

## SONIA DEL RIO

DANCER, 83

## QUEBEC PERFORMER DANCED FLAMENCO ON SOME OF THE WORLD'S TOP STAGES

Though her life began humbly in mining town Rouyn-Noranda, Que., she developed a passion for Spanish dance, trained in Europe and appeared with José Greco and other leading talents of the era

MONIQUE KHOUZAM GENDRON  
PASCALE GARBER

Dancer Sonia del Rio, who died on Oct. 13 at the age of 83 after a battle with cancer and advanced scleroderma, was known as Quebec's ambassador of flamenco. Born in a mining town in Quebec's Abitibi-Témiscamingue region, she began dancing early in life and distinguished herself as a classical dancer, choreographer, teacher, lecturer and businesswoman. Her determination, perseverance and talent led her to perform on some of the world's greatest stages, meeting Salvador Dalí, Edith Piaf and many others.

Quebec filmmaker Jean-Claude Labrecque once said her life story would make a compelling film because of how much she accomplished after such a humble beginning. "Sonia del Rio has a strong head, strength of will, determination, a sense of humor, and a sense of organization. With her there is never a dull moment. She has great beauty, surpassing that of Bardot at the time. ... She is an exceptional woman with a unique personality. But what is most intriguing is her trajectory."

When she was born, on Jan. 29, 1940, in Rouyn-Noranda, Que., her parents, Thérèse Jacques and Émile Boivenu, called her Marie Marguerite Sonia, the latter name in honour of Norwegian skater and movie star Sonja Henie. Her father, Émile, worked as a labourer to provide for their large family, which included six children.

By the time Sonia was 12, her family had relocated to Montreal and she began studying classical ballet and Spanish dance at Studio Lacasse-Morenoff and with Tatiana de Koudriatzeff. She soon began performing at exclusive cabarets. She had found her life's passion.

But meanwhile, Sonia had to help support her family by working at the Miraval grocery store, delivering La Presse newspaper with her cart in summer and her sleigh in winter, and selling Christmas cards. In the summer, she would also hulk strawberries at a jam factory, receiving a penny for each box of berries; a hundred boxes a day would earn her a dollar. She also worked briefly as a babysitter at the Misericorde Hospital, but left because she was upset by an epidemic of baby deaths.

At age 20, Sonia departed aboard the SS *Homeric*, an ocean liner, to further her dance studies in Europe. She studied Spanish dance in Paris with Lurcy de Luz, and soon attracted the notice of the famous dancer Luísllo, who hired her for his company at the Théâtre de l'Étoile. Following this first success, she moved to Spain to deepen her knowledge of Spanish classical dance, folk dance and flamenco. She stud-



Sonia del Rio, seen in an undated photo taken in Madrid, danced for more than 15 years with famous Spanish ballet companies around the world. When she ended her international career, she trained several generations of dancers in Canada. DANCE COLLECTION DANSE

ied with masters Hector Zarázap, Raquel Lucas, José Granero and others.

During this period she adopted the name "del Rio," a Spanish version of Lurvière, the name of one of her ancestors.

In 1963, Ms. del Rio had her big break: She was invited to dance with José Greco, the performer and choreographer who popularized Spanish dance worldwide. Sonia travelled with him, first on a tour of the United States and Canada. The José Greco Ballet was on the bill at Lincoln Center in New York and the Hollywood Bowl The-

ater, among others. In Montreal, the company performed at Place des Arts, where Ms. del Rio was proud to dance for her family.

As a result of her success, she received a scholarship from the Quebec Ministry of Education in 1965, which allowed her to continue her dance studies in Madrid. She returned to the José Greco Ballet the following year for another tour, which took her to Hollywood, San Francisco and New York, then ended in England at London's Royal Festival Hall.

Ms. del Rio danced for more than 15

years with the most famous Spanish ballet companies in the world, such as Pilar López, José de la Vega, Rafael Aguilar, the Goyesca Ballet of Pilar de Oro and Alfredo Gil, and the Mariemma Ballet de España.

On the advice of Mariemma, Ms. del Rio enrolled at Madrid's Real Escuela Superior de Arte dramático y danza in 1973. She was the first Canadian to receive a diploma from this conservatory, which allowed her to officially teach Spanish dance and flamenco.

In 1974, Sonia was dancing with the Madrid Ballet, directed by Antonio Ruiz, when she decided to end her international career. That year she met her great love, Claude Normand, director of photography and cameraman for Radio-Canada, in San Sebastián, Spain. She returned to Quebec and they were married on June 7, 1975, in Montreal. Their son, Sébastien, was born in 1977.

Ms. del Rio left her mark in Canada by training several generations of dancers. She created a Spanish ballet school in Ottawa and then founded a dance school in Sainte-Clotilde, Que. From 1980 to 1989, she was a professor at the École Supérieure de ballet du Québec (formerly the Académie de danse des Grands Ballets Canadiens), under the direction of Ludmilla Chiriaeff.

In 1982, she and her husband, Mr. Normand, bought La Chaconne, a "café-concert," on Montreal's Ontario Street, where they hosted classical music recitals, poetry readings and dance performances by Ms. del Rio. La Chaconne became a popular meeting place for dancers, musicians and poets in the mid-1980s. "What makes La Chaconne, with Claude and Sonia," journalist Lise Bissonnette wrote in *Le Devoir* in 1983, "is the broad and lively community of young Quebec musicians, which is surviving the worst economic crisis with grace and thrift."

In 1988, on behalf of King Juan Carlos I, the Consul-General of Spain presented Ms. del Rio with the Lazo de Dama de la Orden de Isabel la Católica. In 2016, the Montreal Flamenco Festival paid tribute to her at the Outremont Theatre, and in 2020, she received the Grand Prix du patrimoine d'expression du Québec, the Prix Hélène Bialas.

Ms. del Rio leaves her husband, Mr. Normand; her son, Sébastien; and four siblings, Patrick, Louise, Carolanne, and Mercedes Boivenu.

Dance critic Sébastien Gash famously said, "Sonia del Rio is Canadian, but no one could ever tell because she seems to be a purebred Spaniard, Spanish, to the core." And her art does not tolerate classification."

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