

= Patrick Bissell =

Walter Patrick Bissell (December 1 , 1957 ? December 29 , 1987) was an American danseur . He was a leading principal dancer with the American Ballet Theatre . On his death at age 30 from a drug overdose , he was described by the artistic director of the American Ballet Theatre Mikhail Baryshnikov as " without a doubt one of the brightest lights in American Ballet Theater 's history , or , for that matter , in the entire ballet world " . Bissell was noted for his height and athleticism . His most famous rôle was as Solor in *La Bayadère* . His death prompted investigations into the alleged widespread drug use within the American Ballet Theatre .

= = Early years = =

Bissell was born on December 1 , 1957 in Corpus Christi , Texas . He was one of the five children of Donald and Patricia Bissell ; his siblings included his twin brother William , two sisters Susan and Barbara , and brother Donald . The family lived in Palos Park , Illinois for several years . His father was a computer @-@ systems designer with Hiram Walker Inc . Bissell was an athlete who enjoyed performing feats of daring : at the age of 8 he jumped off a 30 @-@ foot (9 @.@ 1 m) -high diving board , even though he did not know how to swim . He dabbled in many sports ? baseball , basketball , football , track , etc . He was introduced to ballet at age ten by his sister Susan who paid him to be her ballet partner ; thus he was first paid to dance . He found a home and sanctuary in the passion of ballet and decided to make it his life pursuit . He began training in ballet and jazz dance and was soon accepted into a company in Toledo , Ohio . Like many boys who take up ballet , he tried to keep his lessons a secret , but word got out and he was ridiculed and bullied every single day for the rest of his school days . " I was a skinny kid . They could have crushed me in an instant , " he stated .

While Bissell showed early promise as a dancer , he also showed signs of being a troubled young man and began taking drugs at the age of 14 . He was expelled from his first school for dealing drugs on the premises . He was noticed by the American ballet dancer Edward Villella , who encouraged his parents to send him to a performing arts boarding school . In 1972 he joined the National Academy of Dance in Champaign , Illinois from which he was dismissed for behavior problems . Bissell then spent a year at the North Carolina School of the Arts which he left when he was informed that he should pay more attention to his academic studies . He hitch @-@ hiked all the way to New York to pursue a lifelong career in dance ? as that 's where the company 's top schools are . He then won a scholarship to study at the School of American Ballet , where he was encouraged by Lincoln Kirstein , its founder , and Stanley Williams , one of his teachers . He was invented to join Balanchine 's New York City Ballet and the American Ballet Theatre . He decided to join ABT and became a member of the corps . Though he quickly rose through the ranks . Wherever Bissell went , he attracted attention , both from his fiery dancing and his habit of wearing a cowboy hat and boots around New York City ? his way of distinguishing he was a true @-@ blue native Texan . He also made his way around the city on a motorcycle .

He danced the lead rôles in three of the four ballets performed by the school in its annual workshop and graduated in 1977 . He became a good friend of Mikhail Baryshnikov , who praised his dancing .

= = Career = =

Bissell joined the corps de ballet of the American Ballet Theatre in 1977 and , after three months there , he danced the lead male rôle in *La Bayadère* . He moved to the Boston Ballet but returned the following year . In 1978 he was promoted to soloist and to principal dancer in 1979 at the American Ballet Theatre due to the shortage of men in the company ? even making the cover of *Dance* magazine . The ballerinas nicknamed him " Tarzan , " as he was a huge , hulking juggernaut of a man who could carry some of the biggest and tallest girls in the company . For much of his career , however , Bissell was plagued with injuries , and there were reports of drug and alcohol

problems . Bissell and Gelsey Kirkland were dismissed from the American Ballet Theatre in 1980 and 1981 on the grounds of chronic lateness and missed rehearsals ? in particular for failing to attend a dress rehearsal on the eve of the company 's opening at the Kennedy Center in Washington , D.C. on December 9 , 1980 . Bissell and Kirkland then appeared as guest artists with the Eglevsky Ballet in its production of Act II of Giselle in 1982 at the Hofstra Playhouse in Hempstead , Long Island , New York . Subsequently Bissell rejoined the American Ballet Theatre .

