

RAMBERT DANCECOMPANY

A HISTORY OF RAMBERT DANCE COMPANY

Rambert Dance Company is Britain's oldest dance company, having been established in 1926. It is also the country's premier contemporary dance company, employing more dancers and artists than any other in the UK.

Founder: Marie Rambert

Marie Rambert (1888-1982), founder of Rambert Dance Company (formerly known as Ballet Rambert) was born in Warsaw, Poland in 1888. She was inspired to dance when she saw a performance by Isadora Duncan in 1904. Although her parents wished her to take up medicine, she began to study dance (initially with Isadora Duncan's brother, Raymond) in Paris, while waiting to take up her medical studies. She subsequently began giving recitals in Paris and then spent three years studying eurhythmics with Emile Jacques-Dalcroze.

In 1912 she was invited by Serge Diaghilev to assist Vaslav Nijinsky and his dancers with the complex rhythms of Stravinsky's music for *Le Sacre du Printemps (The Rite of Spring)*, which Nijinsky was choreographing for the Ballets Russes. While with the company she occasionally danced with the corps de ballet and it was during this time that she acquired her love of classical ballet. She worked with the Ballets Russes for a season (1912-14) and left when Nijinsky was dismissed, returning to her career as a recitalist. At the outbreak of war in 1914 she moved to London. When Rambert arrived in London she supported herself by giving tuition in dance and eurhythmics. At the same time she continued with her own ballet studies, as well as performing as a soloist. She married the English playwright, Ashley Dukes, in 1918, and two years later opened a school of dancing in Bedford Gardens, Kensington.



The birth of British ballet

In 1926 Marie Rambert and her students presented the ballet *A Tragedy of Fashion* by Frederick Ashton, then one of her students, as part of a revue at the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith. It is said that this piece marked the birth of British ballet, and also the formation of Rambert Dance Company.

Above: Marie Rambert

Left: *A Tragedy of Fashion* Photo: Bertram Park

From 1926 Marie Rambert and her dancers staged more occasional performances, until they formed the Ballet Club in 1930. This was essentially a group of talented artists who came together for regular Sunday performances at the Mercury Theatre in Notting Hill Gate, as well as short seasons in the West End and regional theatres. (The Mercury Theatre was owned by Rambert's husband, Ashley Dukes, and acted as a base for the Company for many years.) In 1935 the Company was renamed Ballet Rambert, the name under which it was known until 1987.

Touring ballet company

During the Second World War Ballet Rambert became a full time touring company and, as the Company had outgrown the tiny Mercury Theatre, from 1946 its most frequent London performances were at Sadler's Wells. During the war the Company did a great deal of valuable work appearing in a range of venues including factory canteens as well as theatres, and in this way made its own contribution to the war effort. The change in its performance activities, during and immediately after the war, resulted in a new audience. The small but knowledgeable audience of the Ballet Club was replaced by a more general audience whose tastes were less adventurous than those of the Company's earlier supporters. They began to expect longer ballets in addition to the traditional mixed bills of new works. Ballet Rambert performed several classics, including the well-known *Giselle* and *Coppelia* and the first major British productions of *La Sylphide* and *Don Quixote*. Extensive touring for up to 35 weeks a year meant there was less time to create new works and there was no notable choreographer working with the Company at this time.

In 1958 this changed when Norman Morrice, one of Marie Rambert's novice choreographers, created his first work, *Two Brothers*, for the Company. This work heralded a tentative return to the innovative policies which had previously been the hallmark of Ballet Rambert. *Two Brothers* was performed in modern dress and dealt with a contemporary theme while still using a traditional ballet vocabulary.

Norman Morrice, encouraged by Marie Rambert, travelled to America in 1962 on a Ford Foundation Grant in order to see the new developments in dance and to study with some of the major choreographers of the time, including Martha Graham. At this time it had become apparent that Ballet Rambert could no longer afford the expense of touring large-scale classical productions and that, if it was to survive, a change of direction was needed. Following his visit to America, Morrice encouraged Marie Rambert to return to the Company's original ethos and the Company transformed from a medium-scale classical touring company to a smaller ensemble, aiming to create new works and preserve the best of their previous works.

