

VDC Interview Transcript
Laurie Bell
Elaine Valois

6.26.18
Total Time: 53:15

Ohio Northern University
525 South Main Street
Ada, OH 45810
ONU television studio

Key:

CF: Candace Feck
LB: Laurie Bell
MDB: Megan Davis Bushway (VDC film team)
JD: Jane D'Angelo: (Ohio Dance Director)

CF: I'm Candace Feck, and I'm talking with Laurie Bell at Ohio Northern University. Today is June 16, 2018.

Laurie, I've been wondering where Elaine Valois started out as a dancer?

LB: Napoleon High School, in Ohio. She went to Bowling Green State University, and did her work there. She married Richard Valois, and so her maiden name changed. She ended up, I think because he had G.I. benefits, with a year's study in France, and then came back and through evolution — I may be wrong about this, but I think she went to school around 1952, and I went to her school of Ballet around the age of seven. That would have been 1959, so that gives her time to go to college and get married and go to France and study and get back. Eventually she opened a school, which is where I first met her, in a church in Maumee, Ohio, called the Maumee School of Ballet. I went there, studying ballet and eventually modern — which was very new. I'm not sure anybody else in Ohio, at least in Toledo, was even doing that — and stayed with her school until I graduated from high school in 1971. During that time — I think in about 1966, she became either part-time, and then eventually full-time, at the University of Toledo, and then for a while, her school of ballet in Maumee was happening simultaneously with her work at the University of Toledo. Some of us would go to the University of Toledo that were from her ballet school and perform with the college dancers, and tour with them. Then eventually, I graduated from high school and went away from Toledo to Ohio State where I got my B.S. in Education in Dance. But it wasn't until later that I found out all the things that she did, when I was doing research for my dissertation¹ and was interviewing her. Gail Grant, who writes this Dictionary of Ballet — everybody I know has that little book, and it's a wonderful book² — you know, French, Russian terminology — and Gail Grant was

¹ Bell, Laurie. "The History of the Development of the Valois Company of Dancers at the University of Toledo under the Direction of Elaine Valois, 1966-1991." University of Toledo, 1997.

² Grant, Gail. *Technical Manual And Dictionary Of Classical Ballet*. Dover Publications: 3rd Revised edition: 1982 (first published in 1950).

from Toledo, Ohio. So here's Elaine working, and here's Gail Grant — and it's my understanding that Gail Grant and Elaine were somewhat instrumental in starting OhioDance, but I would talk to Jane D'Angelo a little bit more, and you *can* talk to Elaine about it — but that's the impression I got from talking to Elaine. But it's like what's going on in Ohio? That all of these amazing people are here — they start out in Ohio, they go off to these major companies or they develop fabulous regional companies here...you know, it's such a fertile state, so it's a great place to be.

CF: I agree, and that's really what we've been thinking about in developing this project. It's been a delight to get around the state and see what's happening. How did Elaine get her training? According to her website, she studied with Cunningham and Graham and Hawkins and so on, but that must have been in her adulthood. Where did she *begin* her training?

LB: At Bowling Green, to start with. You know, I don't know what she did as a child — you're going to have to ask Elaine about that — I didn't go back that far, because my dissertation was centered on Higher Education and probably I should have done more research on her background, but my dissertation advisor said he didn't want to read an 800-page history, so (she laughs) I kept it pretty short! In fact, I just ran across on the internet yesterday when I was thinking about this interview — I think I found *her* thesis, which was on a production of Ben Johnson and Inigo Jones, and so she did a lot of dance history as well. So now that I know that it's out there, I would love to read it, because I teach dance history — so that would be really fun to read a history written by someone who's a dancer, because so often the productions from history that we read are written by males who have a Theatre background. And of course that perspective, I think, influences what they write, even though I think they try to be as objective as possible. So I would love to read that and get her impression of that, coming from a dance background, about what those masques and balls and celebrations were like...

CF: Who did she study with at Bowling Green? Do you know?

LB: No, I don't. Hmm-mmm.

CF: So, more questions for Elaine!

LB: She's usually back in Ohio in October — she usually comes back to Toledo, and has a reunion with a lot of her dancers at some restaurant, and I'm *always* working in October and I can never go. So, if you want to catch her, that would be the time to do it, and she would be surrounded by people who worked with her.

