



## Denise Jeanette Britz Clarke

November 21, 1945 - April 6, 2021

Denise Jeanette Britz (Clarke) died just before midnight, this Easter Monday, 5 April 2021, in Charlotte, North Carolina. Having lived and worked on four continents, she was loved and known by many. Most knew her as Den, but she was also Dinky Di, Britzy, Miss Denise, Bushka and Mom – the latter not a term reserved exclusively for her biological children.

Born in Durban, South Africa, on 21 November 1945 to Reginald Britz, a racehorse trainer and manager of Durban's beaches, and Lillian, who was an amateur dancer, a champion walker and, fleetingly, a circus performer. As a girl, Denise obtained provincial colours in gymnastics and trained in ballet (as well as other dance disciplines) with Iris Manning and Brownie Sutton. For a tiny dance school on the tip of Africa, her particular class was abundant with talent; fellow students Margaret Barbieri, Dawn Weller and Faye Daniel would go on to illustrious careers in the world of ballet.

Not having the traditional willowy physique of a classical ballerina, Denise's talent led her instead to the large-scale Joan Brickhill & Louis Burke musicals and Follies extravaganzas. As Joan and Louis' trusted dance captain, she toured with them around South Africa and its bordering countries. Her lifelong passion for dogs began, when, despite strict instructions not to pet the canine performers, she corrupted one of the puppies in the poodle act by showing it affection; thereafter Louis - named after the impresario himself - became useless as a trained animal but wonderful as her companion.

A stint at Sun City coincided with one of Liberace's engagements. Seeing that he was travelling on his own Denise, not one to stand on ceremony, invited him to share her birthday party. She was deeply impressed that after she'd introduced him to the several dozen people in attendance, he remembered everyone's name exactly when he said goodbye to them at the end of the evening, a skill she longed to master herself.

Visiting her close friend and former dancing partner Ron Alexander in Paris, she got to meet her idol: Rudolf Nureyev. While they were out clubbing one evening - ever focused

on dance - she asked the great dancer what his daily schedule was; she was determined to understand his genius and how he shaped it. Ron was a member of the Bluebells troupe at the famous Lido de Paris, and he tricked Denise into auditioning for Madame Bluebell by inviting her to watch him rehearse. Summoned onstage, she and Ron performed one of their Brickhill Burke pas de deux; she was hired on the spot, becoming the shortest Bluebell Girl ever, their average height being 6 feet – and hers being just shy of five foot four. Before long, she was leading the touring troupe around Japan as dance captain.

There, she found a tick-covered stray dog eating out of a dumpster in a back street. Trying to communicate with the help of her Japanese phrase book, she took it to a vet, where she was told that she could not under any circumstances eat the dog. When she said she wanted to save it, she was laughed at. She won the battle and the dog became her beloved Miyaki. It was also during this time that her parents were summoned by the Nationalist South African government and asked to explain why their daughter had sent back into the country a copy of Mao's 'Little Red Book'. They persuaded the security services that Denise wasn't a Communist, but simply had a curious mind and wide-ranging interests. This was true: while most of the other dancers would stay in and have fish and chips in their hotel, Denise would investigate the culture and nightlife of all the different cities across the Japanese islands. In doing so, she discovered a never-heard-of-before delicacy called sushi.

Back in London, Denise continued to train at Pineapple Studios, with a particular interest in the Vaganova method of ballet; between her time in London and Paris, she took classes with such luminaries as Nureyev, Galina Samsova, Gillian Lynne, André Prokovsky and Matt Mattox.

When she returned to South Africa, she was approached by a Eurocentric hotelier who wanted to introduce cabaret revue-style shows to Durban. This started an almost two-decade run of cabaret productions running across South Africa. Starting at the Edward Hotel on the Durban beachfront, venues also included Ruby Tuesday, The Millionaires' Club and the Force 10 show bar at the Wild Coast Sun; she opened Le Parisien in Johannesburg alongside theatre designer Anthony Farmer. Notable amongst these hotspots was the 7th Haven, which, being in the Port of Durban and therefore under international law, meant Denise could have a black singer on stage at the same time as white dancers. A radical gesture at the time.

After marrying Norman Hurt, her Brandoesque high school sweetheart, and having two children with him, her professional output, managed alongside her family life, was

staggering. She would no sooner finish choreographing and rehearsing one show before immediately conceiving, designing and choreographing the next. She was also giving hugely popular dance classes, jazz and contemporary, teaching up to the day before giving birth, then bringing her baby into class a few days later, the vibrations coming from the top of the speakers at the front of the studio acting as its crib. Denise was supported throughout all of this by her domestic worker, friend and second mother to her children, Dorah Gasas.

