

Spring 2014

Ballet Review





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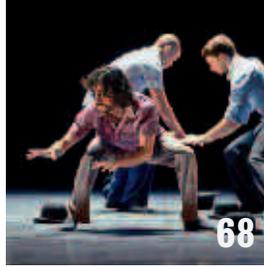
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- 4 New York – Karen Greenspan
6 Schenectady – Jay Rogoff
7 Boston – Jeffrey Gantz
8 Zurich – Renée E. D’Aoust
10 Toronto – Gary Smith
11 Miami – Michael Langlois
13 New York – Karen Greenspan
15 Birmingham – David Mead
17 Boston – Jeffrey Gantz
19 Letter to the Editor – Joel Lobenthal
Joel Lobenthal
22 A Conversation with Dorothée Gilbert
David Vaughan
28 Tanaquil
Joseph Houseal
30 Ballet West
Francis Mason
35 Robert Cohan on Graham
Darrell Wilkins
42 *New Sacre, Historical Nutcracker*
Ian Spencer Bell
51 Artist Types
David Vaughan
56 *L’Allegro at Twenty-Five*
Daniel Jacobson
60 Ballerinas Dance into Your Lap
Harris Green
64 ABT’s Autumn in New York
Susanna Sloat
68 Fall for Dance X
Horst Koegler
75 What Should Ballet Dramaturgy Achieve?
83 London Reporter – Clement Crisp
94 Bhutan Online – Karen Greenspan
97 Music on Disc – George Dorris
100 Check It Out

**Cover Photograph by Costas: Mark Morris Dance Group
at Lincoln Center in *L’Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*.**

Artist Types

Ian Spencer Bell

Ruby Aver, former principal dancer with Het Scapino Ballet in the Netherlands, tells me why she gravitated to dance. We're on the porch of her chocolate-colored Victorian in the rolling hills of Housatonic, Massachusetts, where we teach together in the summer.

"I was always thinking I was in the wrong family. The big draw of dance was that my soul life was not at home or in school. We were living in Hyde Park, on Chicago's South Side. That would have been about 1967. I lived where the Black Stone Rangers and the Black Panthers were having gang warfare. It was Black Revolution. We literally had bullets coming in the house while we were eating. My dad would say, 'Get under the table. But finish your dinner.'"

Aver is fifty-seven now. She could easily be ten years younger. She wears a fine cotton sundress that shows her muscular arms. Her hair is soft and curly and red. Aver has brought some photos and papers to the table, and goes through them now as she talks. Her chest lifts, her small hands sweep across the table, her ankles cross under her chair, her toes point gently.

"I started dancing because I had a friend whose babysitter took ballet. I went along. I was about ten and a half. I remember her with her leg on the barre. She was beautiful. I was a tomboy. When I saw them jumping, I thought, 'I'd like to do all those different jumps. After, when the class cleared out, I ran into the studio in my gym shoes and pedal pushers and put my leg up on the barre, and it got stuck. I couldn't get it off because I was so tight. The teacher, Charles Bockman, came in and said, 'Little Monkey, it looks like you want to dance.'"

"I studied ballet with Charles Bockman and his wife Jane as often as I could for two years. I could walk from home. I was getting beat up

at school. I was the only white kid. They would throw snowballs with rocks in them at my head. The studio was by the high school, and the Bockmans lived above it.

"It was transporting just to be in that beautiful house. It was like something out of *The Red Shoes*. There were beautiful gardens and French doors. I didn't even know what a French door was. Charles would say, 'Spot the French doors.' The word 'French' sounded amazing to me. At the studio, there were kids who were cultured because their parents taught at the University of Chicago. I started going to their houses. It was like, 'Whoa.' They had art and classical music playing and natural foods I'd never seen. Their houses were soulful. We were Formica and velvet art.

"My mother, Francis Hogan, a first-generation Irish Catholic, was a housewife, and my father, Max Aver, a first-generation Russian Jew, worked in an electrical supplies warehouse. They'd met at Aragon Ballroom and went ballroom dancing twice a week. My Russian grandparents would put a scarf on my head and my mother would say, 'You look like an immigrant!' My dad's family came from Ukraine, through St. Louis, and ended up in Chicago selling newspapers. And from their newsstand, they ran horse betting.