CF: I think I read that she still gives workshops in Ohio...is that still happening?

LB: She may...it's mostly the reunion as far as I know, because she lives in Hawaii now.

CF: Would you know much from your research, or from just living and growing up here, what the dance landscape was like prior to Elaine's impact? I mean, what gaps might she have been filling in the area?

LB: I don't think there was much. I don't *remember* much. But once she got to the university, it got very busy. Because I was one of the students from her school that danced with her and there were tours that...I got out of school a lot! (She laughs): I got out of high school a lot! To go and perform with them at various places and various schools in the area, and then probably one of my best recollections was the hub-bub surrounding *Tommy*. That whole thing, especially when I was researching it — that was amazing. This woman from Ohio tracking down Pete Townsend in probably — that production happened in '71, so I bet she started planning it in '68 — and that was a big deal! I mean everybody knew The Who — not everybody, but a lot of people had an old LP stereo record of The Who, and so here's this lady from Ohio tracking down Pete Townsend through his agent in New York, and eventually gets his London phone number. You have to remember — way back then, calling overseas was a big deal — you had to jump through a lot of hoops! But she calls him, and explains what she wants to do, and “Can I have the rights and your permission to use this?” And he said yes, and so woo-hoo! We're off. Oh, and there's no score! So she had to find musicians in Toledo who could listen to the sound, recreate the sound, because that's what everybody was expecting, and I'm sure that's what Pete Townsend was expecting as well, and produce this show. And I think that that was...she dreams! She *still* dreams, I know she does. But to have that kind of dream and to make that major production and not...and to say, to me almost “Well, no one has done it, and therefore we should.” That's not a direct quote from Elaine, but I think that may have been part of her mindset, and she found a collaborative team to work with her. And there were all kinds of things about that production — and this, again, sounds really funny, but back in the day there were overhead projections — “Ooh! Ah!” (She laughs.) And they had this way of swirling oil — and I think it was oil and food colors — and they could swirl it so that this projection, you know, went all over the stage and these colors were swirling, very psychedelic. But it was new! And it hadn't been done — or at least *we* hadn't ever seen that, so it was just like “Wow! Wow!” (she faux-gasps, indicating their amazement) “Aren't we cool? Isn't this a cool production?” So it was very fun; it was very fun.

CF: Did she do that under the auspices of the University of Toledo?

LB: Yes, and when you read the dissertation, there was a little...it was a big deal. There were, I think eight performances, and maybe two open rehearsals. And it was *packed*. It was packed! And standing ovations every night. And Elaine at one point told me, “Yeah, there were people standing on the door because Doermann Theater³ couldn't accommodate all of them” — and that it was a huge deal. And it brought a lot of attention — *national* attention — to this, and the backlash from that from colleagues, she felt, was a little detrimental to moving forward after that. But there's a funny story that I just read today because I was reading the dissertation and I had forgotten it. They had this rock group, and they were working on the sound and they were rehearsing at Doermann, which is one of the main university buildings at the University of Toledo. So they're rehearsing there, and the sound was so loud that the plaster is coming down off the ceiling, and the faculty were complaining that they couldn't even hear one another talk to hold a conversation, so they were asked to move. So they moved to a church that had a basement with walls that were five feet thick to solve the problem. And so those challenges didn't stop, and yet she assembled a really wonderful creative team at the time, and everybody was pretty all in, working on this. And it was *huge* success. I mean it got a lot of attention on campus and elsewhere.

³ Built in 1931 (remodeled in 2013) on the University of Toledo campus, Doermann Theater serves as performance space for several departments at the university.

CF: Amazing. And this is leading me to want to jump to the kind of person that Elaine was, because having not known her, and reading the few things that I've been able to get my hands on...she seems extraordinary, and she seems...not like anyone else...

LB: Oh! She's *not!* (laughing)

CF: So, as a child when you first studied with her, did you have any sense of this? Or was she just your teacher and that's how teachers were...

