

VDC Interview Transcript  
Nancy Strause, Founder and Board Member, BalletMet  
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Ballet Met  
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**Key:**

CF: Candace Feck  
NS: Nancy Strause

CF: One thing that I've learned in reading about BalletMet and its history, and about your involvement with it, is that you've been with it — in some form — almost, if not *since* its inception. Is that right?

NS: Well, since its inception as a professional company.

CF: How did that happen? How did you first become involved with BalletMet?

NS: I was involved with Cultural Explorations, which was a year and a half-long survey of the arts in Franklin County that was commissioned by Battelle through the Junior League of Columbus to conduct this arts study; we brought in consultants from Minneapolis who worked closely with us. They did interviews with community leaders, they did focus groups with many people in the arts community— we had probably 200 interviews with artists and arts organizations, and there was a whole process coming together for the community really to look at what was our future going to be in the arts. And out of it came about ten recommendations for next steps for Columbus. The very top priority was for the Greater Columbus Arts Council to be more relevant, to be strengthened, to be funded and to be a more effective advocate for the arts. And a resident professional theater was near the top of the list — and professional dance was one of the ten recommendations that we tried to move the city toward. The Columbus Symphony Orchestra was at that time only sixteen full-time players, and there was definitely interest in strengthening that. So, out of these recommendations, there was a cry for leadership to step forward. The Ballet Metropolitan as a civic company had existed since 1974, and this study was done in 1976 and 1977. And the company, this fledgling civic company, was already looking to how it could become professional. And they approached me after the study, knowing how I had been involved with it, and asked if I might not work with them to develop a plan to go professional, and by the time we worked a year on that, went to Battelle Memorial Institute Foundation for funding for the seed money, I was hooked. I didn't know hooked for life — but I was hooked!

So, that planning would have been 1977. And the Battelle funding came through in spring of 1978. We worked on it, and then the funding was pretty immediate from Battelle. The Ballet Metropolitan Board had already made a decision to embark on the track toward a professional company and had secured a grant to hire an Artistic Director; an extensive search landed Wayne Soulant, who accepted the position without knowing if the Battelle request would be funded. In early 1978, I was invited to go on the Board and continue working on planning and funding.

CF: Was the Board already in place?

NS: Ballet Metropolitan had a Board from the time it was incorporated as a 501(c)3 non-profit organization in 1974 – it had been a Board mostly of school parents, educators and volunteers from Pro-Met, their women’s support group. As this was a transition from a civic to a professional company, there was a transition on *every* level, including the Board. So, [for example] there had been a school, the Dance Academy, which had been owned by Jack and Daryl Kamer, and we began discussions to acquire it, which we did in 1981. We were fortunate to have the Board involvement of Helen Alkire, head of Dance Department at OSU, and she had been very helpful throughout the planning process.

*Clearly* we had to strengthen the Board and get more corporate engagement, go to the broader community, the philanthropic community, so the first eighteen months were crucial and quite challenging. And many funders we approached said, “You need to get six top corporate people and if you can get the other five, I’ll be one of them.” So that was our first challenge, and we had to do this in matter of months, to get everything into place and proceed with major fundraising.

CF: How was it that you were involved in this to begin with? Did you have a dance background yourself?

NS: No, I have never danced — never had a dance class — until I took one from Wayne Soulant when he was Artistic Director, just as a publicity stunt — with [*Columbus Dispatch*] dance critic Barbara Zuck in the class! But I had always loved dance, and tried to see the dance that did come into Columbus, which was mostly at Vet’s Memorial<sup>1</sup> at that time, or Mershon.<sup>2</sup> I had also always loved theatre, so I could have gone either way after this study, to get involved with something specific. But dance was — even though I couldn’t dance, and could only experience it vicariously — always a love of mine.

CF: Well, what a challenge, to have to create something, in a way, *almost* out of nothing: you had the civic company...

NS: Right.

CF:... you had a grant from Battelle...

NS: Right.

CF: — it sounds like you had Wayne already...