"There was some money for dancing, but I helped with cleaning. When I first started studying dance, I never saw a ballet. Dance was always on TV, though: the June Taylor Dancers, Ed Sullivan. I would get up and try, and they would tell me to sit down. I thought, 'One day they will pay to see me dance. And they did.'

"I got a scholarship to Interlochen [Center for the Arts] for the summer. I was twelve or thirteen, and John Kriza and Ruth Ann Koesun gave me a scholarship for their year-round program at home, at the Jane Adams Center. They had left American Ballet Theatre and had come to Chicago to start their own school. John was one of the original sailors in Jerome Robbins' *Fancy Free*.

"I don't know how they knew Ed Parish, but they brought him in as a guest. When he taught,

I felt like I was going to throw up after the first forty minutes. I was sheet white. After, I told him I wanted to study with him. He laughed and laughed. 'For Christ sake,' he said, 'you can't even make it through a class. How are you going to study with me?'"

When Aver imitates Parish, she smiles broadly. Her voice booms, and she is brighter. She shows me a photograph of them in class. Parish guides her leg in grand rond de jambe.

"Ed was teaching a couple of boys in Logan Square, which was pretty much a Puerto Rican neighborhood at the time. Other boys were looking in, breaking windows, screaming 'faggot.' Ed would get them in the studio and say, 'If you take ballet class, I won't tell your mother about the broken window. You think we're faggots? Then you do that grand jeté.' He could take kids that no one else could handle. 'Fine, you want dinner,' he'd say. 'Then take this dance belt, these tights, these ballet shoes, and you dance seven days a week.'

"Ed was working in a factory, feeding all these boys with his factory money. He found out he could give up his day job and get money to be the boys' foster parent. So he contacted Social Services and went to their mothers. The mothers were hookers, heroin addicts. They'd say, 'Keep 'em.' He had at least ten foster kids of his own. They were boys no one else wanted: boys whose knives he'd taken, boys who had stolen, boys who had raped. They'd make a studio together and then have to leave because the boys were too rowdy or because of money.

"He asked my mom if I could deal with it. And he told her there was a lot of bad language. But I grew up with a lot of bad language. It was not a leap for me to be with them. My mom would drive me, and I had a sleeping bag there. She'd throw him a check every once and a while, and he got money from the foster kids, and people in the neighborhood would give him sides of beef and day-old bread.

"The studio was a rat hole. Your pointe shoes would get caught in the cracks in the floor. We trained seven days a week and at Christmas. 'Of course we have class on Christmas,' he'd

say. 'I'll put on a pot of spaghetti.' And the thing was, you wished there were more days in a week. It was dance until you drop.

"At the beginning, of course, I dropped. We'd repeat exercises until a muscle group was exhausted. My pointe class was two-and-a-half hours. The frappé exercise would have over a hundred relevés. It was a multilevel class, and we'd get a new boy, and then someone like Karen Kain would drop in. And he had kids coming on Sunday from Columbia College who later danced with Merce Cunningham.

"He didn't even correct much, but he called out the combinations while we danced. I learned to dance from his voice. He would carve you with it. On days when his back was okay, he'd demonstrate. But he had long periods when he could barely show anything. He'd fallen off a ladder when he was in the navy, and I'd heard that he'd fallen into the orchestra pit when he was dancing in Europe with Grand Ballet du Marquis de Cuevas. At the end of the day, he'd tell us that he had to get a glass of wine because we looked so lousy. But I think it was because of his back.

"He'd say things like, 'The way you're working now, you couldn't be a pimple on a dancer's ass. Go back there and fix it.' You'd laugh and work. And after working really seriously, the laughter allows to you release, and that was really good for our training. And he'd say, 'You know why I get so angry? Because I goddamn love you so much.' Just like that, right in the middle of class. It was tough love. He was connecting with people's soul life. He'd say, 'You're fearful. What are you so goddamn afraid of?'

"When I was fourteen, David Howard came out to that funky studio. He'd seen the crew before us. Here was this young, proper British gentleman in the Puerto Rican ghetto. He sat there while we worked like racehorses. Afterward, he said we were all absolutely fearless, and that he'd take all the boys and the girl.