Contemporary dance company

In 1966 Morrice was appointed Associate Artistic Director of the new company which comprised eighteen dancers. The dancers in the new company were trained in both classical and contemporary (Graham-based) dance techniques. Each dancer was considered equal in status. No individual held the position of principal dancer and they became soloists in their own right.

During this time he brought in several American choreographers to make works on the Company. Amongst the choreographers invited to work with Ballet Rambert was Glen Tetley, whose own background encompassed both classical and contemporary dance. He mounted *Pierrot Lunaire* (created for his own company in 1961) and *Ricerca* (originally created for American Ballet Theatre in 1966) on the 'new' Ballet Rambert and went on to choreograph other new works for the Company. Regular choreographic workshops were also held for the dancers, and Christopher Bruce began to emerge from the Company as a talented choreographer.

During the first few years of Ballet Rambert's new incarnation, the Company also retained several pieces from its earlier repertoire. Among these were four of Antony Tudor's works, including *Dark Elegies* (1937); and also Nijinsky's *L'Après-midi d'une faune*, revived for Ballet Rambert in 1931.

In 1974 Morrice resigned as Artistic Director and was succeeded by John Chesworth, who had performed with the Company since 1951 and served as Assistant to the Directors from 1966 to 1974. During Chesworth's years as Director, assisted by Bruce in the role of Associate Director, the Company produced several major works, including two full evening pieces: *Cruel Garden* (1977), by Bruce in collaboration with Lindsay Kemp and Tetley's *The Tempest* (1979). He also continued Morrice's policy of inviting overseas choreographers to mount works on the Company. In 1979 Bruce left the Company to embark on a career as a freelance choreographer, although he still maintained a position with Ballet Rambert as Associate Choreographer. The following year Chesworth left to pursue other interests.

In 1981 Robert North was appointed as new Artistic Director, a post he held until 1986. During North's directorship, the choreographic focus centred on North himself, Bruce and Richard Alston, although occasional invitations were made to overseas choreographers to mount works for the Company. Amongst these were Paul Taylor's *Airs* (1982), Merce Cunningham's *Fielding Sixes* (1983) and Dan Wagoner's *An Occasion for Some Revolutionary Gestures* (1985). North developed a repertoire that proved popular with audiences both at home and abroad, contributing several popular pieces himself.

In 1986 North was replaced by Richard Alston as Artistic Director. Under Alston's direction the Company became known for its use of Cunningham technique and a repertoire of mainly abstract works, in line with Alston's own belief that dance should be created for its own sake and not to support narrative or spectacle. He too invited choreographers from abroad to make works for the Company, including a number of influential American 'postmodern' choreographers such as Tricia Brown, Lucinda Childs and Merce Cunningham himself, whose *Touchbase* (1992) was created specifically for Rambert. It was Alston who was responsible for renaming the Company in 1987, and Rambert Dance Company is a name that more accurately reflects the style and nature of the Company in its present form.

Christopher Bruce's directorship

Alston left Rambert at the end of 1992. His successor was named as Christopher Bruce, who, because of his long and fruitful association with the Company, was uniquely qualified to take on the role of Artistic Director.

Christopher Bruce took up the position in April 1994 and over the first few months built up a company of 25 dancers: some former members of Rambert, some dancers from other companies that he wished to continue working with, and some new to his style of working. Their mixed backgrounds in classical and contemporary dance allowed them to perform a wide range of work. Bruce invited internationally recognised choreographers such as Merce Cunningham, Twyla Tharp and Siobhan Davies to produce works for the Company as well as providing opportunities for young choreographers like Jeremy James and Wayne McGregor to create new works for Rambert.

Bruce also recognised the importance of developing talent from within the Company, regularly offering the dancers the opportunity to create their own short works, platformed at 'choreographic workshop' performances in London.