LB: She was my teacher, and if I remember correctly, in order to graduate onto another level, she would make you take a vocabulary test, and she, I think was very...I'm not sure what the word is, but she wouldn't let us go on pointe — I mean, now everybody knows this about ossification and bones and all that kind of stuff, and damaging your feet. But she wouldn't let us go on pointe until a certain time. And I also remember that we had recitals, but mostly in my earlier years, but later — and I'm not sure, you'd have to ask Elaine — but later, there weren't that many recitals. We had some, but they weren't the be-all and the end-all — it was the *training* that we did, which I really appreciate now — and I'm probably going to get in trouble with colleagues, but the whole competition and recital thing, when I look at the training, over all, that students get in a studio — and they're *wonderful* experiences — but the time spent learning technique versus the time spent learning choreography...I wish there was more time spent learning technique. Because then when we get them here to college, the students — a lot of them — some of them are brilliant dancers, but some of them could use a little more...technical help. So, anyway, especially when I look back at that, I like the fact that we got a lot of technical training. She was very much about doing it right, which... I don't think a lot of people had the understanding of the technique — I mean a lot of people just open schools because they like to dance, but she had a *really* good sense...And I know in later years, she studied Feldenkrais,⁴ too. But she was *energetic* — I know my mom took an adult ballet class from her, an adult dance class — and Elaine's this — when I was a kid, I thought she was tall. And I'm not a tall person — I'm 5'3" — and she's shorter than I am. But as a child, she was always *big*. She was always full of energy, she was always very beautifully dressed: make-up, hair — and she demanded that we do things right. In fact, she threatened to throw me out of class once if I didn't stand up straight, because I was very sway-backed. And she was right. I didn't take the correction, and I probably *should* have been thrown out of class... Anyway, *full* of energy. Again, I think the newness of modern dance that she was bringing — it was very obvious when I look back and think of what she was teaching us, you know the Graham influence was there... But, *full* of energy, *full* of ideas, very *positive*. And also, I remember reading or seeing something on the news when I was a kid — this was at the beginning of the ecology-awareness thing, and there was Elaine, and she was on the news, and she'd made the news because she was ripping off all of the cellophane and the extra packaging from the stuff that she was buying at the grocery store. Because it was wasteful — she didn't *need* this, she didn't want to take it home, and why were they wrapping things in this, because we don't need this waste in our environment?! And I remember that there was a Christmas gift exchange where she wrapped gifts in either fabric or something that was reusable, and

⁴ One of many somatic training modalities used by dancers, among other body-centered training. The eponymous method was devised by Israeli [Moshé Feldenkrais](#) (1904–1984) during the mid-20th century. Devoted practitioners claim that the method harnesses the neuroplasticity of the brain to reorganize connections between the brain and body and so improves thinking and body movement, as well as the psychological state.

so that was another aspect of her, that she was very socially and environmentally aware of things. And this was 60s...early 60s. My mom was like (she drops her voice a register), “There’s Elaine, on TV.” It’s like, yeah (she laughs.) Just, just wonderful!

CF: Did you say she studied Feldenkrais back in those years?

LB: I don’t know how early she did, but I know she studied Feldenkrais. And I think that that brought — in later years, when you talk to Kerry Wilde, I think that you’ll see that, because she became very conscious of what I would say — and Elaine may say this differently — but mind/body integration. And she has, I think, continued to develop that, and again that was kind of new, back then — at least in dance circles.

CF: When you were studying with her in the context of her studio, was she working on her Masters degree then? Did she already have it?

LB: No, she was done. And she would do things, too — I don’t know whether other studios did this, but I think probably not — she would have a lot of students from the university...originally, she was teaching all the classes, but as I got older, other students from the university came and taught as well, and I became an assistant teacher. And we had to have lesson plans, and all of that kind of stuff — so I don’t know that I’ve ever been in a “*studio-studio*” that requires that. That, again, was in the mid to late 60s, and I was making good money: I think I made \$5.00 a class, and that was at a time when minimum wage was \$1.35, so it was like “Hey, I don’t have to work at a fast-food place — I’m doing well!”

CF: If I asked you for three adjectives that come up for you that describe Elaine — what comes to the top? Take a minute to consider — and then, perhaps, we could unpack those. I’m just trying to get a sense of Elaine “the phenom” — the person, you know...

LB: (She does not pause long): Energy. Spirituality. Positivity.

CF: Okay.

