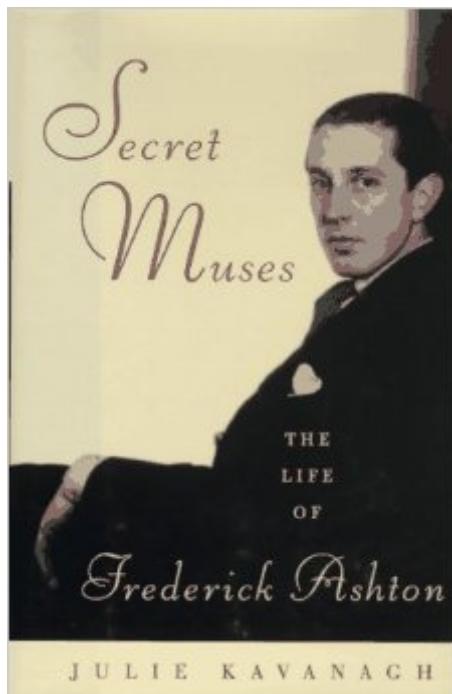


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Secret Muses: The Life Of Frederick Ashton



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.

Book Information

Hardcover: 647 pages

Publisher: Pantheon (May 13, 1997)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0679442693

ISBN-13: 978-0679442691

Product Dimensions: 1.8 x 6.5 x 10 inches

Shipping Weight: 2.4 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (3 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #1,435,421 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #76 inÂ Books > Arts & Photography > Performing Arts > Dance > Choreography #11501 inÂ Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Arts & Literature > Actors & Entertainers #11971 inÂ Books > Humor & Entertainment > Movies > Biographies

Customer Reviews

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 its 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.

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.

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