Above: *Dark Elegies* Photo: Houston Rogers



Christopher Bruce's distinct choreographic style, embracing both his ballet and Graham technique training, led him to create a wide range of new and diverse works for the Company. His productions generally encompass dramatic, emotive and theatrical elements with clear themes. Among his most popular productions are *Cruel Garden* (1977), *Ghost Dances* (1981) and *Rooster* (1991). His creations made for the Company after its re-launch in 1994 included *Stream* (1996), to commemorate the Company's 70th Anniversary, and *Four Scenes* (1998), commissioned by Sadler's Wells to mark Rambert's opening of the newly re-built theatre in October 1998. Bruce's *God's Plenty*, a unique narrative work combining dance with song and spoken text, was premièred in September 1999, and *Grimacing in your Face* was created to celebrate the Company's 75th Anniversary in 2001. He has continued to work with Rambert and his most recent revival was *Hush*, a light-hearted and affectionate celebration of family life.



While Bruce was Artistic Director, the Company performed a repertoire of 50 works (excluding workshop dances) of which 40 have been new to Rambert. Impressively, 25 were creations for Rambert's dancers.

Above left: *Ghost Dances* Left: *Rooster* Photos: Anthony Crickmay

Mark Baldwin

With the end of Christopher Bruce's Directorship in 2002 and the appointment of Mark Baldwin (a previous dancer and choreographer for the company) as new Artistic Director, Rambert entered a new chapter in its history. Mark's vision when he started was to commission works that encourage collaboration with other artforms such as music and design in order to create a body of work that is visually and aurally entertaining for audiences. This vision has earned Mark critical praise for reinvigorating the Company and its repertoire, to date Mark has commissioned new works by many choreographers including Karole Armitage, Javier De Frutos, Walker Dance Park Music, Ian Spink, Kim Brandstrup, Rafael Bonachela, Christopher Bruce, Aletta Collins, Darshan Singh Bhuller, André Gingras and Garry Stewart. Its artists have always been encouraged to learn from different styles and Rambert's superb dancers continue to welcome the challenges presented by the Company's richly varied repertoire.

In May 2005, Mark premièred *Constant Speed*, his first work for Rambert since becoming Artistic Director, which was nominated for a 2006 Olivier Award. In October 2005, Mark won the TMA Theatre Award for Achievement in Dance, for the creation of *Constant Speed* and the high calibre of his artistic directorship of Rambert Dance Company.

Mark has been the recipient of numerous awards. These include the Bonnie Bird Choreographic Award (1992), the 1995 Time Out Award for Dance, and the South Bank Show Award for the Mark Baldwin Dance Company's *The Bird Sings With Its Fingers* (2001). In 1996 he received the French Grand Prix Award for Film, for *Echo*, a collaboration with visual artist Anish Kapoor and composer Brian Elias. In 2002 Mark received the Dance Artist Fellowship for Outstanding Contribution to Dance.



Above: Mark Baldwin Photo: Hugo Glendinning

Dame Marie Rambert, DBE - Founder Director

Marie Rambert was born in Warsaw in 1888. Although she showed exceptional aptitude for dance at school it was not until 1904 when she first saw, and was genuinely inspired by the work of Isadora Duncan, that she seriously considered becoming a professional dancer. Her parents however, had other plans and in 1905 Marie Rambert was sent to Paris to study medicine. She was too young to begin medical studies immediately and so continued her dancing while she waited, eventually earning a modest income and reputation by giving dance recitals in fashionable Parisian salons. In 1910 she went to Jaques-Dalcroze's School of Eurhythmics in Geneva, and when Diaghilev needed someone to help Nijinsky teach his cast the complicated rhythms of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, Dalcroze recommended Marie Rambert. She joined the Ballets Russes in 1912 to teach eurhythmics, assist Nijinsky and dance in those ballets for which she was suitable. She remained with the company for a year.



Above: Marie Rambert in 1937 Photo: Houston Rogers

At the outbreak of the First World War she moved to Britain and supported herself by teaching dance and eurhythmics in schools and private homes in London. She continued to study and prepared new productions which, when performed, met with considerable public and critical success. In 1918 she married the English playwright, Ashley Dukes, whose support and encouragement for her work proved invaluable throughout the 41 years of their marriage.

In 1920 she opened her own school of dancing in Kensington and six years later, in 1926 she and her students appeared in a short ballet by one of her pupils, Frederick Ashton, at the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith. *A Tragedy of Fashion* is important not only because it was Ashton's first work, but because it marked the earliest beginnings of Ballet Rambert.