NS: We had already engaged Wayne, with early support from the Greater Columbus Arts Council and the Columbus Foundation to fund his first couple of seasons, and then we had the Battelle grant to go professional. So, we’re building a company, we’re building a board, we’re building a staff and

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<sup>1</sup> Built on the west bank of the Scioto River in downtown Columbus in 1955, Franklin County Veteran’s Memorial was a flexible meeting and event venue that offered nearly 4,000 theater seats and 110,000 square feet of exhibit space. The building was razed in January 2015, making way for a new complex expected to open in 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Part of the OSU campus, and now part of the Wexner Center for the Performing Arts, Mershon Auditorium was built in 1957 as a venue for large concerts.

we're building an audience. The civic company already had a very robust education program in the schools, and then there was the academy — which was going to be very important because as a company that is aspiring to be successful, and a full service to the community, you *really* need to have a company strong enough to do a *Nutcracker*, which means *big* enough to do a *Nutcracker* — so you need a school that's significant enough that it has upper level students that can augment the cast for the *Nutcracker*. And we were very, very fortunate to start with a very strong company of dancers; while it was sad for Chicago, it was the year the Chicago Ballet had folded, so six of our top choices for our twelve-member company were coming from the Chicago Ballet. And we had other dancers who had danced professionally from Kansas City and North Carolina Dance Theatre. So, it was a great start for us, and a *high* level, to begin with.

CF: Is this 1978?

NS: Yes, 1978-79 was our first season, which means we're coming up to forty years!

CF: I know, amazing. So, you had the challenge, also, of getting corporate support...

NS: We did.

CF: I mean — out of nothing! What did you *do*?

NS: Well, we went to, as they call themselves, all the usual suspects. But we were just building a board, and many of them wanted to have a presence on that board, and we *wanted* them to have a presence on that board. So it was pretty much of a dual approach: we were asking for participation, and we were also asking for financial support. We had already developed a long-range plan. Battelle had given the seed money — a \$200,000.00 grant over three years, decreasing: 100,000.00, 60,000.00, 40,000.00 — and we were challenged by Battelle to meet certain benchmarks in order to receive the second and third year funding, including strengthening the board, gaining corporate support, meeting budget projections; attaining ticket sales goals; beginning to build a base of individual support. This provided an enormous incentive and kept us highly motivated!

We had early commitments from GCAC and the Columbus Foundation, and we had a major community leader in David R. Patterson step forward to spearhead fundraising from corporate and foundation sources; this gave us huge initial credibility within the corporate sector. Dave was another through-line who later became Board Chair, and his son-in-law and his son have both served on our Board over the years.

We started our first season with a performance at OSU in Sullivant Hall. And then in the Spring, we performed at the Ohio Theatre with the Columbus Symphony Orchestra for a very small audience, but we made that commitment right from the beginning to have live orchestra. And then in the second year of BalletMet, we had our first subscription season, so that would have been 1979-80.

CF: So BalletMet *and* the Columbus Symphony Orchestra have been joined at the hip, as it were, from the beginning — and in a way sort of grew up together as organizations.

NS: We did! We really did! And for many, many years, we had the Columbus Symphony for all our performances at the Ohio Theatre — and then later on, when David Nixon came in 1995, we started using the Capitol Theatre in the Riffe Center where, of course, there isn't an orchestra pit,

and we were doing mostly mixed repertory programs there. And then, finances have become a part of that. We would like to have CSO for our Ohio Theatre performances whenever financially possible. We always have the Symphony for *Nutcracker*, still — and we just did this amazing collaboration with the Symphony and the Opera for *Twisted 2* and we certainly like collaborating with them whenever we can.

CF: What was your first professional season for the company, then?

NS: We were able to go professional in June of '78, so '78/'79 would have been our first season — and our first subscription season would have been '79/'80.

CF: I'm curious, too, about the evolution of the academy. What was the size of that academy and how did it grow with you?

