

# Famed taskmaster used to change the clocks to get more work from her dancers

Founder of Winnipeg's School of Contemporary Dancers received many honours for her life-long accomplishments

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Rachel Browne died with her boots on. The founder of Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers and its associate school passed away peacefully in her Ottawa hotel room on June 8. She was attending the Dance in Canada Festival.

Brent Lott, WCD's current artistic director, speaks for the Canadian dance community at large when he says: "How tragically poetic, how bittersweet, that she died surrounded by dancers." It is also prophetic that Browne's penultimate piece *Radiance*, a solo for WCD dancer Kristin Haight, which made its debut in December, 2011, was about confronting death.

Browne was considered the matriarch of Canadian contemporary dance. She took great pride in the fact that WCD, which she established in 1964, is the oldest modern dance company in Canada. Through the School of Contemporary Dancers, she helped train, nurture and inspire countless choreographers and dancers. Her role as a pioneer in the development of modern dance in Canada is monumental.

She was born Ray Minkoff in 1934 in Philadelphia to Russian immigrant parents. Her father Israel, an insurance salesman, and mother Eva, a seamstress, were learned people who loved the arts. Browne began her ballet studies at six. After graduating high school, she went to New York for advanced training.

Browne married her first husband, Don Browne, when she was 18. The two had first met at what Browne's daughters fondly call a "Commie" summer camp. At one point, Browne became a member of the Communist Party. In fact, throughout her entire life, she remained a committed social activist. For example, the dancers' notice board usually contains rehearsal schedules and other company memos. Browne used the WCD dancers' board to tack up her latest causes, be it animal cruelty or the dangers of pipelines.

In New York, Browne's major teacher in ballet was Benjamin Harkavy. She also studied modern dance, and performed with the Marxist-influenced New Century Dancers. She changed her name to Rachel in order to join Actors' Equity and avoid conflict with an existing member. Her inner circle called her Ray.

When Harkavy became artistic director of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, he invited Browne to join the company. It is a testament, either to Don Browne's service to his wife's career, or her force of will, that the couple moved to Winnipeg in 1957 where they were soon joined by Eva Minkoff.

Browne arrived on the same plane as Richard Rutherford, a fellow RWB dancer. Rutherford remembers Browne's relentless pursuit of her craft. "We had an hour and a half class followed by six hours of rehearsals," he says. "I could scarcely breathe at the end of the day, but Rachel would stay late, endlessly practising her pirouettes."

This single-mindedness would become a well-known Browne trait when she was working with dancers in rehearsal. Apparently, in the early years of the company, dancers were afraid to tell Browne if they were injured because her philosophy was to keep making them dance, no matter what. In fact, Browne used to set the studio clocks back 10 minutes to gain extra rehearsal time. When the company moved into its new quarters, the studio clocks were placed above Browne's reach.

The Brownes adopted daughters Ruth and Miriam before the arrival of their biological daughter Annette. Browne left the RWB in 1961 to raise her young family, but she was extremely unhappy with domestic life. With Eva in place to look after the children, Browne resumed her dance career with the founding of her company. She and Don Browne, a social worker, divorced after 10 years of marriage. In 1981, Browne married Ben Sokoloff, an English professor at the University of Manitoba. Sokoloff died in 2004. Both husbands were committed social activists.

In the early years of WCD, Browne was a one-person show, doing everything from publicity to booking tours. She also mandated that WCD would be a repertory company, and provided many opportunities for Canadian and American choreographers to create works. In two decades, she had built up a company with a formidable reputation.

1983 was one of the darkest chapters in Browne's life. That year the WCD board fired Browne as artistic director. She was even barred from entering the building. The reason given was a desire to have a fresh, new approach. A modern dance repertory company with its refined ideals of harmony and musicality seemed stilted and unadventurous in light of the many changes sweeping contemporary dance in the 1980s.

It took many years for the rift to heal. Browne ultimately became a WCD board member and created many works for the company. In 2008, the main WCD studio/performance space was named the Rachel Browne Theatre.

