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# A Changed Nureyev Returns to a Russia Much the Same

By D. Garrison Golubock

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Nureyev resting in a dressing room at London's Royal Ballet School, 1973. **Allan Warren**

For the past two weeks, news reports have been dominated by stories of Edward Snowden, the former NSA employee turned leaker who has fled the United States and is on the run from his own government. Russia has had its own far share of runaways, one being famed ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev.

A Moscow gallery is currently showing an exhibition of photographs relating to the flighty dancer: Dom Nashchokina's exhibit "Rudolf Nureyev. Life in pictures. Paris-New York" examines the career and personal life of the man commonly considered one of the greatest ballet stars of the 20th century.

The focus of this exhibit is a series of photos made of Nureyev's homes, both in New York and Paris, shortly after Nureyev's death. Originally intended for the catalogue of Nureyev's estate sale, the photos capture the luxurious tastes and wild imagination with which Nureyev

furnished his home.

"They [the pictures] show everything," said Natalia Ryurikova, director of the Dom Nashchokina gallery. "His character, his tastes, his passion — he had an incredible passion for life." Nureyev furnished his homes with rich dark wood antiques and bright oriental carpets, buying precious objects from across Europe with his surprisingly large fortune, earned as one of the highest-paid dancers in history.

The extravagance of his lifestyle may shock some viewers, yet not those familiar with Nureyev's headstrong nature, a characteristic that led him to flee the Soviet Union and defect to the West, sparking his career at a number of famous Western ballets and leading to his worldwide renown.

"If the taste is outrageous from our point of view, it is authentic to him. I don't think he much cared about what people thought — he did what he wanted to do, and the world be damned," said Nancy Goldner, a prominent New York ballet critic who interviewed Nureyev late in his career.

The finery of his life at the end contrasts starkly with the poverty of his birth: Rudolf Khametovich Nureyev was born in a train car on the Trans-Siberian railroad into a poor Bashkir-Tatar family and spent his early years in a village near the provincial city of Ufa, now capital of the republic of Bashkortostan.

Nureyev's first dance training came from studying Bashkir folk dances, and his precocity with these led his teachers to recommend that he train in Leningrad. Nureyev rapidly attained a high stature in the Soviet ballet world and took leading roles in the Kirov ballet, accompanying the group on trips outside of the Soviet Union.

However, Nureyev's individualistic nature, as well as his homosexuality, inevitably led to problems with the staid, conservative Soviet leadership, leading him to memorably run away from his colleagues at a Paris airport and seek asylum during a trip to the West.

Once established in the West, Nureyev's energy and technical perfectionism won over crowds. Nureyev himself once described his dancing, saying "my whole body bursts into flames," and he certainly lit up stages across Europe and North America with his presence.

However, despite his worldwide fame, Nureyev has never received the same level of respect in his native Russia. Part of this is due to his premature death — Nureyev contracted HIV in 1984 and died in 1992, making him too ill to dance when other defectors returned to the Soviet Union to perform.

However, his early death is not the only reason for his cool reception in Moscow. Gallery director Natalya Ryurikova sighed at the topic of Nureyev's reception in Russia, explaining that though educated Russians embraced his great talent, some people still had difficulty accepting his character — both his defection and his homosexuality.

"In Russia, some people always complain that he was gay, that he was too much of an individualist," said Ryurikova, explaining that "what Nureyev did in the West, he could never have done here." Goldner agreed with this, saying: "Were he living in Russia today — well, he

wouldn't; by hook or crook he would find a way to get out."

It seems probable that even now Nureyev would have a hard time in Russia, though he would be by no means unique in not returning to Russia — many other defectors, such as fellow ballet dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov, also declined to go back to their homeland even after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Nureyev clearly had a certain nostalgia for Russia, as the photos of his home show: His collection Karelian birch furniture was wholly unique. Yet Nureyev was a man who left his country with no intention of returning, in the same way as Sheremetyevo resident Edward Snowden.

As for the possibility of comparing Snowden to Nureyev, Natalya Ryurikova was dismissive: "Nureyev came out of a closed country with a strong young body and incredible talent, and he brought tremendous good and beauty to the whole world — I don't see anything like that coming from Snowden."

Looking at the photos of Nureyev as a young Tatar boy, dressed in peasant rags, next to photos of the confident dancer swathed in gold silk, one can't help but be struck by just how far the man rose. Considering Russia, now passing laws intended to persecute people just like Nureyev, one can't help but think how little it has changed, and how it is still too small-minded for people like Rudolf Nureyev.

*The exhibit "Rudolf Nureyev. Life in pictures. Paris-New York" is on display until July 20 at Dom Nashchokina, 12 Vorotnikovsky Pereulok. Metro Mayakovskaya. 495-699-1178.*

Contact the author at g.golubock@imedia.ru

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