dance, in a way. That's what you go onstage for, to be looked at, to enjoy giving across and having fun with it. That was him, full stop."

Nureyev covered up his AIDS for a long time, but he would have covered up anything that stood in the way of his performing, Bussell says.

"He wasn't going to give in to his injuries. I used to see him in class -- he was old by then -- and his ankles were often in agony. He just kept going."

At night: *Sunset Boulevard*. For Patti Lupone's next to last performance, I hook up with some American friends who are also in town for the Nureyev thing. The show is much better than I expected, thrilling even -- especially the bit that precedes the song, "As If We Never Said Goodbye." Norma Desmond has just returned to a soundstage for the first time in years and is recognized by an old lighting hand up in the flies. "Let's get a look at you," he shouts down and proceeds to train this gigantic spotlight on her. She falls back in her chair in ecstasy. It's as if food and wine -- sustenance itself -- had been restored, after years of privation. In that sublime moment Lupone's expression (not unlike Bernini's Santa Teresa) says everything about stardom in the 20th century, which is exactly what Nureyev embodied and must not have been able to imagine giving up, any more than Norma Desmond could. I walk out of the theater forgiving Nureyev for his late Albrechts.

SATURDAY, MARCH 12

Lunch with Geoff Henning, the immensely capable director of Crusaid, who brings me a copy of the tribute's souvenir book, which is filled with dozens of never-before-published photos of Nureyev. Some of them, of the dancer as a young man, are so hot the book looks like pornography. How proud Nureyev was of that amazing torso, those can-do legs.

SUNDAY, MARCH 13

Around three, I walk over to St. Martin's Lane. Outside the Coliseum, the theater where the tribute is taking place, there is a huge line of people wanting tickets -- standing room, cancellations, anything. At the backstage door, a refrigerator-size bouquet of flowers has already been delivered for Bussell. I try to get a look at the card, but the door attendant is being kind enough to report back to me every few seconds on his attempts to locate Geoff.

In the dark I find a seat at the back of the auditorium. Tech rehearsal is under way. Onstage, in full costume, to the accompaniment of the amplified, disembodied voice of artistic director Derek Deane, Paris Opera Ballet stars Isabel Guerin and Laurent Hilaire are repeating a few steps of their *Sleeping Beauty* pas de deux. In the background, a stage decorator thoughtfully swags and reswags a bit of drapery hanging from a cross. As my eyes adjust to the dark I can make out, scattered through orchestra seats, some of the other dancers and actors taking part in the event: Bill T. Jones, Alan Bates, the Royal Ballet's Anthony Dowell. All the performers complain that the follow spot is too bright. Deane promises it will be adjusted, though "too bright" doesn't seem particularly inappropriate for a stage on which Nureyev will be honored.

"I had my suspicions about his health, but I never broached the subject at all," Liz Robertson tells me, during a break. Robertson is dancing opposite Mukhamedov in the role she performed with Nureyev during a nine month tour in 1989 and 1990: Anna in *The King and I*. "That was a taboo subject. I think he was aware that his illness was going to be very serious and pretty soon, so at the slightest sniffle he would get a bit panicky. His room was 110 degrees. It was in his contract that there was never to be any air conditioning on in the theater, even if when we were playing in the middle of summer. Other people's dressing rooms might have individual air conditioning, but his usually had the heat on. Yet he never missed a performance. Not one."

The evening is taking place in the presence of Princess Margaret. Right on the ticket it says to be seated by 7:15 for a 7:30 curtain. At 7:30, on the dot, the crowd comes to kind of a noisy hush and everyone stands for the royal entrance. My American friends and I are seated near the front of the dress circle -- which, unlike my seat last night, does very well, indeed -- and perhaps naively we had been expecting Margaret to emerge in the grand royal box in front of us, stage left. But behind us there are footsteps and the rustle of expensive fabric, and down in the aisle next to me comes Her Royal Highness. In lavender, looking great. With gala chairpersons Pamela Lady Harlech and the novelist Josephine Hart and escorts, in tow.

The program actually makes sense dramatically, making this one of the most watchable galas ever produced; a parade of some of Nureyev's greatest roles: Solor, Romeo, Apollo, Don Basilio, Prince Florimund -- danced by some of his most talented artistic heirs. In addition to Mukhamedov, Solymosi and Hilaire, there is Nureyev's Paris Opera Ballet protege Charles Jude, heart-wrenching in a piece that the program says "depicts Pierrot's confusion and depression upon descending from the moon and discovering the disappointment of the terrestrial world." Makarova is there, kicking up some glamorous fun with Kermit and Miss Piggy (as Nureyev did on TV, in something called *Swine Lake*, during the late 70s). And just before intermission, as Drigo's pas de deux music or *Le Corsaire* cranks up, on leaps the princely guy I'd seen insulted at the backstage door of the Opera House, whom I'd not recognized as the brilliantly exhibitionistic Royal Ballet dancer Tetsuya Kumakawa. Think loft, lots of loft.

"How many people here tonight do you think are HIV positive?" a friend asks in a whisper. Well, the Coliseum holds about 2,300 people and this is a special audience, so I guess 20 percent. He shakes his head. Too low? I ask. "Way too high," he says. There are at present an estimated 27,000 HIV-positives in Britain and something more than 8,000 reported cases of AIDS here, with a

population of some 58 million. “There are probably more people here who have slept with Nureyev than who are HIV positive.”

The reception afterwards is in the historic Banqueting House. The architecture is by Inigo Jones, the ceiling is by Rubens. Endless waiters, always wanting to top off your glass of champagne: Think real jewelry and titles galore; Geoff Henning comes over and introduces a kindly gentleman wearing an embroidered yellow silk vest beneath his dinner jacket. So this is Dr. Canesi, the doctor who diagnosed Nureyev’s illness and the friend who, during the last years of the dancer’s life, cared for him even on the road.

“Dance kept him alive more than medicine,” Canesi tells me. “Rudolf was far from ashamed of having AIDS. He was simply concerned, given the border policies of the United States, that he might be limiting his opportunities there if he were to go public about his illness. And since he absolutely needed to dance until his very last breath, that was something he would not risk.”

We speak for some time, and it becomes clear to me that Canesi must have wrestled with his conscience in order to observe his patient’s wish for privacy. But since Nureyev did indeed instruct him to “tell the truth” after his death, Canesi now seems to take great pleasure in relating the strength and courage the dancer showed at the end of his life.

That last gig in the U.S. -- conducting the *Romeo and Juliet* at the Met -- *was* the most heroic performance of Nureyev’s career, Canesi agrees.

“He’d been in the hospital in Paris and Jane Herman [then ABT’s executive director] had been calling, rightly concerned about whether Rudolf would appear. I told her, ’Jane, don’t even think of cancelling the engagement. He must appear.’ He had no strength at that point, but he knew that to conduct would give him strength.”

Not only did Nureyev accept that he had AIDS, Canesi tells me, he asked the doctor to establish a medical wing of the foundation Nureyev started in 1975 -- a wing for the benefit of sick dancers, explicitly including those with AIDS. As soon as Nureyev’s will has been settled and his multi-million dollar estate transferred to the foundation, there will be a significant new force in world AIDS care, Canesi says proudly.

“Rudolf wanted to do as much good as he could about AIDS, but he wanted to do it in his way.”