He appeared in many lead rôles , including Don Jose in Roland Petit 's Carmen , Franz in Coppélia , Basil and Espada in Don Quixote , Albrecht in Giselle , Romeo in Romeo and Juliet , Prince Siegfried in Swan Lake , James in La Sylphide , Prince Desire in Sir Kenneth MacMillan 's Sleeping Beauty and lead rôles in George Balanchine 's Stravinsky Violin Concerto , Symphonie Concertante and Theme and Variations . He created the rôle of the Prince in Mikhail Baryshnikov 's production of Cinderella , the leading male rôle in Antony Tudor 's The Tiller in the Fields (1978) , Glen Tetley 's Contredances (1979) , the title rôle of Peter Darrell 's Chéri (1980) and the lead rôle in Lynne Taylor @-@ Corbett 's Estuary (1983) . In 1984 , Bissell starred as a guest artist with the Universal Ballet Company in its first production , Adrienne Dellas 's Cinderella . He was partnered by its leading ballerina and general director , Julia Moon . He also performed as a guest artist with the National Ballet of Canada , Scottish Ballet and Pacific Northwest Ballet . This is a stark contrast to Patrick 's brother William , who trained to be a minister , but then went on to work in manufacturing .

= = Drug use and death = =

Bissell was arrested in 1981 in Bloomington , Indiana , and charged with public intoxication , disorderly conduct and pushing a policeman . He was given a 30 @-@ day jail sentence , however a plea bargain was made whereby the judge ordered him to arrange to give a performance at Indiana University with the proceeds to be given to charity . Bissell was also given a \$ 100 fine . After being fired by the ABT (along with Gelsey Kirkland) , they were re @-@ hired and celebrated by doing a stash of cocaine they had smuggled in the lining of a ballet slipper .

Bissell married Jolinda Menendez , a former American Ballet Theatre ballerina (she danced two rôles in the Baryshnikov Nutcracker) and principal ballerina with the Pennsylvania Ballet , on June 26 , 1982 at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church . However the marriage ended after a year due to Bissell 's many philanderings and erratic behavior . In 1984 , company officials from the American Ballet Theatre consulted with experts on drug addiction and found a therapist for him . The following year , a condition of his continued employment by the company was that he undergo regular urine tests . The tests were held weekly with results 95 percent negative , however lapses were penalized with fines . In 1987 , he spent five weeks at the Betty Ford Clinic in California for intensive therapy , completing the treatment in August . Prior to entering the clinic he had injured his foot and was thus prevented from going on the American Ballet Theatre 's fall tour . His family blamed his drug use on the " highly competitive dance world in New York City " .

Bissell was found dead in his apartment in Hoboken , New Jersey on December 29 , 1987 . At the time of his death , he was engaged to fellow dancer at the American Ballet Theatre , soloist Amy Rose , and had planned to rejoin the company in January of the following year . The results of an autopsy showed that he died from an overdose of cocaine , codeine , methadone and other drugs . It never was determined whether Bissell 's death was a deliberate suicide . His death prompted charges of extensive drug use in the dance world by Bissell 's parents and fellow @-@ dancer Gelsey Kirkland . Kirkland 's autobiography Dancing on My Grave mentions Bissell 's frequent use of cocaine and , when discussing her own addiction , she alleged that he had introduced her to the drug . Attention was also drawn to the drug therapy program offered by the American Ballet Theatre . According to the company 's executive director , Charles Dillingham , Bissell had been participating in the therapy program instituted by the company and had " appeared to have been making progress " prior to his death . Gelsey Kirkland alleged that Bissell 's death was " an unavoidable tragedy caused at least in part by the failure of the ballet world and American Ballet Theater in particular to acknowledge and deal openly with the drug problem " , which contrasted with Dillingham 's statement that " his death came as an utterly horrible surprise " . The 1988 production

of La Bayadère by the American Ballet Theatre was dedicated to Bissell who had been notable in the rôle of Solor .