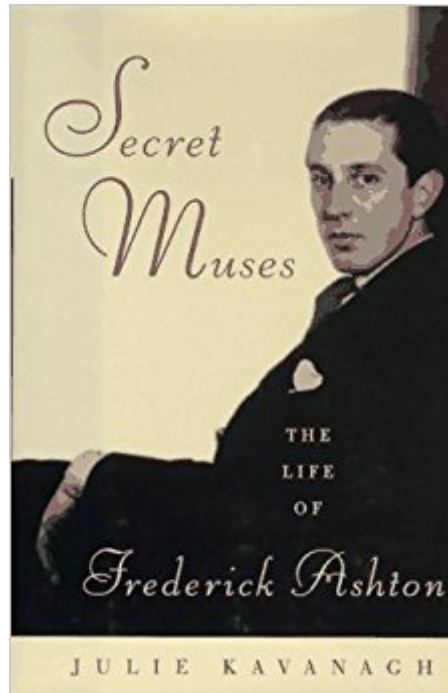




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# **Secret Muses: The Life Of Frederick Ashton**



## Synopsis

The founding choreographer of English ballet saw his influence extend far beyond that world. For more than 50 years he worked with the most famous dancers of his day and many celebrated figures came to know this dazzling and witty personality. Given complete access to Ashton's papers, Kavanagh has written a compelling and definitive account of one of the most important cultural figures of the 20th century. photos.

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## Customer Reviews

The eponymous muses were young men, many of them dancers, who inspired choreographer Frederick Ashton (1904-88) to create *Symphonic Variations*, *La fille mal gardee*, and the other works that brought English ballet to a new level of artistry. His biographer Julie Kavanagh, a British ballet critic, appreciates but does not overemphasize their importance, respecting the mysteries of the creative process in her perceptive evaluations of Ashton's work. She is equally good on his famed wit and giddy social life, providing enough party scenes and famous names to keep even non-balletomanes reading.

Critic Arlene Croce has called Ashton one of the "two great classical choreographers of our time," George Ballanchine being the other. Ashton, whose lyrical style many felt personified British dance, left his mark on the Royal Ballet in the many ballets still in its repertoire and on dance companies around the world. Rather than focusing solely on the choreography, Kavanagh turns the spotlight on

the man behind it and all his inspirations. Offering numerous anecdotes and seasoning her account with notable names in literature and the performing arts, Kavanagh tells the story of a remarkable career. For the complex Englishman, Terpsichore, the muse of dance, took more than one form on- and off-stage?male, female, dancer, nondancer. Although the narrative concentrates more on the person than his work, the details are never prurient and are often poignant. Ballet aficionados will revel in this celebration of the art and one of its foremost figures, and others will find an interesting social and cultural history.?Carolyn M. Mulac, Chicago P.L.Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I enjoyed Kavanagh's biography of Rudolf Nureyev so much that I bought this earlier book about Ashton, whose impact on English ballet was enormous, and at a time when it was just coming together, before WWII. This is the best biography about him. He was a successful man in an era when success in dance wasn't an assured thing. One criticism I'll make about the book is it requires that you recognize quite a few names from British society of 50 or 60 years ago. Some of these people do matter, so a little side research helps; a lot of them are not well known today. Besides the tonnage of names, there's an awful lot of information about Ashton's lovers, some of whom were in his life for a long time but were not themselves noteworthy. I'm not sure this huge amount of detail is worth knowing. I admit it's a tough call in a biography, these people were important to Ashton, but for the most part they aren't of significance to us. Some of the best parts in the book are comments by dancers about how Ashton's ballets were put together, and what it was like to work with him in the creative process. Some pretty well known dancers who built major careers on his work are part of the discussion, and I would have liked to hear more from them.