NS: Well, I'm really not sure how many students the academy for the civic company had — maybe 150 — 200 students, something like that. Once we had a space for a bigger expanded school — we had moved over to Jefferson Avenue after starting our on Gay Street,<sup>3</sup> and then moving to a church on Blake, just north of campus, and then moving to Jefferson, where we actually *had* several studios [for the first time]. And we started growing — you know, here's a new Artistic Director — never been an artistic director, building a company, taking on a school and *building* that school over the course of — Wayne Soulant had a tenure of about eight years with us. And we were *totally* outgrowing our space at Jefferson, which is what made us start looking all over the city for a [space] where we could have a *home*, where we could have an even *more* significant school. And when we moved to our current space on Mount Vernon Avenue in 1990, we were able to pretty much double the size of the school at that time to — we might have gone from 300 to 600, and then up to 1,000 — and now we have about 1700 students in our downtown setting as well as at the McConnell Art Center in Worthington.

CF: Perhaps I could ask you a related question, which is to talk about the relationship of the academy to the professional company over the course of its history.

NS: Mm-hmmm. Well, the school is very, very important in terms of having several levels — and we've said from the beginning that we would have both avocational levels for all ages — everything from 4 to 84 (I think maybe now up to 90) — but that we'd also have a professional training program. The pre-professional program is so important to a professional company, because they can augment a *Nutcracker* performance or a *Sleeping Beauty* — and Edwaard Liang now is using them in a number of productions. Our students are able to *have* these performing opportunities, which are just so important, and being affiliated with a professional company is really important. I understand we have one of the five largest academies in the country that are affiliated with a professional company. Over the years, we have, I'd say, *elevated* the level of our academy, because we have added into the upper levels while also *expanding* the curriculum — not just ballet but modern and contemporary; even Hip Hop we've had at times, Flamenco, and some Pilates, so that we're able to serve those who have an interest in that as well as those who have an interest in training.

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<sup>3</sup> For the first season, BalletMet stayed on Gay Street in studios over Bernie's Bagels, then quickly moved to a church on Blake Ave. just north of campus

CF: I wonder if you could zoom back again to the mid to late 70s, and perhaps describe the dance landscape as it existed in Columbus. Not just the ballet scene, but more generally, what kind of a context were you coming into?

NS: Well, first I'll just briefly mention — in Ohio, there already was a vibrant dance scene. Dayton Ballet, I think, was the first professional ballet company in Ohio, and there was the Ohio Ballet, the Cleveland Ballet, and the Cincinnati Ballet. So when we became professional we were the *fifth* professional company in Ohio, which, I think, was somewhat of a record at the time outside of New York — to have that many professional companies.

Here in Columbus, we had Dance Central at that point, Maggie Patton's modern company; we had Zivili, an ethnic troupe focused on the songs and dances of Yugoslavia; and Ballet Met's civic company, which had, I think, six stipended dancers — and they were actually doing a *Nutcracker* at the Ohio Theatre, bringing in dancers from Butler University and also bringing in guest artists. So, other than that, it would be OSU bringing in outside dance to Mershon, and presenters presenting at Vet's Memorial. So we'd see Houston Ballet or Pennsylvania Ballet, or Ballet West would come to town...and, so it seemed there was an existing audience in Columbus, and a wider potential audience significant enough to support a professional ballet company, according to the findings of the Cultural Explorations Study.

CF: I'm struck by how important and how visionary that study was!

NS: Yes, it was.

CF: Could you say anything that you know about how that came to be?

NS: Well, Battelle had a court mandate at that time to give a certain percent of their net profits back to the community, and they had made a number of commitments already, but they *wanted* to address the arts, and they approached the Junior League at that time to see if we would actually run the study, and select a consulting firm to come work with us. They had intended to use it as a guide to their funding, which they did — and BalletMet was one of many, many arts organizations that benefited from that. And... we've been told that it was not just the study and the recommendations that came from that, but the whole process of — maybe for the first time — bringing the community together to look at these issues: Town and Gown, all aspects of the arts — arts management, arts audiences — the philanthropic community, to discuss, you know, "What do we want our city to *be*?"

CF: Just one follow-up question about the community dialogue and spirit of collaboration at that time: you mentioned that Helen Alkire had been on the first Ballet Metropolitan Board. Was that kind of partnership between the growing BalletMet and OSU, the university — a strong one?