In 1928 Ashley Dukes bought a disused church hall in Notting Hill Gate and converted it to accommodate both his wife's school and later a small theatre, the Mercury Theatre. This provided a permanent home for the company for the next three decades and during the 1930s was the home of the Ballet Club.

From then on the story of Marie Rambert is inextricably linked with that of her company, renamed Ballet Rambert in 1935. Marie Rambert, one of the great pioneers of modern British ballet, cajoled, bullied and inspired countless dancers, choreographers and designers for over sixty years. Ballet Rambert has produced such eminent dancers as Pearl Argyle, Diana Gould, Maude Lloyd, Harold Turner, Sally Gilmour and Celia Franca. As an indefatigable discoverer of choreographic talent, Marie Rambert can count Frederick Ashton, Antony Tudor, Andrée Howard, Frank Staff, Walter Gore, Norman Morrice and Christopher Bruce amongst those who especially benefited from her enthusiasm and advice.

In 1966 with characteristic insight, she chose Norman Morrice as Associate Director and under their leadership the Company transformed from a large classical company to a small ensemble of eighteen soloists, concentrating on the creation of contemporary works. Once again, Ballet Rambert gained its place in the forefront of British ballet. In 1926 Marie Rambert had formed Britain's first ballet company and forty years later was instrumental in the birth of Britain's first modern dance company. No other director, with the exception of Diaghilev, has had a greater effect on the creative forces in ballet, not only in Britain but all over the world. Her adopted country has honoured her, with a CBE in the Coronation Honours of the British Empire. Dame Marie retained an active interest in everything the Company did, attending rehearsals and performances and giving carefully heeded and highly respected advice, criticism and encouragement until her death in June 1982.

A brief explanation of some notable names associated with Rambert Dance Company

Isadora Duncan (1888-1927)

An American dancer and teacher who developed her own philosophy and dances, breaking away from the conventional technique of classical ballet and exploring new ways of moving. She created no technique as such but her dances were inspired by emotionally expressive and natural sources and the music she selected to dance to - established works by major composers including Chopin, Brahms and Beethoven. She performed in simple tunics inspired by Greek sculpture, very daring in an era of tight corseting and long skirts, and in her lifestyle as well as her performances appeared as an ambassador for women's liberation.

Raymond Duncan (1878-1966)

Brother of Isadora, adopted a lifestyle inspired by classical Greece. After establishing a self-supporting community outside Athens he settled in Paris where, in 1911 he founded a school for Greek arts and crafts and a colony in the suburb of Neuilly. Marie Rambert met him at a party in 1905 and he encouraged her to become a dancer.

Serge Diaghilev (1872-1929)

A Russian amateur and impresario who promoted Russian arts in the West and established his famous Ballets Russes (1909-1929) which toured internationally. The company was noted for the quality and innovation of its works, becoming a catalyst for the most important artistic trends during the 1910s and 1920s. Designs were commissioned from major fine artists including Leon Bakst, Alexandre Benois, Pablo Picasso, Andre Derain, Georges Braque and George Roualt; music from Igor Stravinsky and Serge Prokofiev; and choreography from Mikhail Fokine, Vaslav Nijinsky, Leonide Massine, Bronislava Nijinska and George Balanchine.

Emile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950)

A Viennese-born Swiss musician and teacher who developed a system of musical training through movement called 'gymnastique rythmique' or Eurhythmics*. In 1911 he founded his school at Hellerau near Dresden.

*Eurhythmics - A system used in education which focuses on the harmony of bodily movement and music

Tamara Karsavina (1885-1978)

A Russian born dancer and teacher, she began her career as a member of the Imperial Ballet in St Petersburg and became a leading member of the Diaghilev Company from its inception in 1909. She was much admired for her roles in the traditional nineteenth-century classics and her creations in works by Fokine and Massine. She left Russia in 1918 and settled in London dancing as a guest with Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, on her own tours and, between 1930 and 1931, with Ballet Rambert. She played a significant part in the formation of British ballet and was Vice-President of the Royal Academy of Dancing until 1955.