The most amazing thing about Ms Kavanagh's book is that it NOT a hatchet job on what seems to be a rather unpleasant man. Underneath the many layers of Ashton's exhibitionism, egocentricity, tightfistedness and manipulative scheming Kavanagh reveals a rather sad, but talented, figure, whom one feels a certain sympathy for. Was Ashton a great choreographer? Probably he was. Future generations will be hard pushed to know though, as his ballets are massacred by the Royal Ballet in the UK. One should, I feel, never judge a ballet by it's revivability. Those of us present at the first night of "Enigma Variations" or "A Month in the Country" knew we were in the presence of greatness. In many ways Ashton was a choreographic Somerset Maugham, who managed to evoke a lost world in a few steps of a short ballet, very like Somerset Maugham's short stories. Who knows whether they will stand the test of time? I can't help feeling that Ashton wasn't a very pleasant

person, though not as unpleasant as the snarlingly awful Antony Tudor with his chips on his shoulders and his deep seated inverted snobbery. Ashton's sexual politics within the Royal Ballet would be considered highly politically incorrect, [while his treatment of some of the dancers would be considered sexual harassment and, if pursued through the courts would have won huge payouts], in this day and age. The whole set up sounds [and probably was] terribly incestuous. Ms Kavanagh quotes extensively from Ashton's love letters to and from young men, letters which, in most cases, are too foolish and should have been submitted to a strong editorial hand. It's bizarre to read that Dame Ninette de Valois retired from the Royal Ballet in 1964 for she wielded enormous influence there even 30 years later. In fact there was no real reason for her to retire then at all, as her retirement caused a choreographic block in Ashton. Her shoddy politics in the affair do not show her in a good light at all. It's also bizarre to think that the cradle of British ballet as such was in the hands of these people, who were little more than dilettantes, and who lost in the early post-war period the two great influences on them; Constant Lambert and Sophie Fedorovitch. What was the alternative? Marie Rambert? I think not! Page 476, Ashton to Kavanagh: "There are things I have to say about Ninette....but I'm not going to tell you while she's alive." Did he ever say them? I bet he did!! I do have some small issues with Ms Kavanagh's approach. She talks about the men of the early post-war Royal Ballet as having good techniques. This is nonsense. Believe me, until the advent of Nureyev British male dancing was of a pretty poor standard as there were no outstanding male teachers at the Royal Ballet School in those days. For instance, there was no male variation for the Prince in Sleeping Beauty until just before the Royal Ballet's Russian tour in 1961 and no coda to the pas-de-deux until well into the late sixties. There were one of two plausible dance-actors, Alexander Grant being one of them, but he was miscast in any thing remotely classical, i.e. The Two Pigeons. Michael Somes [and what a fearful baddie he turned out to be, his behaviour bordering on psychotic!] simply could not dance by today's standards. He couldn't even walk properly onstage and was really just a 'porteur' for Margot Fonteyn. I never in my life saw David Blair [page 446] perform eight en dehor turns consecutively onstage, and I saw him often. Nureyev's arrival at the Royal Ballet did not really wipe out a whole generation of British male dancers [page 471n] because there weren't any who could be remotely compared to Nureyev. Certainly not the gormless looking Christopher Gable who, with Lynn Seymour, nightly mistook barnstorming for acting. Which reminds me: There is a myth that is gaining circulation [page 485] that Seymour and Gable were deposed from the first night of Romeo and Juliet. There would never have been any question of them doing the first night whilst Fonteyn and Nureyev were in the offing. When the press announcement of Romeo and Juliet was made [if memory serves] in late December

1964 it's opening two performances, February 9th and 11th 1965, had Fonteyn cast as Juliet with Nureyev as Romeo. Think about this: If Nureyev had been around in 1960, "La fille mal gardee" would have been for Fonteyn and Nureyev, not Nerina and Blair. Nadia Nerina, [page 472], should keep this in mind when criticising "Marguerite and Armand." If one Ashton ballet survives it will be "La fille mal gardee" and Nerina, for all her bitterness at not being Fonteyn's successor, will be remembered as the first Lise in Ashton's production. [Mercifully preserved in a complete black and white kinescope.] Despite my quibbles Julie Kavanagh has produced a great book. I hope she's planning a companion piece, the life of Dame Ninette de Valois! That will be something to look forward to.