LB: I’m sure she has her dark days, but in general she’s so full of energy, it’s hard to believe. Although now as a dancer, I’ve grown, and you understand what the physicality is at various ages. But I mean she was performing at her retirement, you know, her farewell performance, and I believe she *had* to be in her sixties at that point...But still, absolutely beautiful, full of energy, nothing looked difficult for her, but I’m sure that’s kind of like her life: she had a lot of challenges that I know if — personal challenges. I think her son one time borrowed a horse and decided he was going to ride west! (She laughs) And her daughter died from cancer when Elaine was working; she had to take two... this was all after I was gone, but I researched it — she had to take *two* leaves of absence to stay with her daughter. But still, in all of that she’s productive! It doesn’t matter: it’s almost like whatever mountain is there, it doesn’t matter. Yes, this may not be a great time but we’re going to push through this and come out on the other side. You know, I think she said to me about Hawaii — she said, “You know I think it’s a better environment for me.” And so, if things aren’t great here, well, we’ll just go over there — and make things happen. That’s what she did. The amount of touring they did — *incredible* amount of energy that pre-professional company associated with the University of Toledo did — the touring schedule was amazing, for somebody who’s also teaching full-time! So where do these vast reserves of energy come from?

CF: That's what I'd really like to know!

LB: Yeah, well, you'll have to ask *her*, because I don't know where she gets those! I get tired these days...But I think when you meet her, she'll still be that way — just incredibly positive, and full of energy, and probably full of plans for the next two hundred years!

CF: What about the spirituality piece?

LB: That I'm not aware of. At the time I knew her, it was new. It was something that Elaine was exploring, but it was not necessarily something I wanted to jump on board with. So I didn't really go there at that point, but...

CF: Yet when you chose your three words, that was one of them...

LB: Yeah. Spirituality as a term not necessarily — and again, this is coming from *me*...not necessarily an organized religion kind of spirituality, but a self-awareness, a tuning in with her self, her body. And also her surroundings, and understanding that there are symbiotic relationships going on and do we want to tip the scales on those kinds of things...You know, like her environmental activism, so that again, getting rid of our western concept of the mind/body dichotomy, understanding that all of those feed one another, and that you can't — and probably it's not good for you to separate those...

CF: Just tremendously holistic in her outlook, it sounds like.

LB: Mm-hmm...

CF: She was the founding program director of Dance at the University of Toledo, was she not?

LB: Mm-hmm.

CF: Was she the only full-time faculty there for a while...?

LB: I'm trying to remember, toward the end...There *were* some people who taught at the University of Toledo prior to her coming there, but they were not full-time. In fact, the evolution in most universities was that dance came through the Physical Education Department, and at that time — it was *before* Title IX — and so there were, you know, the men's realm and the women's realm in terms of what sports were taught and what expectations, and who could do what. So, dance came in to *most* places of Higher Education in the United States through that door of Women's Physical Education. And the University of Toledo had some people there, but they might teach Dance, Square Dance, Swimming, Volleyball — that kind of thing. That's what I call the "kitchen sink" position. So there was some dance *through* the Physical Education department prior to her being there — I think there were two or three prior to her being there — but she eventually became the first full-time — where that's *all* she taught — was Dance, eventually, when she became full-time there. And then she had a core of people that studied with her and may have gone other places, but came back to Toledo and worked with her in the touring company. Or may have gotten their Masters and were teaching undergrad classes while touring with her company. And you know, that's a big step — when we talk about positivity: you want to start your own dance company? You have

to, I think, have a lot of faith in yourself! Faith in yourself in terms of *you* know you can *do* this. Because nobody else is *really* going to do that for you — it's not like minions magically appear and create bookings for you and arrange money for you, and all that. You know, if you take that on, you've got to make it happen: so, the scheduling and the transportation and the publicity and contracts — getting paid, or *not* paid, depending on what you want to do. Arranging teaching schedules and residencies in the schools —while she's also teaching a full-time load at University of Toledo. That goes back to if I was describing her: energy, positivity, dedication — and really, a huge belief that dance can make your life better.

CF: So you eventually left Toledo and went to study dance at OSU. Did you find that you had gotten a lot from Elaine that applied, that you were well-prepared?

LB: Well, I think that my training must have been good — because I got in, which was not an easy thing to do! I was only eighteen at the time. I wanted dance certification because I didn't want to wait tables, so I wanted a Dance Education degree so I could do substitute teaching. I had no idea what Ohio State was, at the time. And I got in, and this again, I think, goes to Elaine's training. There were two of us from her school who went to Ohio State and got in. And I remember this huge “cattle-call” audition at Ohio State, because you could get in to the university, and not necessarily get into the dance program. If my memory is correct, there were 60 in the freshman class, and to the best of my knowledge 15 made it to the sophomore year. So my training— for me to make it to the sophomore year— that didn't *all* come from OSU, not just in one year; I mean, we know dance training takes a while. So what she gave me in terms of training — what I was talking about, being a kid in her studio and her standards — that must have been almost *the* factor, in my eventually going on.

