

L'ÉCOLE
SUPÉRIEURE DE

BALLET

DU QUÉBEC

THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BIRTH OF
LUDMILLA CHIRIAEFF

Biography

Milestones

Video interviews

Photographs





The vital legacy of a great visionary

The story of Ludmilla Chiriaeff, the founder of the École supérieure de ballet du Québec and of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, is the story of the incredible journey of an immigrant who settled in Quebec in the 1950s with an ambitious dream: to make the art of dance accessible to all. A true pioneer of professional dance in the province, the woman everyone called “Madame” succeeded in opening new territories and shattering multiple glass ceilings, allowing dance to earn its rightful place among the arts. Today, we honour her immense contributions to the arts and culture in Quebec.

BIOGRAPHY

An exceptional immigrant experience

The daughter of Russian parents who emigrated to Ukraine and then to Latvia before making their way to Germany, Ludmilla Chiriaeff spent her childhood in Berlin, where she began her training in classical dance. She had the good fortune to meet the famous master of the Russian Ballet, Mikhail Fokin, who would have a life-long influence on her art. Shortly after the start of the Second World War, she became a soloist for the Berlin Opera. At the end of the war she moved to Switzerland, where she opened her first dance school.

In 1952, Ludmilla Chiriaeff emigrated to Canada, where she proudly proclaimed her status as an artist. At the earliest opportunity she founded a company, Les Ballets Chiriaeff, which would be officially renamed Les Grands Ballets Canadiens in 1957. She continued to lead the company until 1974. She was a true pioneer, giving Quebec its first world-class classical dance company. The company’s artistic rise coincided with the growing popularity of television, and she soon started to put her talent and energy into Radio-Canada variety shows. Cutting against the grain of then-prevalent Catholic prudery, she produced more than 300 ballets for both stage and television, and invited numerous prominent guest choreographers to work with the company.

Training the next generation, one step at a time...

The origins of the École supérieure de ballet du Québec can be traced to the early 1950s, when Madame Chiriaeff gave her first dance lessons at L'École Chiriaeff. In 1958, that institution became the Académie des Grands Ballets Canadiens, which trained dancers for the new company. At the request of the provincial ministry of cultural affairs, which wanted Quebec to have a professional dance academy, Madame Chiriaeff reorganized her educational activities, resulting in the 1966 founding of the École Supérieure des Grands Ballets Canadiens. In 1980, the school received a charter independent of the dance company and became the École supérieure de danse du Québec. Finally renamed the École supérieure de ballet du Québec in 2011, it remains the only French-language institution in North America providing world-class training in classical dance.

With the École supérieure, Ludmilla Chiriaeff toured Quebec to train dancers in several regions of the province, providing unique opportunities to numerous emerging performers and instructors. Blessed with exceptional business acumen and political savvy, she was the key to the emergence of a thriving professional dance scene in the province. She also supported contemporary dancers in addition to ballet dancers, always keeping the doors to her studios wide open.

Dream big

Her desire to give Quebec a major ballet company and to train young dancers made her one of the most influential people in the history of Canadian dance. Over the course of her career, Madame Chiriaeff was the recipient of numerous honours, including Companion of the Order of Canada, Grand officier de l'Ordre National du Québec, the international Nijinsky Prize, the Governor General's Award for the Performing Arts, and the Prix Denise-Pelletier presented by the government of Quebec. In 2022 the provincial government designated her a significant historical figure (Personnage Historique).

The heart of dance

For Ludmilla Chiriaeff, dance was a consuming passion, a refuge and a universal form of communication. Her many accomplishments in furthering the advancement and success of this art – at once demanding and sublime – made a significant contribution to the transformation of Quebec's artistic landscape.

As we celebrate her centennial, Ludmilla Chiriaeff remains an enduring icon and an infinite source of inspiration for future generations.

MILESTONES

1924: Born in Berlin, Germany
1946: Arrives in Switzerland
1950: Founds the Ballet du Théâtre des Arts, Geneva
1952: Arrives in Canada
1953: First appearance of Les Ballets Chiriaeff on Radio-Canada television
1956: Opening of the Stanley Street studio
1957: Becomes a Canadian citizen and founds Les Grands Ballets Canadiens
1958: Founds the Académie des Grands Ballets Canadiens
1966: The Académie becomes the École supérieure
1967: Receives the Centennial Medal
1972: Becomes an Officer of the Order of Canada
1974: Retires from her position as artistic director of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens
1978: Named a Great Montrealer
1980: Receives the Prix Denise-Pelletier for the performing arts, presented by the government of Quebec
1981: Inaugurates the Maison de la Danse du Québec
1982: Receives an honorary doctorate from McGill University
1983: Receives an honorary doctorate from the Université de Montréal
1984: Named a Companion of the Order of Canada
1985: Named a Grand Officier de l'Ordre national du Québec
1988: Receives an honorary doctorate from the Université du Québec à Montréal
1991: Retires from artistic and educational director duties at the École supérieure de danse du Québec
1992: Receives the Nijinsky Medal from the government of Poland
1993: Receives the Governor General's Award
2022: Named Personnage Historique by the government of Quebec

Source: Forget, Nicole (2006). *Chiriaeff, Danser pour ne pas mourir*. Montréal: Québec Amérique, pp. 603-606.

VIDEO INTERVIEWS

Excerpt / Femme d'aujourd'hui – April 20, 1970 (4'41)
Ludmilla Chiriaeff interviewed by journalist France Nadeau

Watch

Full interview / Femme d'aujourd'hui – April 20, 1970 (25'14)

Watch

Archives of Le Téléjournal / Radio-Canada (1'58)

Il y a 25 ans décédait Ludmilla Chiriaeff, pionnière de la danse classique au Canada (on the 25th anniversary of her passing)

Watch

In 1968, Ludmilla Chiriaeff and Fernand Nault discuss Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal (8'54)

Watch

PHOTOGRAPHS

Source : [Bibliothèque de la danse Vincent-Warren](#)



Photographer: Paul, Henri

Portrait of Ludmilla Chiriaeff at *l'Heure du concert*

[1955?] (Call no.: P112, S2, D08, P05). Document no.: 1020982. Archival fonds: Roger Rochon

[Link to record](#)



Photographer: Paul, Henri

Ludmilla Chiriaeff in *Variations sur un thème de Haydn*

[1955?] (Call no.: P112, S2, D44, P03). Document no.: 1020943. Archival fonds: Roger Rochon

[Link to record](#)



Photographer: Diamond, Ron S.
Ludmilla Chiriaeff and Montreal mayor Jean Drapeau
[1977] (Call no.: PHO-C457-1977-01). Document no.: 1026403
[Link to record](#)



Photographer: Beauchemin, Serge
Portrait of Ludmilla Chiriaeff in 1980
1980 (Call no.: P112, S2, D08, P10). Document no.: 1020984.
Archival fonds: Roger Rochon
[Link to record](#)



Gaudard, Pierre

Ludmilla Chiriaeff corrects a student at the barre

[1966?] (Call no.: PHO-C457-1974-01). Document no.: 1031741

[Link to record](#)



Ludmilla Chiriaeff and Maurice Béjart at a rehearsal of *L'Oiseau de feu*

[1972?] (Call no.: PHO-C457-06). Document no.: 1041465

[Link to record](#)



Portrait of Ludmilla Chiriaeff

[197?] (Call no.: PHO-C457-197X-02). Document no.: 1030965

[Link to record](#)