Toronto choreographer Carol Anderson, who wrote Browne's biography *Dancing Toward the Light* (1999), believes that Browne's dismissal from WCD was a blessing in disguise. Says Anderson: "Ray became an independent choreographer, and freed from the strictures of creating company works to fit the needs of a program, she could pursue her individualistic artistic expression."

Browne's first piece, *Odetta's Songs and Dances* (1964), resembled a folkdance in its joy of movement. Over the years, Browne's choreography became more abstract, percussive, minimalist and direct. Honesty of expression was her mantra. *Mouvement*, a solo created in 1992 inspired by Frida Kahlo's painting, *The Wounded Deer*, is considered Browne's career-defining work because it introduced dance vocabulary that was primal and raw.

Among her 80 plus choreographies are themes of war and peace, nature, aboriginal rituals and human relationships. Feminism became a very important component, and in the 1980s, Browne made the deliberate decision to work only with women dancers. She would also revisit pieces, setting them on new people, or changing the number of dancers, in order to mine the work for new riches. Browne had a predilection for mixing the ages of dancers to make an intergenerational statement, such as her first full-length work, *Toward Light* (1995), a tribute to strong women paving the way for those coming after. Browne also believed in the creation of new music, and had a particularly fruitful artistic relationship with the late composer Ann Southam.

Browne was a singular personality, and the people who knew her rejoice in talking about her foibles. Luckily, Browne was always able to laugh at herself. An endearing trait was the notes that Browne gave after performances, even on the closing night. She even gave notes when she saw the works of other choreographers whom she had mentored.

By all accounts, Browne was an atrocious driver who was prone to sideswipe other cars. This led to a special routine when it came to the Gas Station Theatre and its tight parking spots. Browne would leave her car on the street for someone else to both park and back out, before and after the performance. Browne was also notorious for being late, and often, curtains had to be held for her. She had no patience with e-mails. In fact, when anyone sent an important e-mail to Browne, they also had to copy Charlene Kulbaba, the school administrator, who would tell Browne to check her inbox.

Victoria choreographer Constance Cooke tells the funny story about Browne and her rehearsal breaks, when she would send a dancer to her favourite coffee place, the Donut Castle. What Browne didn't know until many years later, is that the dancers made sure to bring back decaffeinated coffee rather than increase Browne's hyper level. Browne was also a germaphobe who regarded hand sanitizer as among the greatest inventions.

Browne's standard outfit was a tracksuit and sneakers. She did, however, dress up when she received her Order of Canada in 1997. Among her other honours were the Jean A. Chalmers Award for Creativity in Dance (1995), the Canada Council Jacqueline Lemieux Prize (2000), and the Manitoba Arts Council Great-West Life Lifetime Achievement Award (2001).

She put so much of herself into creation that she would often get sick before a performance. Browne also suffered from chronic insomnia and needed pills to put her to sleep. In recent years, she had become increasingly frail, struggling with hip injuries and a very serious bout of pneumonia, but at 77, she was still going strong. Family and friends thought she was an indestructible force. Everyone assumed she would be there for WCD's 50th anniversary in two years.

Browne's death leaves many projects unfinished. One of the most poignant is a dance for camera film with Cooke. Browne had very arthritic, deformed hands that were, at the same time, very expressive. Cooke's idea was to film Browne's hands while recording her stream of consciousness voice-over. They had two rehearsal sessions last month, and Cooke is going ahead with the project using this exploratory footage.

Although Browne's demanding, controlling and challenging personality remained intact throughout her life, she had apparently mellowed in her twilight years. She seemed to be a kinder, gentler version of herself. Says Winnipeg choreographer Stephanie Ballard: "Ray was a humanitarian both in life and in art. She always wanted to make a difference."

And Anderson adds: "Ray was a woman who never gave up."

Rachel Browne was born Nov. 16, 1934 and died June 8, 2012. She leaves behind daughter Ruth Asper, her husband David, and their children Daniel, Rebecca and Max; daughter Miriam Browne and her husband Kevin McElrea; and daughter Annette Browne and her partner John Shultis.

## Your Account

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