"I went to Harkness School of Ballet for the summer on a full scholarship and a stipend, because we didn't have money. David had a woman there take me to Estée Lauder – they

made Harkness Blue eye shadow – because I had no makeup. I was like a guy. Before I left for New York, Ed said, ‘You sprouted titties. You have to get a bra.’

“Then at the end, David asked us to stay year round. And that’s when all hell broke loose. I called Ed and told him, and he said, ‘Did I ask

thought you had rhythm.’ Or to a Jewish boy, ‘That’s not kosher.’

“When he’d say these things, it was the way you’d tease someone you were crazy about. It was intimate. He loved his students. You didn’t feel that other teachers loved you. No one loved you. No one even cared. One day, hopefully, you’d make their school look good – if you got into ABT or City Ballet.

“I don’t think I finished my sophomore year. I was fifteen. I skipped a grade and dropped out. On one of the last days of school, I started to slip down the stairs on something wet. It was blood, because, again, there had been gang wars in school. I didn’t think, I don’t want to go to school because I could get shot. I thought, I don’t want to go to school because I could sprain my ankle and not be able to dance. The fact is, I could have been killed from all the gunfire and stabbings.

“By the time I was not quite seventeen, I had a contract with Chicago Ballet. And then, after a year, Chicago Ballet folded. I saw David and he said,

‘Come, I’ll give you an apprenticeship and money,’ because he knew who I was. And I just left. And then Harkness folded.”

The phone rings and Aver leaps from the chair to get it. She is expecting a call about an injured student. I pause the recording device. I know what’s next anyway: Aver auditions in Europe and dances with Ballet de Caracas in Venezuela and then, finally, with Het Scapino Ballet.

Aver hangs up, leans into the chair beside me. “I don’t care if I have the least talented



Ruby Aver and Ed Parish, 1971. (Photo: courtesy of Ruby Aver)

you to do anything?’ I said, ‘No, Ed,’ and he told me to get my ass back home.

“Ed had taught at Harkness for a week, but he was not allowed to teach there again. The Harkness boys were glam – very androgynous and very feminine – and stretchy and all about line. They couldn’t jump, and he told them to stop stretching. ‘I don’t care about your sexual preference,’ he said. ‘You’re dancing like goddamn faggots. And you can’t do that. Pony it up for dance class. You can be who you want after class.’ And he’d say to the black kids, ‘I

dancer,” she says. “If that child is with me, then I’ll do anything for him or her.” She sounds like Parish.

That evening, in Aver’s pink wallpapered attic, I read through eighteen pages of remembrances about Parish, written by former students and family. The document was compiled a year before he died, when he suffered amnesia from an automobile accident in 2001. His life reads like a 1940s musical.

He was born Eldon Parish, in rural Emetsburg, Iowa, on December 30, 1925. He’s still a boy when he tells his mother, Augusta Maine Sewell, that his name sounds like a disease, and he wants to be called Ed. His three siblings, brother John and sisters Bing and Dawn, admire his high jinks: he brings a frog to the Little Red School; gets caught in neighbors’ trees; builds a swing from a wooden refrigerator box; ruins his mother’s pans making candy and buries them in the garden; twirls batons on top of a pickup truck while supposedly standing on his head during a homecoming parade; puts on talent shows for the neighborhood kids starring his tap-dancing pet chicken. And every Saturday he rides a caboose with his uncle, a worker for the Rock Island Railroad, to ballet class.

Then, in 1939, the family moved to Los Angeles. That’s when I realize that there’s been no mention of his father – not a name or a date. I scan the eighteen pages. There are so many other names and dates. There are the names of the famous people he knew and danced with when he trained with Irina and Bronislava Nijinska at their Hollywood studio: Robert Joffrey, Eugene “Luigi” Louis Faccitos, Mitzi Gaynor, Johnny Weismuller.

There are the names of the men and women he met when he moved to New York to study with Vladimir Dokoudovsky: Billie Holliday, Alicia Alonso, Jerome Robbins, Paul Sanasardo, Sonja Henning. There are the names of his two biological sons, Marvin and Steven, by a Marian Rockford he “got together with.” There are the names of his many jobs and professional titles: ballet dancer, tap dancer, ice skater, house painter, sign painter, kitchen

helper, cook’s assistant, ship’s cook, auto mechanic, jukebox maker, fine art student. There are even the exact days he was in the Navy: three years, five months, nine days. But there is no mention of his father.