CF: You said you earned a BS in Education.

LB: I did. At the time, Ohio State was really focusing on their BFA, so we were kind of the “poor stepchildren,” in a way; we had a slightly different track, especially in the junior and senior year. But yes, they did offer that — now I understand that the teacher training is a big deal. Back in the day, it was about performance.

CF: What years were you there?

LB: '71- '75. And ADIR⁵ — American Dance in Residency — was still there, Ruth Currier was there, Odette Blum and Lucy Venable — oh my gosh, Labanotation almost killed me! But it was good training, and out of those years, there were three or four of my classmates who went into Tharp's company. But when I started out at Ohio State, it was one of the few places that gave dance certification — now they call it licensure, so that's why I went. I had *no idea* what I was getting into (she laughs)! But again, I will credit Elaine with laying the technical foundation for me to get into that.

CF: In terms of your own trajectory, then, did you return to the Toledo area?

⁵ In 1968, Helen Alkire hired choreographer and dancer Ruth Currier to form a professional company as part of the newly formed Department of Dance at OSU. Called by its acronym, ADIR, American Dance in Residency failed to receive long term university financing and endured for only five years: 1969-1974.

LB: No. I've never really been back to Toledo. I mean, I have family in Toledo, but no. I left Ohio and went to James Madison University in Virginia and got a Masters in Education, and then started teaching in college as well. It's a mish-mash: I started teaching in colleges, but then I directed a regional dance company, and then I performed, and I went back into college teaching and eventually got my doctorate — because you kind of need that terminal degree in Higher Ed.

CF: Did you remain connected to Elaine through those years?

LB: A bit — after I came back to Ohio— I kind of pretty much settled here, because I had kids and my parents and my in-laws were here in Ohio and I wanted them to know their grandparents. So, I was working at Bowling Green State University as an instructor — and because of Ohio Dance and OPHERD — the “D” was still on the Ohio Association of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance — and so I would see her at conferences, and see her with her performing company, at that point, yeah. And she would give, you know, presentations at conferences and that's how we would connect.

CF: So, the time came in your doctoral studies to figure out what you were going to write about, and you thought to Elaine — in part, as you said, because there was an archive, and you wanted to document dance in this part of the state...

LB: I wanted to document dance, period. And I still have fantasies of...in most institutions of Higher Ed, as I said, Dance has come through Women's Physical Education – and usually there's that one person — that tenacious, “hanger-on-er,” mover and shaker — that gets things done. Which is what Elaine was. And you *know* this because it kind of fell apart when she retired at the University of Toledo. And *somebody* needs to remember these women — and they were *mostly* women; I'm not saying they were only women, but they were mostly women, in Higher Ed. And so I wanted to document that. And one of my fantasies, maybe in retirement, is to travel around these schools in Ohio and say “What do you know about the person who started this program?” Because it's going to be lost, and it really worries me that that information will be lost because they are probably wonderful, fascinating people, — as I said, just tenacious, hanger-oners, people that are willing to move and shake and beg and borrow to get things done in Dance. And so I called a couple of universities and when I called the University of Toledo, they said they had ten linear feet, and it was like, Bingo! And oh, I actually *know* Elaine Valois— I do have a little background in this. So that was great — it wasn't a cold call, in essence, for me to call her up and say “Elaine, I want to do my dissertation on the development of the dance company there— and oh, by the way, since you're such an integral part of that, would you meet with me for interviews?” And she was very generous to do that.

CF: Do you have transcripts of those interviews? Did they make it into your dissertation? Are those files somewhere?

LB: (Ruefully): Not any more. I had a big party when I got my dissertation because it only took me *nine* years to finish it... And I had a big party — I saved most of that, though, for the required seven years, and then I got rid of it. If (sigh) — I would have to look through things — I don't know if I saved the 3½ ” floppy discs — I have a reader, and I actually do have an old Mac Classic in the garage. I'll look. I'll look — I may still have that.