NS: Well, it was very helpful, as a resource. With the university dance program being focused on modern and contemporary, while we were more the ballet company, there weren't that many opportunities to work closely together in a programmatic way. But we have collaborated with OSU a number of times and for our 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary we are working on a major collaboration to kick off our 40<sup>th</sup> season as a way to celebrate this relationship. Current head of the Dance Department Susan Hadley has been very involved over the years as a choreographer and faculty member and advocate as well as a tremendous resource for artistic director searches. Sherri Geldin at the Wexner Center has been a staunch supporter. Karen Bell served on our Board when she headed the Dance

Department and remains a staunch advocate. OSU dance has been very, very supportive over the years.

CF: I wonder if you could talk about Ballet Met's *early* artistic directors. Would you like to maybe talk about how significant each of those was in the development of the company?

NS: I think we've been very, very fortunate to have, I would say, the right artistic director at the right time in our history. When Wayne Soulant came in, he had an *unusual* background in that he *did* have a college degree, he *did* have a *Masters*. He did not have the major dance career that many artistic directors do, but he had danced professionally with one of the Scandinavian companies and had experienced the European dance scene. He was a very urbane man, very intellectual. This was an adventure for him to put together a company, and he went about it in ways that we would not have even known to guide him, but he sort of had an *intuitive* way of approaching things. A couple of years into his tenure, we engaged a national arts consultant for an institutional assessment, sort of assessing where we were; things were changing so fast, maybe we needed a *new* artistic director already — and they said “No, he is doing *all* the right things. He is putting into place your education programs, he is strengthening your school, he has brought in a fine company, and he has the ability to attract some significant choreographers to work with the company.” He took us, I think, as far as he was able to during his eight-year tenure, and really laid the foundation for the next artistic director, who was John McFall.

CF: You mentioned that Wayne Soulant had this kind of “intuitive sense” of what to do. Would you fill that in a bit?

NS: Early in our history, we were doing mostly mixed repertory programs. We were *not* in a position to build any full-length ballets — we didn't have a company big enough to *do* full-length ballets. So he worked really hard to put together programs that would have, you know, “something for the artist, something for the audience, something for the art form” — is how he put it. And I think it made a very satisfying and challenging kind of program, because there was something there, I think, that almost every audience [member] could relate to — which is one of the reasons I love mixed-rep programs so much — because there is something there that will speak to you, for almost every audience member. And *that* really became our signature for many, many years, all through John McFall and until David Nixon came along many years later, when we *were* in a position to start doing some full-length ballets. Mixed rep was our brand.

CF: You began with twelve dancers. How quickly did that grow, and what were the numbers as you went along?

NS: By the time we hired John McFall in 1986, we had 18 dancers and the company grew to almost 30. When David Nixon came in 1994, we became a union company, and so, for actual full-time dancers, we've ranged from, I would say, 25 to 29 — ever since. We've always had an ensemble company, an ensemble company of solo-quality artists. It wasn't hierarchical, but we've had a level just beneath the professional company — sometimes it was called trainees or by some other name. Now we also have BalletMet 2, a six member second company that is still training but also augmenting the main company for large-cast works and working within our Education and Community Program.

CF: Let's stay for a moment with John McFall. Can you talk about the transition from Wayne Soulant to John McFall?

NS: Yes. As I said, Wayne Soulant really laid the foundation with everything in place for a professional company. John McFall came in 1986 as an established choreographer. He had done work for all the major companies in the US and Canada; he had started his dance career with San Francisco Ballet – a company that is known for internally nurturing young choreographers, and he was one of their most successful (and we're doing work now by Val Caniparoli, also one of the San Francisco [Ballet] choreographers). John came in and pretty much changed the company overnight. He elevated the level of artistry, bringing in many new dancers. While he himself was a choreographer, he took a different direction as an artistic director. The choreography that he did for us was mostly to complement the other choreographers he was bringing in. I think some of his best work he had done, really, before he came to us, and he saw himself in another role the years he was with us — although he did do probably at least one work a year for us. He was well known and very well-connected in the dance community; having worked with so many companies, he had access to a number of dancers, he knew other choreographers, so he was able to bring new work to us.