This was Apartheid-era South Africa, and although not overtly political Denise raised eyebrows and risked punishment by flouting segregation laws: Dorah's younger children lived in the house with Denise's own children. By this time she had married Don Clarke, whom she met through work, after striding into his recording studio in what he described as the 'tightest pair of jeans he'd ever seen'. Throughout their marriage, she collaborated with him as a musician on her work.

While she could often be wildly impractical and disorganised when it came to the quotidian details of life, when it came to her work she was like a precision-focused machine. As well as her cabarets, Denise choreographed pantomimes (directed by John Moss), musicals and operas; staged a show on the Astor cruise liner; and was involved in conceiving and staging massive fashion shows and corporate spectacles.

Following her second divorce, Denise was offered a job choreographing, producing and designing shows for an Austro-Turkish hotel chain, with venues across the Mediterranean. While she loved working with the hundreds of dancers from across the world that she had to train for these shows, Turkey was not, as a base country, a natural fit for her fiery feminism. Sponsored as an 'alien of exceptional ability', she emigrated to America where she started to teach ballet. First in Florida, then in Charlotte, North Carolina, where she settled to be near her brother.

In Charlotte, at Miller Street Studio (founded by Michelle Soutier; her boss who also became a friend) she was known as 'Miss Denise'. Her students remained largely unaware of her colourful background and career but she was a legendary figure to them nonetheless. They responded to her passion, sense of discipline, humour and loving attention. She had come full circle and back around to her true love - ballet. Instead of being a ballerina, though, she was helping to create hundreds of ballet dancers.

She devoured books and films on dance at the same rate she had once created cabarets, comparing and analysing the great interpreters of the classical repertoire. Not content to teach the same class more than once, she spent as much time outside of her studio

devising new classes as she did inside teaching her 'spoilt American brats'. As Michelle often said, Miss Denise could get away with saying things to her pupils – often the unvarnished truth – in a way that no one else could. Her students have gone on to great success, among them Josh Hall as a principal for Charlotte Ballet and Jacqueline Harris as one of Alvin Ailey's rising stars.

Irrespective of whether her students went on to careers in dance or not, her influence on the hundreds of young people who passed through her classes was – and remains - indelible. More than a teacher, she was a mentor, instilling in these young people a sense of curiosity about the world and an openness to different ways of thinking and seeing. Denise didn't just teach dance, she showed people how to live.

Starting with her own children, and then with all those who considered her their 'other mom', she encouraged them to do as she had done: to be navigated by love. Love for the thing you do – whatever it may be. It was this philosophy of accepting others for who they were and nurturing their individual passions that made people feel intimately connected to her. Her support and training gave so many students and performers not just careers, but inspired the direction their lives would take.

Having lost most of her close male friends to AIDS during the early days of the HIV pandemic, she missed her remaining friends and family scattered across the globe. Although her life in Charlotte was quiet, she was happy there and felt embraced by her new community. American life included more adored dogs: Misha (named for Baryshnikov), Rudy (for Nureyev) and Margot (for Fonteyn). After having been diagnosed with Covid at Christmas, she recovered, but then metastatic breast cancer was detected in March. She died in her sleep, with her brother Reg to one side of her and her son Matthew on the other. She is also survived by her daughter Sarah-Jane, the absolute apple of her eye, her grandson Dylan, Dorah's two daughters Smiley and Zanele, her sister Colleen and the Clarke family, whom she thought of as her own. That list does not do her surviving family members justice: her family was as numerous as all the lives she touched, and she was 'Mom' to them all.

Having followed her passions and having acted with such kindness and generosity of spirit, she died rich in the love of all who knew her.

# Events

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**APR**   **Memorial Service**   **03:00PM**  
**11** 

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The River Place  
1420 Convention Dr., Fort Mill, SC, US, 29715

# Comments

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“ For a number of years, one of the Providence Park highlights was to encounter Denise and her beloved canines during their rounds around campus. She loved to narrate stories of her career at Miller Dance Academy/Providence, her passion for dance and her students vivid with every word. Denise was an amazing woman who led an amazing life. She will be greatly missed, yet her artistic spirit lives on in all who knew her.

**John Farrington Benton** - April 12 at 05:45 AM