CF: I'd like to take a little departure here, because another idea I had reading what I could find to read about her — is the question of dance therapy...

LB: Mm-hmm. *That* was new...

CF: What would you know about her engagement with that body of information? (She is nodding her head...) Perhaps Kerri or Cathy...

LB: They would know better because that was a curriculum that I was not a part of — but it was very different, it was very unique — and she found that niche, you know? Because dance therapy for the longest time was really a graduate program, so you had to get your undergraduate degree and then go someplace to study...But she started integrating elements in her curriculum at the University of Toledo in dance therapy. And it was very unique, and very forward-thinking...

CF: Thinking about the dance landscape in the Toledo area during Elaine's time here, to your knowledge, did she have any connection with Marie Bollinger Vogt of Toledo Ballet?

LB: I'm sure they knew one another...

CF: They would have been contemporaries...

LB: Yeah, but geographically, Maumee is kind of southwest of Toledo, and Marie's school was quite far away. And it was a long drive for me and the girls from the school that I was going with — it was a long drive...it was maybe 20 minutes to a half an hour to get from Maumee to the University of Toledo. So, I think there was just that geographic distance...and also, Elaine did Ballet and did it very well, but eventually it got to be more and more Modern. So they were, like, serving different populations — because way back then, there were “the shod and the un-shod,” and sometimes they didn't speak to one another. Now, I'm not saying that their relationship was acrimonious, I'm just saying that this person is dealing with bananas and this person is dealing with oranges...

CF: What do you know about the Imaginal Body?

LB: That was after me, so I'm going to have to pass that on...

CF: That's fine. She managed to also be married and have a family, and accomplish all of this, right? Is that testament to the “energy” part of her that you mentioned, again? Or is there another story there...

LB: There is definitely an energy part of that — and I will say that in terms of pioneering and forward-looking, you know, women — I don't think she's that much younger than my mother was — I think she might have been three or four years younger than my mom, and women in that era — post WWII — generally — depending on your socio-economic class — generally, got married, had babies, *stayed home*. And she was in that socio-economic class, and she didn't. She got married, she had babies, but she didn't stay home. And as a working mother in the performing arts, I understand. there weren't — back then, you either had relatives or you paid a babysitter — there were no child care centers, there was nothing like that. So again, she had to solve problems to make that work — and she's not working 9:00 - 5:00 — not working in a school or a regular office — she's out there in tights and leotards. She's dancing. Now there were accepted gigs for women in that era, and again

I'm stereotyping, because there were more fields, but in general you were a teacher, you were a stay-at-home mom, you were a secretary...

CF: a nurse...

LB: ...nurse, thank you, that was the other one. And so those were the typically accepted...not that people didn't go in other places, but she's also an *artist* with a Masters degree! Women didn't go to college! There was a big joke back then: "You go to college for your MRS degree." And she went to college, and then she went back to graduate school, and then she studied in Paris. So she's breaking the mold everywhere, in terms of what was typically acceptable. And she's got to balance her being a mom, being a wife, and "Oh yeah, I teach at the University of Toledo during the day — and I have rehearsals from 7:00 to 11:00 every night. Oh yeah, and by the way, I have a studio that meets from 3:00 - 6:00..." — and I *know* this schedule because I went to high school, then I went to her studio from 3:00 - 6:00 and taught, and then I went to rehearsals at the University of Toledo from 7:00 - 11:00. *I don't know when she was home!* And I don't mean that in a judgmental way, but when you're talking about energy and positivity and making things *happen*, it's just amazing! It's amazing, especially back in that era with those cultural expectations of what you should be or what you shouldn't be.

CF: Two children?

LB: Yeah.

CF: And did her marriage endure? I ask that not in a gossipy way — but she either had to have an extremely supportive husband or...

LB: I think you have to ask *her*, but at one point I think I remember that they weren't living together...It's tough. It's tough — I mean, it's huge! Again, we're talking about traditional roles, and if your husband is an overland trucker, or if your husband is a salesman, where he goes out for a week and does sales, and you stay at home: "That's what you're supposed to do!" I mean, that was — again, I'm not saying everybody was supposed to do that — but that was kind of the thing: that's what you did. Reverse it: back in the '50s? That really wasn't the thing. And even if it wasn't the thing in the '50s, when you're both working, who's home? It's hard! It's really hard, so...but she made it work. She made it work. I'm in awe.