There was still touring money for dance in those years — not so much in the last twenty — but, we did a certain amount of touring. We had our first New York area premiere during that time, in Brooklyn. We went to Canada, and we had a western state tour that I was a groupie on. (As a sidebar, it was on that trip that BalletMet performed in San Diego and the newspaper review said something like: “If you ever hear about a little dance company from Columbus, Ohio, don't laugh! San Diego should be so lucky...last night we were!”) In 1989, we were in Egypt — the first American company to perform in the Cairo Opera House. Honda had funded the Opera House and so they were receptive to providing funding for our tour there. And that was great — I did go on that trip, and to see an international audience really, really appreciate what we had here in Columbus has been one of the things that inspired me to stay involved.

CF: Did you ever imagine, when you were sitting on the Junior League in the 1970s and got involved because Battelle wanted a study done — did you ever *imagine* where it would go? How is it that your commitment and your dedication has remained firm all these years?

NS: I think one thing is that it's always been an upward arc. I mean, there have been challenges along the way, but I *always* felt the company was getting better, and as you see the artistry elevated, it just speaks to me personally. No, I never thought when I got involved in those first years that I would be involved for so long, but I've been involved in so *many* ways. I was on the Board and had a number of leadership positions, but then John McFall at a certain point said “I want you to come and be our Development Director.” And I thought, “Well, I'll do that for, you know, maybe two or three or four years — and then I was their Development Director for *fifteen years*. So I became involved in another, completely different way, as part of the staff. I've just always been so proud of this company — and to come in here for this interview right after just seeing a stunning costume run-through for our upcoming performances.... No, I never dreamed that we would be where we are today.

CF: It must be amazingly satisfying. You served as a founding member of the Board, you became President of the Board, and...talk about those roles.

NS: Yes, I was President, and later I was Chairman of the Board. I had been basically a community volunteer as my kids were growing up, and I *knew* I wanted to go back in the workforce. I had an opportunity to do some consulting as a fundraiser for another arts group in the town, and so BalletMet said “Hey, if you’re going to do this for real, come do it for us.” So that’s how I got involved in fundraising as a profession.

CF: There are a couple of directions I’d like to go here, but I’ll stick to this one for now. In thinking about your switch to becoming Development Director, your job was to *sell* the idea of a professional ballet company — to persuade people to support the effort financially. I remember Columbus in the late 70s, and it was a very different place than it is now. Could you talk about your struggles, and your achievements in selling the idea of a ballet company to this city?

NS: I think one of the ways that we *did* that was we *did* get the involvement of many leaders in this community to come onto our Board, get invested, see what we were doing — and they got inspired! And much of that work I was already doing as a Board member, so the transition to being a Development Director was really not that much of a transition; it was continuing the work in a slightly different role, but I had already, as a Board member, been writing grants, preparing strategic plans, chairing campaigns, recruiting trustees, putting proposals together. And I had established relationships with many of our corporate leaders at that time. Working to build a board of “*doers and donors*” was also part of what I had been doing, and it was just expanding that role and taking people from maybe the first time they had ever *seen* a ballet to, you know, showing them: “And this is what our school does, this is what we’re investing in the community, and this is what we’re able to take to other cities and really be a cultural ambassador for Columbus.”

CF: Would you care to characterize any of your struggles with the naysayers? For example, how would you convince someone who said “Oh, we don’t need dance in Columbus,” or “Columbus isn’t that kind of city?” Could you talk about any of that — how you would convince somebody?

NS: Well, one of the best things we could do was just bring people down here to the Dance Center — and I think just the vibrancy of our lobby, with all the parents and the kids — and peeking in those studios and seeing our *students* — and then, moving them into the studio to watch a performance. We’ve always had a wonderful open-door policy where we could take people in and let them experience what the dancers were doing, what the choreographers are doing — and then get them to a performance. To me, the artistry and the product would speak for itself.

CF: Right. I imagine that is the case! Early on, the company acquired works by Balanchine and other great choreographers. How did that happen?