The sun bursts through the clouds. Then there’s a sudden downpour. It’s a typical Berkshire summer day. Aver has gone to Great Barrington to do some shopping. She’s left me a copy of *Dance, Remember Dance*, a fifteen-minute documentary about Parish, shot in 1978 by filmmaker William Gatewood. It begins with Parish calling out a nearly hundred-year-old boys’ exercise, “Chassé, tombé, coupé, double tour.” It cuts to three boys walking the streets of Chicago. They cross train tracks. Bells ring. Guardrails lift. Then we see boys eating hungrily around a large kitchen table, their plates heaped with food. They talk about Baryshnikov’s pirouettes. (Aver tells me later that Parish had taken them to watch American Ballet Theatre rehearse at a Chicago theater. He often sneaked the boys into performances, following large families and groups into theaters, and finding empty seats when the lights went down.)

“I had felt at one time,” Parish says in voiceover, “that I would like very much to see artist-type people take kids in. Teach ’em trades. Teach ’em crafts. Art. People that have something to offer the kid other than just a home, just a roof over their shoulders. A carpenter take in one, a plumber take in one, a singer take in one. You know. It doesn’t have to be done big, but I think that’s what they should do.”

We see Parish getting into a white van with the kids. The boys smile and laugh, sing with the seventies folk pop on the radio. They arrive at the large white farmhouse Parish has acquired.

“You know,” Parish says, “the state’s not going to take care of these kids after they’re eighteen. They’re gonna have to be able to take care of themselves. ’Cause I hope, especially with the farm, that I’ll have a place where they can all come back and they’ll always have a home.”

An older boy who was brought up as a girl, Aver tells me, walks close to Parish. He is beautiful and admiring. The boys ahead of them shout playfully. They gather in a circle in a field to practice a Russian folk dance. It looks like a cool autumn day. The sky is gray, and the grass is thick and wet and shiny. There are animal pens off to the side.

A boy named Allen cries because he's being teased. Another, Dago [Dagoberto Nieves], curses and talks quickly at him. (When Nieves is older, Aver tells me, Baryshnikov chooses him for ABT. Another boy in the circle, Tim Grensback, has a career at Milwaukee Ballet, while his older brother, John Grensback, from the first crew, dances for NYCB, Joffrey Ballet, and becomes a principal at Houston Ballet.) The boys, laughing, yelling, arms linked, perform the Russian dance while Parish looks on and calls out corrections.

Dancing helped him get out of his world and come back to it. It helped him become a father. "The boys," Aver says, from the doorway by the porch, "were still getting in too much trouble in the city, so he moved out to the farm." She's holding a bowl of strawberries from Taft Farms, just down the road. She sits in a chair in half lotus, pulls the cap off a strawberry, drops it in the bowl.

"One of the boys got a girl pregnant. They moved to another rural area and, I don't know how, but he decided that would be his last crew of kids. And then he left the farm and started

staying with the boys who had babies. He'd go and help with their families, and then, finally, he went to his sister's.

"The last time we spoke, I'd just had Fay Lee. I pick up the phone and hear, 'Goddamn son of a bitch. Why do I have to hear from Linda [Reifsnnyder Jenkins, former Parish student and administrative director and ballet faculty member at Florida Ballet] that you had a baby? Well, good for you for having that baby at home. What's with the hospital? It's not an illness. But you didn't have to pay for those goddamn midwives. I could have delivered that baby. I've birthed calves. It's the same thing.'

"And then he said, 'I'm not getting better, Rube. I walk from the house, and I look for the first bench to sit down on. I'm not recovering from that accident. It's okay if I don't teach. I never cared if any of you danced. I just loved you guys. But if I can't help take care of your kids, what good am I? I'm not going to have you guys taking care of me.'"

Aver's eyes seem to reflect the sky. It's been raining for some time.

"I always felt he had my back. It was the confidence. He gave us all an enormous confidence. How many teachers gave us that? I would go to those big auditions, and he'd say, 'Did you stand front and center? What are we working for? Someone has to be front and center. You have as much chance as any of them.'"