

**Clement Crisp — FT dance critic of 60 years who wrote with eloquence and wit His prose could be scorching, but his love of dance was limitless and his knowledge astounding**

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The critic Clement Crisp — brilliant, outrageous, erudite, shocking, hilarious, mercurial — has died at the age (it is finally revealed) of 95. For more than 60 years, his prose distinguished the arts pages of the Financial Times, always with eloquence, panache, expertise and astounding wit.

For much of his life, his age was a closely guarded mystery. “Start lying about your age now, dear!” he once said to this younger writer. For decades, no question in the dance writers’ world was more asked than “How old is Clement Crisp?” He admitted to 90 in 2021, but those who attended Oxford with him were between one and five years older: in fact, he was born in 1926, in Romford, Essex, only child of a close family, and attended Oxted school before going up to Keble College, Oxford at the end of the second world war.

Crisp was one of an exceptional generation of Oxford postwar undergraduates devoted to the theatre arts — the theatre producer Michael Codron and the critic Andrew Porter became his life-long friends, the latter when Porter was playing continuo for an undergraduate production of Mozart’s *Idomeneo*; Crisp was turning the pages. Several of Crisp’s other contemporaries also became critics: among them Clive Barnes and John Percival. Porter, who with Derek Granger founded and developed this paper’s arts section, introduced Crisp to its pages in the 1950s: his first review for the FT was in 1956.

To read him was to quote him. One FT colleague loved to single out the 1988 review in which Crisp wrote: “In this work, *Second Stride* may be said to be ‘into’ world religion in the sense that a bull is ‘into’ a china shop.” The choreographer Matthew Bourne enjoyed quoting one Crisp review of his own *Highland Fling* (1994) that described Bourne’s sylphs as resembling “manic dirty laundry”. My own go-to Crisp opening line was of a 1980 London Coliseum programme of Maurice Béjart’s *The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, *The Rite of Spring*: “Béjart and Stravinsky is one of those fabled partnerships, like Romeo and Goneril or bacon and strawberries.”

Yet this wit could also turn to incisive poetry. In 1980, while observing the fustian nature of a “new” Covent Garden production of *Giselle*, he wrote that the performances of Natalia Makarova and Anthony Dowell cut through their surroundings “like a laser beam through fudge”.

Crisp had discovered ballet as a teenager during the second world war, when his parents took him to see the Sadler’s Wells Ballet: “ballet with a bun”, he loved to recall this epiphany. A brilliant French speaker, he preceded his Oxford studies with a year’s undergraduate study in Bordeaux. For many years, his primary source of revenue was from teaching French at school level. But during the 1960s, he became dance critic of *The Spectator*, a post he relinquished when his FT work took the preponderance of his time.

Crisp wrote many scorching reviews. He loved to announce, in print, that some choreography made him long for the relatively lesser terrors of the dentist’s chair. He was the same out of print: in a 2015 Christmas email, he cautioned recipients to steer clear of the work of four eminent choreographers, whom he called “beads on the devil’s rosary”. Yet he was equally generous and eloquent in his praise and he counted an unusually high

number of dance professionals among his valued friends: the choreographers Yuri Grigorovich, Kenneth MacMillan and Paul Taylor were just three, while the ballerinas Merrill Ashley, Natalia Makarova, Alicia Markova and Ludmila Semenyaka were only four of the many truly devoted to his company.

Clement Crisp talking to dancers Noelle Christian, Alexandra Balashova and Phyllis Bedells in 1969 © Royal Academy of Dance/ ArenaPAL Despite his intense focus on the ballet, his tastes could be wider. He had deep admiration for the finest flamenco dancers, and once commented on his enthusiasm for breakdancing, for instance, calling it: “beautiful, vivid, exciting and thrilling”.

He regarded Markova and the American director Lincoln Kirstein, another good friend, as the two figures from whom he learned most about dance history. In truth, though, Crisp’s amazing scholarship was very largely his own: he could tell you which shelf at the Victoria and Albert Museum to visit when researching Renaissance dance.

Away from the FT, Crisp lectured on dance history at several institutions: the Royal Academy of Dance, the Laban Conservatoire of Movement and Dance, the Society for Dance Research, and more. In his weekly lectures to MA students at Laban (I attended them for a year), he was at his most dazzling and profound, showing his wide command of historical issues far beyond dance. His conversation effortlessly included his enthusiasms for Haydn (“so much greater than Mozart”), Dickens (Bleak House was “the greatest novel of the 19th century”), Trollope, Bridget Riley’s painting, Jean Muir’s couture, television series including the ITV soap Crossroads and the BBC children’s puppet Edd the Duck, gardening and cookery. His lifetime partner was Peter Hollamby, who liked to remark that nothing about Clement was more priceless than his telephone conversations.

Crisp with Royal Ballet director Kevin O’Hare during the interval at a performance of ‘Romeo and Juliet’ dedicated to Crisp in 2019 Crisp became close friends with the critic Mary Clarke when the publishers Adam and Charles Black brought them together to co-write *Ballet: An Illustrated History* (1973). Initially, they divided the chapters between them but soon found collaboration a pleasure, beginning their *Ballerina* book in 1986 by co-writing 4,000 words before lunch. In all, Crisp authored and co-authored no fewer than 17 books on dance and dance history. Last year saw the publication of his collected reviews, *Six Decades of Dance*, created and published by the newly formed International Dance Writing Foundation, whose aim is to keep the art of dance criticism alive and flourishing in Crisp’s name.

In 1992, Crisp was made a Knight of the Order of the Dannebrog in Denmark and in 2005 he was awarded an OBE “for services to ballet”. In 2019, after his 2018 retirement from the FT, the Royal Ballet dedicated a performance of MacMillan’s *Romeo and Juliet* to him.

Crisp was loved by many colleagues: not just fellow critics but editorial staff at the FT and elsewhere. He made work and life terrific fun for those around him.

Alastair Macaulay was the FT’s theatre critic from 1994-2007

Louise Levene, the FT’s current dance critic, writes: Like every dance-goer and dance writer, I was always in awe of the great Clement Crisp, his breadth of knowledge, his genius for describing and evaluating what he saw, his keen wit and uncompromising standards. He ignored other dance critics unless he stumbled upon them in the *Telegraph*, to which he remained stubbornly loyal throughout his life. Shortly after I began writing for *The Sunday Telegraph* in 1998, I wrote a particularly savage one-star review. Two days later the great

Clement Crisp looked sidelong at me in the bar of Sadler's Wells, wagging a stern finger: "I see you've been making friends." I muttered something about having gone in a little strong and he shook his head: "You told The Truth." It was all that mattered. He rang me the next morning, we spoke for an hour and we spoke every morning, every day for the next 20 years: an education and a delight. So terrifying in print, he was one of the cleverest, funniest, kindest men I have ever known. It was a privilege to be his colleague and friend.

*'Clement Crisp Reviews: Six decades of dance'* is available from Troubador Books, £30