CF: You referred to her as a dreamer, and I think I noticed that her email address has the word "dreamer" in it — did she talk about that? Did she, sort of, preach it?

LB: In the time that I spent with her — in the era, let me put it that way — because you're going to talk to people post-1971. I think that's when it really started. And it may have coincided — it's a question you might want to ask — with when her daughter got cancer. That was a very, very tough time for her. And she did a lot of — we used the word holistic at one point. There was a time where I read a memo asking for a leave of absence at a time when her daughter really felt better if she could have wheatgrass, and Elaine was looking to find sources of wheatgrass because they were just seeking treatments — anything that would make things better...So, Cathy eventually did die, quite young — I think 25...

We discuss time for a moment - we have ten minutes remaining...

CF: Her company, the Valois Dancers and also a group from the University of Toledo — or was that one and the same?

LB: (A big laugh): Well! You know when I was talking about her being tenacious? I think I learned to circumvent authority from her. Because if one door closed, she would find another one. And they eventually formed a non-profit dance company, *loosely* affiliated with the University of Toledo. And that was another thing — because the company was called The Valois Company of Dancers; it was *not* called The University of Toledo Dancers, which was very typical of that era — if a university had a dance company, it might have been the Orchesis⁶, because that was another kind of club or dance organization name in Higher Education for performing groups. So this was The Valois Company of Dancers, and they had a musician/accompanist/law student that worked with them and filed a 501c3, and got them tax-exempt status, and eventually somehow it morphed into the fact that they were also a student organization that could get or at least apply for funds for student performances. So they weren't officially — they may have *become* — but they weren't officially, and one of the reasons they incorporated was because once it became a non-profit entity, they could go to the Ohio Dance Council or the National Endowment for the Arts or any of those funding organizations, and get financial assistance for their performances, to bring workshops or guest artists on campus, which they did. So all of that kind of stuff would happen, but it was — she kind of “back-doored” a couple of things, and kind of skated at the edges of some things — and basically, “I’ll find a way to make it work!” — which she did.

CF: Was it a large company? I’m trying to get a sense of scale...

LB: Sometimes it was nine people, which I think is pretty large. I think it was, really, who could go out? There were a number of people in the company — but who could make the residency at Maumee Valley Day School that day? You know, who didn't have other jobs that they were working? So, how many can we send out there? But usually there were around nine or so, and it seemed pretty steady: you know, some people would come, some people would go — and it's interesting the people that I've run into since that time who worked with her company. My Pilates trainer worked with Elaine! And so many other people did — she influenced *so many people*. Her influence, or her reach, was very broad — because she was there a long time. She was there until about '90, '91.

CF: And as you said, she wore a lot of hats during those years.

LB: She did. It was like: make it work. Anything to make it work.

⁶ a term that is derived from dance as an integral part of the Greek chorus. The term since came to be associated with extracurricular dance clubs at universities, beginning with the University of Wisconsin-Madison during the academic year 1917-1918 by a group of students who wanted more opportunity to study dance than was possible in regular university classes. According to one source, Orchesis is not a national organization but a name used by graduates of Wisconsin for their own dance groups as they began to teach in various sections of the United States. This pattern fits the one described here, as Margaret H'Doubler of Wisconsin started a group in Madison, and Helen Alkire, who studied with H'Doubler, initiated a group of the same name at OSU. Today, this term is rarely used, and university dance companies have arisen in their wake.

She went to Bennington,⁷ I want to tell you that. She went to Bennington one summer and she would take some of her students to Bennington, and she came back — speaking of forward-thinking — and she taught us *Trio A*,⁸ which was probably the hardest piece of choreography I have ever had to learn because to me, at the time, there were no — it was all abstract, and there was no organic through-line, to me, in the choreography. You just learned about — let's see how long is *Trio A*?

CF: About 4 - 5 minutes...

LB: Well, there's no music, so there are not even auditory cues to tell you where you are — like if you forget your place in a piece of music. And she comes back and teaches us *Trio A*! It was very groundbreaking at the time.

CF: So this was in her studio, or...?

LB: I learned it when I was working at the University of Toledo as a high school student, but she had taken some of the kids to Bennington. So she was totally aware of things going on outside, and things going on and *new* and breaking things in the world of modern dance — and bringing them back to Toledo.