NS: Well, certainly with Balanchine, you’re working with the Balanchine Trust, and they want a certain standard, a certain level of artistry — and, you know, they will come in and look at your company — so again, it’s in the studio everyday that you’re trying to elevate the level. And the Trust does a good job of matching the work to your company. It’s interesting, we’re doing *Serenade* now, and we’ve done that over a number of years, but to see *now* how we’re able to do it — even *there*, there is an evolution.

One of the things we’ve looked at as we’ve been out on Artistic Director searches from time to time, is the candidates’ ability to attract other choreographers, interesting choreographers — and, you know, we’re competing with many, many other companies in this country. We have been very fortunate to

have a long-standing relationship with James Kudelka, the renowned Canadian choreographer. Two brilliant works that he created for us (*There, below*” and *Man in Black*) have now been staged for many other companies all over the world.

So one of the hallmarks for BalletMet, I think, is to have a company that is very *eclectic*, and that can do the whole spectrum of dance. And choreographers *like* that— they like to be able to work with companies that are diverse, and eclectic, and quick learners – and that’s something that I’ve heard from the choreographic community for many years, and so that’s also been one of the through-lines for BalletMet.

CF: So, now let’s talk about the move from McFall to Nixon.

NS: Yes. Well, John McFall had built up a very impressive repertoire for us, a broad spectrum of work. When David Nixon came in, he had a whole different background from John McFall, who was kind of the “All-American Boy.” David had been...his background was the National Ballet of Canada, he had been in Berlin — he and his wife Yoko Ichino, who had been with American Ballet Theatre — and they had been in London before Berlin. So they had a very different aesthetic.

And one thing about BalletMet is that we are *not* an artistic director-founded company —we are a board-founded company. And yet, we have given total free reign to each artistic director, and said, you know, it’s within the framework of “we want an ensemble company, and we want a company that can do a diverse range of work, It’s your eye, it’s your decision.” — Every dancer, every program, it’s the Artistic Director’s aesthetic. And David Nixon came in with a different aesthetic, which I think he had to adapt over time to the American audience. I remember when he first came, he wanted to do a major gala, and he said, “I think it should be six hours long,” and we said, “Nuh-uh, it’s going to be *two* hours long!” Early on, he said “You don’t have anything in the warehouse, you don’t have sets and costumes for full-length work.” And he said, “That’s going to be one of the things that I’m going to work on.” And he himself, at that point, was very much still coming from a dancing career. He had done a *little* bit of choreography, but I think he saw that that was his future. And he sort of *developed* that — what became a major talent for him — on our *watch*, and we’re very proud of that. He did a *Beauty and the Beast*, which we toured extensively, and then we rented to a Canadian company that toured it all over Canada; he did *Dracula* [1999] while he was here, he did a *Romeo and Juliet* [1998], he did a *Sleeping Beauty* [2000]. He’s now in England,<sup>4</sup> as you probably know, and continuing to do wonderful work over there, but when he came, we didn’t have these full-length ballets, and when he left we had many that we have continued to draw on over the years.

CF: What about the transition then from him to Gerard Charles?

NS: Well, that wasn’t too much of a transition, because Gerard — there have been so many through-lines throughout BalletMet’s history, and Gerard was one of them because John McFall brought him; his very first season he brought Gerard Charles and his wife, Catherine Yoshimura — wonderful dancers, beautifully trained classical dancers — and Gerard was nearing the end of his career, and so he segued from a dancer into...he was our Education Director, he was our Ballet Master, he had then become our Associate Artistic Director, and so by the time David Nixon had left, he had done virtually every aspect of the job! The only problem was that he didn’t *want* to be Artistic Director. But through our search process, we had met Stanton Welch, who was an

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<sup>4</sup> Northern Ballet, Leeds, UK

internationally known choreographer and he wasn't ready to take on a company — but Gerard and Stanton sort of forged a partnership — I think the headlines at the time said “Dynamic Duo” —and Stanton agreed to work with BalletMet, doing two new works a year for three years. And Gerard agreed that he would be the Artistic Director, and Stanton was “Artistic Associate,” I believe was his title. And then Stanton decided maybe he *would* like to be an Artistic Director, and then he went from here to Houston, where he still is the Artistic Director. And then Gerard decided that “Well, I think I can do this job after all,” and then he *himself* began to do some choreography. His *Aladdin* was a delightful work, and then he did a *very* charming *Nutcracker* [2003] that we're still doing.