Mikhail Fokine (1880-194)

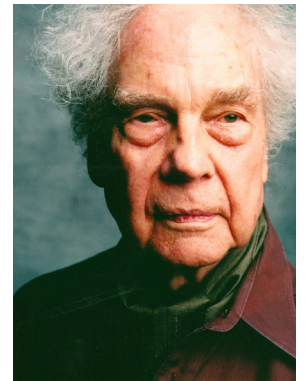
A talented Russian dancer and influential choreographer who worked extensively with Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in the company's first years (1909-1914) and thereafter throughout the world. Like Diaghilev he believed that the art forms of ballet, music and design should be much more closely linked and that the style of dance in any production should suit the specific narrative or mood of the ballet. Fokine used choreography to carry his narratives forward uniting dance and drama. He only used pointe work to achieve special effects and gave his dancers freer epaulment than had been used in the nineteenth-century ballets should be more dramatic and stylistic than it was in the early 20th century. When Marie Rambert established her company Fokine's works were very popular.

Lindsay Kemp - born 1939, a British mime, actor, dancer, director and teacher. He was a student at the Ballet Rambert school and in 1962 established his own company which continues to tour internationally. He created two works for Rambert: *The Parades Gone By* inspired by Hollywood musicals, and, with Christopher Bruce, the highly theatrical *Cruel Garden*.



Paul Taylor - born 1930, an American dancer and choreographer. He studied with Graham, Humphrey and Limon, Tudor and Craske, danced with a number of modern companies, and created roles in Cunningham, Graham and Balanchine works. In 1954 he created his own company which has appeared worldwide.

Merce Cunningham – (1919-2009) an American dancer, choreographer, ballet director and teacher. He was a member of the Graham company during the Second World War. From 1952 he worked with his own group, now called the Merce Cunningham Dance Company and is well-known for his collaborations with John Cage and the artists Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol and Jasper Johns. He experimented with new choreographic methods and was one of the first people to explore aleatoric principles. Most of his later works were created/ choreographed/performed using chance techniques. He died in 2009.



Dan Wagoner - born 1932, an American dancer and choreographer who made his debut with the Graham company in 1958. He worked with Cunningham and Taylor and formed his own group in 1969. He was Artistic Director for London Contemporary Dance Theatre from 1989-1991.



Richard Alston - born 1948, a British dancer, choreographer and Artistic Director of Ballet Rambert 1986-1992. He began his career studying art but, when he was eighteen, started to take classes in contemporary dance and soon decided to take it up as a career. He became one of the first full-time students at the London School of Contemporary Dance and created his first works in 1968. His choreography was taken into the repertoire of the London Contemporary Dance Theatre and he formed Strider, an experimental company, in 1972. Alston's work became related to the principles of postmodern or 'New Dance'. Having studied with Cunningham in New York from 1975-1977 he became Resident Choreographer for Ballet Rambert in 1980 and then became Artistic Director in 1986. He created many pieces for the Company using elements of ballet, Cunningham and popular dance styles. In 1987 he was responsible for changing the Company's name to Rambert Dance Company, reflecting its concerns with developments in modern dance. After his departure in 1992 Alston formed his own company and took up the post of Artistic Director of The Place.



Christopher Bruce – born in 1945, a dancer, choreographer and Artistic Director of Rambert Dance Company since 1994. He developed an interest in classical, contemporary and popular dance from a young age. At the age of thirteen he attended the Ballet Rambert School, going on to join Ballet Rambert in 1963. Bruce emerged as a leading dancer and consequently a major choreographer for the company. As a choreographer he was stimulated by the variety and experimentation of Ballet Rambert in the 1960s, creating twenty works for the Company between 1969 and the end of the 1970s.

Between 1975 and 1987 he was Associate Director and became Artistic Director in 1994. Although Rambert has been Bruce's 'home base' for most of his career he is in great demand to create and revive productions for companies worldwide. Bruce has a distinct choreographic style that embraces both classical and contemporary movement vocabularies. After the re-launch in 1994 it was Bruce's intention to develop a Company that demonstrates Rambert's heritage and ongoing creativity. Bruce retired in November 2002.