

Leo Kharibian

American choreographer who revolutionised British dance

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The twee world of British musical comedy choreography - camp young things doing lots of pretty twirls - was dealt a death blow in 1958 with the arrival in London of West Side Story. Jerome Robbins' expressive, acrobatic and sexy movement - the new jazz dance - so impressed British directors that even television light entertainment was never quite the same again.

In turn, the London of the 1950s so impressed several of the American dancers brought from New York for the production that they did not return home. Among those who stayed was Leo Kharibian, who has died aged 74, and who did much to popularise American jazz dance in Britain. On stage and screen, he was the cool little dude showing uptight Brits how to loosen up.

Kharibian had the skill and energy to become a major choreographer, but he took a different route, first through the swinging pop music scene, then to very British comedy, working with the Monty Python team and in pantomime in Oxford. Finally, however, he did stage some classic musicals back in his home town, Boston, Massachusetts. It was a peculiar career, but, by all accounts, a very happy one; his Fourth of July and Guy Fawkes' parties, held in his north London home, formerly a derelict tea shop which he restored and designed himself, were the talk of the town for many years.

Throughout his life, Kharibian dabbled as actor, photographer and interior designer. But from the moment he saw, as a child, his first ballet class, he was in no doubt about his principal career. He was only 17 when, as a student, he choreographed Boston University Opera's production of Stravinsky's The Rake's Progress, conducted by the composer. After two years' service with the US army in Hawaii, he settled in New York, where he studied at the Ballet Russe school with Martha Graham and Peter Gennaro.

Smallish, lithe and youthful, Kharibian was 30 by the time he made his professional stage debut, as the Mute Boy in Saroyan's The Cave Dwellers, at the Boston arts festival in 1957. He was too old to be a Jet in West Side Story, but was too talented to be ignored, and played Anxious (and later Arab) at Her Majesty's theatre from 1958 to 1961.

During this time, he also began choreographing his own pieces, such as *Variations, Jazz*, seen in Oxford and London. Later, he taught American jazz dance, notably at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art.

Tapes of Kharibian's television choreography have been mostly wiped, but *Lyrics By Shakespeare* (1964), a charming collaboration with Johnny Dankworth and Cleo Laine, survives. He also worked on the pop show *Ready, Steady, Go!*, which led to *Search For A Star* (1965), the first of the ruthless talent shows. Each week, young hopefuls had to pick up almost instantly Kharibian's slick dance routines; he eliminated those who could not keep up until only one remained. He also choreographed *Pop Gear* and *Be My Guest*, film vehicles for pop acts of the day.

Much of Kharibian's stage work was done for director Peter Coe. *The Love Of Three Oranges* (1963) was followed by both musicals and opera, including *Pickwick* (1963), *Ernani* (1967), an American production of *On A Clear Day You Can See Forever* (1967) and *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1972).

Kharibian returned to Oxford to direct Christmas shows at the Playhouse; his last, *Puss In Boots* (1976), was particularly successful. He had developed an affinity with British humour - probably his best known number is *We're Knights Of The Round Table*, which he did for the film *Monty Python And The Holy Grail* (1974).

Subsequently, he rather dropped out of sight. He had small parts in the National theatre's production of *Guys And Dolls* (1984) and the film *Death Wish 3* (1985), and he was inside the bear suit in the television commercial for Hofmeister beer. After his home was demolished to make way for the new Angel tube station, in Islington, he returned to Boston, where he directed and choreographed musicals at the Riverside theatre works. The last was *The Hopeless Romantic* (1999).

Prostate cancer had been diagnosed in 1996, and last May he returned to live with his family in Leicestershire. He was married first to Jennifer Till, and then to Ann Edwards. They survive him, along with three daughters and two granddaughters.

Leo Kharibian, dancer, choreographer and director, born April 27 1927; died August 23 2001.