CF: Obviously, you have witnessed this major cultural institution transform itself — expanding exponentially from this little fledging in the late 70s to now. I'd like to ask you to think about highlights, landmark moments for the company in its growth, as well as challenges — and you can take those in any order that you like.

NS: Give me a minute...

CF: Of course, I will!

NS: Give me an *hour*!

CF: “Give me a whole week!” Go home and write an essay...

NS: Well, certainly among the highlights have been some of those times that we have been on tour — going to the Joyce Theatre in New York and getting validation from a very educated dance audience and seeing, you know, that you're doing something that has really broad appeal and broad respect. Being in the audience in Egypt and seeing a *very* sophisticated audience, again, you know, give a standing ovation to our company from Columbus Ohio — and that was early in our history. To me, almost every performance has something in it that is memorable — either some dancer has attained a new break-thru role or...I am trying to think of some *specific* performances. I know that when David Nixon came, he wanted to make a big statement the first fall that he was here. And he did this gala called “Window on the World of Dance,” and he brought in people that he and Yoko Ichino had worked with over the years, and it was like “This is what I *aspire* to, and *this* is what I want Columbus to aspire to...” and, you know, people said, “Wow! That is tremendous!” And I think those kinds of moments — this recent collaboration with *Twisted*, with *Twisted* two years ago that we did with the Opera and the Symphony, it tells people that we're collaborating, we're working together — some of the work we did with Jazz Arts Group, those aren't two organizations that you expect to work together. You know, we've worked with Shadowbox [Theatre]. So some of those collaborations where, I think, it tries to say “The arts here are very inclusive, and you can be a part of it!” And I love the fact that BalletMet has been dedicated to creating and performing new work....it is high risk and high reward when it works.

CF: How about challenges? Major moments when you thought “Agh!”

NS: There have been many challenges — and most having to do with dollars!

CF: Mm-hmmm.

NS: And you know one of the reasons we had a parting of the ways with John McFall was that it was the early 90s, it was a recession — and it was very hard for him to *accept* that that extra \$500,000.00 dollars — it's just not *there* right now, and you have to be *patient*, and the cycle will come back. This recent 2008 recession that we've been through, it's been *very* difficult, because we have everything in place here to go many levels beyond, and you just have to sometimes slow down, and there's only so much you can do. Right now there's so much that Edwaard Liang can do — he has so many big plans for us — and again, you know, will the resources be there? And that involves inspiring people and funders *one* at a time.

CF: I think your colleague, Sue Porter, touched on this, but I often think about the fact that the world-at-large doesn't really understand what it *takes* to support a ballet company, and an organization like this. So, I guess, I'm wondering what efforts — how has BalletMet contributed to telling that story, or getting that word out? How do you bring people to know what it is that you do?

NS: It's difficult. And again, it's a lot of one-on-one work, *particularly* with funders. I think one thing beyond artistic quality that BalletMet has done from the beginning is we've been very fiscally responsible. That's been another through-line for us, and we've gained a lot of *respect* for that. So when we say we're going to be good stewards of your dollars, we have a track record to back that up, and our donors trust us.

One of the things that we did — when you mentioned challenges earlier, at the time of 2008, we were doing what every other arts organization and every business was doing at that point: we were cutting and slashing, and trying to keep our record of operating in the black intact. But that was a brutal, brutal year. And the next year we said, "We cannot go there." We had an initiative called Moving Forward. You know, "we are NOT going to spiral down, because we're on the edge of — we're a professional ballet company, a full-spectrum company, we have a school, we have educational programs. To have a company, to do a *Nutcracker* that provides the net proceeds for almost everything else you do during the year, we have to invest in our artistic product, to try to keep our audience, to position ourselves for the future. And I remember the Columbus Arts Council here said "This is not what we expected you to say," and "We're not sure about whether that's the right path." And *since* then they've said, you know, "This absolutely did work for you." We were convinced that there *was* potential to build the audience here, surveys that had been taken to say there *is* an audience out there for dance that somehow you are *not* reaching, and if you keep your artistic product strong..." So, we invested over a period of three years about 1.2 million dollars, and kept our budget levels up to where we are *still* among the top 20 – 25 companies in the country. And *that* is what positioned us to attract somebody of the talents of Edwaard Liang.