I remember performing *Trio A* for some people that weren't dancers — that didn't go over well (she chuckles) — 'cause it's not a non-dancer piece. You have to appreciate dance for that one. But you know, that's it — she brings this stuff back to us!

CF: She had tremendous curiosity...

LB: Yeah — and open-mindedness. Because even as a dancer, you know *Trio A*...I think you have to be a dancer, to appreciate *Trio A*. And so she's bringing this back to a community that's not, you know, full of abstract modern dancers. You know, ballet/Toledo, Ohio/conservative, kinda-sorta — and this is just, to most people, *weird*. (She imitates Elaine's voice at the time): "But I'm going to bring it back, and I'm going to show it to you, I'm going to share this with you!"

CF: I think this is perhaps my final question...How do you think Elaine Valois sits in terms of appreciation, in the context of dance — and I guess art — in northwest Ohio? Do you feel that she gets her due? I'm wondering about that.

⁷ Bennington is used here as a form of shorthand for the Bennington College School of the Dance in Bennington, Vermont, which was the site of a summer program founded in 1934 by dancer, choreographer and faculty member Martha Hill. The summer program was profoundly significant as a kind of breeding ground for the new modern dance movement, as it brought together the major practitioners of the emerging form on an annual basis. The School ran until 1942, and was resumed post-war at Connecticut College, eventually giving rise to the American Dance Festival in Durham, NC.

⁸ *Trio A* is an iconic dance originally created by Yvonne Rainer in 1965. As a piece of work, it dismantled previous notions about compositional practices, and defied common perceptions about what constituted acceptable dance practice. As used here, then, it serves as a reference to the kind of dancing that became known as postmodern dance, a form that would have been largely unknown by university dance programs at the time that Valois introduced it to her students. Bell references the dance here to highlight Elaine Valois as a forward-thinking and "in-the-know" dance professional in her time.

LB: I think she knows she's loved — I can't imagine any other way to say that except she comes back every October. All of these people that danced with her come to this restaurant — it's the same restaurant all the time. This has been going on forever. She left the University of Toledo in '91. It is now 2018 and people still come back for that. What else do you need? 'Cause in dance, some people come to you...you know (she adopts a distinctly comical, low voice): "Are you a star?" It's like, "No, but I'm making money off of this, which is pretty good. But the influence of her on all of those people, and the things that she inspired and drew out of all of those people as a teacher? I don't think you can ask for any better.

CF: Thank you.

LB: (Laughing): I was trying not to cry!

CF: She sounds so amazing! I can't believe I just didn't know of her.

LB: You know, well that's it: we all work in our own niche, and we put our heads down and we work really hard. And that's what she did. You know, I had Tom Cobb, who is the President of the National Dance Education Organization, come out here, and I've had Bill Evans here, and I've had Billy Sigenfield, I've had Jump Rhythm Dance, I've had Giordano, I've had River North — I mean, I could go down the back hall (she is referring to the hallway lined with photographs of visiting dance companies and artists who have visited Ohio Northern University) and tell you all the companies I've had here. Does anybody in Ada, Ohio, know? Well, my students do, but that's the quality of...we've had Taylor II in residence. We just had Catapult. So, if you ask anybody around here about dance? "Oh, yeah, I think there's some at the university...." And my students are so *used* to that quality of dance coming in, *they* don't even get it! So, when I leave here? I don't think anybody's going to notice! I don't think anybody's going to notice. It's okay! I know what happened here! I mean, really. I mean, the people that we got weren't at OSU (she taps the desk, emphatically). (Laughing): we had *better* and *more* performers than at OSU here.

CF: That's wonderful. Congratulations!

LB: Yeah, yeah. But you know, going back to Elaine, I don't think it was ever about being a star, so when you ask me about...she did what she wanted to do, and she succeeded? Great. Because it's a tough business. Not everybody is going to be a Baryshnikov...If you can make a living? But on the other hand, I keep going back to that restaurant: all these people who come back? Phew! That's a gold star.

CF: Thank you so much. Really interesting!

LB: You're welcome. I'm sure Kerri's going to be much better — I'll have to listen in on those.

CF: She can't be better — she'll have a different chapter of Elaine's life, perhaps.

LB: Yeah, because I was in the early, early, early days...

CF: Yes, and that's why your recollections are so valuable!

LB: ...and I was also very young.