Julie Kavanagh's biography of Frederick Ashton has been splendidly reviewed below, but there are one or two things I should like to add. This biography of Sir Frederick Ashton is a panorama of 20th century dance in Britain and, in some aspects, America also. It is, and will remain so for future generations, a marvellous "Who's Who" of the British ballet establishment. I confess I started to skip the love letters to and from the boys. A little love letter goes a long [long] way. Was Ashton really so creatively tied to such people as Martyn Thomas? His choreographic talent was such that I am left wondering how very much greater Ashton's work might have been without the sturm and drang of those relationships. Was Ashton 'passionately lazy' or did he, I wonder, suffer from undiagnosed depression from most of his life because he could not be the great dancer he longed to be? His attempts to 'keep the slate clean' as far as having a good war record and not get caught out in his homosexuality at a time when it was illegal in the UK are commendable, but how stultifying for him artistically! He could never let go and have a really life-enhancing grand passion. I have the feeling that secretly Ashton longed to be a voluptuously beautiful courtesan with the world at his feet. He had his world at his feet most of the time, and his palace was the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, so there were compensations of course. The whole hypocritical business of the illegality of homosexuality in the UK affected not only Ashton but Noel Coward, Cecil Beaton, Terence Rattigan and above all, Benjamin Britten. How much greater might their artistic output have been otherwise? It doesn't matter that many of Ashton's ballets have not stood the test of time. Some of them certainly have, *Les Patineurs* and *Les Rendezvous* are great works for, beside, and because of, their choreographic content, they are wonderful for improving and strengthening any corps-de-ballet - and how many ballets of the 20th century can one say that of? *Symphonic Variations* and *Scenes de Ballet* are masterpieces of their genre. *Daphnis & Chloe* was a marvellous realisation of the score, as was *La Valse*. I use the past tense deliberately. Julie

Kavanagh has captured the essence of the life Ashton led, and brings him to life with more sympathy than perhaps he deserves. Objectively, then, one should separate the man from his choreography, and it's up to each reader to do so. One aspect of his art that Ms Kavanagh has captured is the man's 'theatrical theatricality.' Ashton was theatrical in the best sense of the word. It pervades his ballets and certain effects, such as the billowing curtain in *Marguerite & Armand* stay in the mind's eye, [well, it has in mine anyway], long after the image of the choreography has faded. That a man of Ashton's years could produce *A Month in the Country* is a testament to his genius, his theatricality and his self-revitalising humanity. As Ms Bonifaccio points out below in her review, should one judge a ballet for its revivability? No. Ballets are here and now. I am reminded by this by a friend of mine who knew Mme Karsavina in old age. He once said to her: "I'd love to see *Le Pavillon d'Armide* revived." Mme Karsavina laughed, and replied, "Believe me, you wouldn't." Julie Kavanagh's book is here and now, but I do see great 'researcher trouble' ahead. Some of the prose is misleading because she assumes, rightly, that we KNOW what she is writing about. I can just see a post graduate student doing their thesis in say, Kansas in 2050, and writing about Dame Ninette de Valois longing to jitterbug with a handsome negro at the Caribbean Club. [Page 305]. This is because Barbara Ker-Seymer tells Billy Chappell that 'Madame was in charge... She longed to be whirled into a jitterbug.. but nobody asked her to dance. Maybe it was her WAAF's uniform that put them off.' 'Madame', 'she' and 'WAAF' all in one sentence are going to be read by the uninitiated as though Dame Ninette de Valois was present in uniform when she was, clearly, no-where near the place. [And how I do agree with Sir John Drummond that calling Dame Ninette de Valois 'Madam' was a fearful practise.] That irritating habit [bad theatricality this time] of referring to men as 'she' pervades this book. [Jocelyn Bowlan, a dancer in the English National Opera Movement Group in the 1980'S once complained to the ENO's Head of Dance, Nicky Bowie; "DO the boys have to always call each other SHE?" Ms Bowie replied: "Jocelyn, I joined London Festival Ballet when I was 18 years old and since then everyone's been SHE."] On page 435 'Debo' is mentioned. She is, of course, the Duchess of Devonshire, but you won't find this in the index. Little things, they may seem quibbles, like this are a minefield for future generations who will be hard put to understand where Ashton and The Royal Ballet establishment stood in relationship to the British upper classes. In fact, Ms Kavanagh captures the glorious postwar collision between the Brideshead generation and the Establishment. The whole situation, outlining Ashton's artistic predicament, is wonderfully and accurately summed up by Lincoln Kirsten to Cecil Beaton on page 438. This alone is worth the price of the book. A wonderful wonderful book!!

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