I think if we *hadn't* done that...we're always following where all the companies are nationally, and there are only ten companies in this country that are 10 million dollars or more. There are another five or six that are between 6 and 10 [million], and we're in a group that's between 5 and 6 [million]. You don't see companies that are down in the 4 or the 3.5 [million], because you can't have a large enough company to *do* a *Nutcracker* that gives you the financial base to do everything else you do. So that was a challenge I think we met very, very well. But most of the challenges have involved dollars.

CF: And as Director of Development for so long, you have a good idea about how that happens.

NS: Yes.

CF: It's *interesting* about timing. I arrived in Columbus in the late 70s, the OSU Dance Department became an autonomous department around '74/'75, right about the time BalletMet was taking off. So, I have myself witnessed the city become a great cultural center — a vibrant cultural center — as you have witnessed. I wonder if there is something you could say about that growth in the city, and about BalletMet's place in it...

NS: Well, there is now such a diversity of arts and while, in the 70s, I had been told that we had more *community* theatres per capita than any city in the country, we *still* didn't have a professional company, and now we have a number of professional and semi-professional theatre companies, just as one example. And, you know, we have the Columbus Symphony, but we have other symphonies in town — we have chamber orchestras, so it's not just that we have every art form now, but that we have layers — we have other dance companies that are successful. And, of course, the city's much larger now. But in Columbus we still do have a funding issue, and there have been studies done with Columbus's peer cities, and we find that other cities are investing more in their arts groups than we are here. And this is being explored, but it's lower than we would like, and to really solidify all the advances that have been made, we are going to need more public sector funding.

CF: Where would *you* like to see the company go next? Let's say you get that increase in public sector funding. What would be your dream for the BalletMet of, say, the next twenty years?

NS: That is *such* a good question. I think one of the things from *my* perspective is — you know, I'm not the visionary — I want to just create an atmosphere, an environment, a culture so that artists who *do* have vision, can fulfill it. And so for me, it's making sure the resources are there. I would *never* have been able to envision where we are today, and I would say I wouldn't *dare* to say where we're going to be twenty years from now.

CF: Is there anything else that you would like to say about BalletMet, its growth, its successes, its contributions to the state, to the city, anything at all that maybe I haven't given you a chance to address?

NS: Well, I was just thinking about some of these things today — how there have been, as I mentioned before, so many through-lines — like Daryl Kamer, who had the school before we ever went professional, and who has now stepped in *again* to head our school while we're looking for a new academy director. And people I meet all the time say “Oh, yes, I had Daryl Kamer as my teacher” — and some of our dancers who came through our academy, had been trained them by her from the beginning. And somebody like Gerard Charles, who came as a dancer and then had so many roles, and then became Artistic Director. And we've had so many times that just the right person stepped up to just the right position — and had a lasting effect on the company.

CF: How about the growth of the Board itself? You have a very large Board at this point!

NS: We have a very large Board, but you wouldn't believe — it used to be much larger. There was a time we had 75 on our Board, and now we're *trying* to keep it around 50! But the Board has evolved, too. I think the corporate world has changed; we still have some very strong corporate support, but the *numbers* of corporate representatives we have is not as great as it was when our Board was larger. We try to have every *aspect* of the company represented, so people who are knowledgeable about dance, people who are connected to the business community, educators, Academy parents, people who can act as advocates, who know our role in establishing and preserving relationships with our

public officials and community leaders — so there are many different kinds of ways to serve on the Board.

CF: Anybody here want to ask or follow-up anything?

*Nancy has brought several materials, including her last copy of the original Cultural Explorations final report from the 70s, some magazine articles, and photos. She has BalletMet's first program and notes, laughing, that "This was our first program — our first year. We can't afford anything like this now!"*