

VDC Interview Transcript

Gregory Robinson, former principal dancer with Dayton Ballet Company  
Schwartz Sisters

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Dayton Contemporary Dance  
DCDC Offices  
840 Germantown Street  
Dayton, Ohio 45402

Key:

CF: Candace Feck

GR: Gregory Robinson

JC: Jessica Cavender (VDC film team)

JD: Jane D'Angelo: (Ohio Dance Director)

CF: I'm Candace Feck, and I'm talking with Gregory Robinson at the Dayton Contemporary Dance Studios. Today is June 27, 2018.

GR: (asks about the nature of the project).

CF: It's an oral history project that celebrates the amazing contributions of artists and educators in dance throughout the state. The selections are chosen by nomination. Thirty nominations were made in the first round — selections from those were made by the OhioDance board. DCDC was in that first round.

GR: I see.

CF: And then in this, the second round, we are considering the contributions of the Schwarz sisters, which is why we wanted to speak with you today.

GR: Great.

CF: It looks like you originally studied in Alabama?

GR: That's right.<sup>1</sup>

CF: And you graduated and came straight to Dayton Ballet?

GR: Yes, this was my job right out of training. Yes.

CF: So it seems that you started in 1980, and I think that was the year that Miss Jo retired.

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<sup>1</sup> Robinson began at the University of Alabama (Tuscaloosa), transferring to the University of Alabama in Birmingham (UAB). He was a member of Ballet UAB, where he continued to perform and pursue his BFA through 1980, when he joined Dayton Ballet.

GR: Yes. I had met Stuart Sebastian<sup>2</sup> — he came to the University of Alabama in Birmingham, like a year and a half before 1980, and set a quartet of two guys and two girls, and he was assuming directorship of the company and knew that that was happening and he wanted us — all four of us — to come up and audition. Well, the two guys did and the two girls didn't. And we both, Richard Stetzman and I, both joined the company right after that.

CF: Did you meet the Schwarz sisters?

GR: Yes. Though Miss Jo and Miss Hermene had stepped down, they were definitely presences and you'd see them at the studio all the time. Miss Jo felt no compunction about yanking you into a corner and giving you a note on somebody else's work, so... But my connection with them was more social than professional, though she mentored me: every now and then she — especially for something she felt that was really important, not just for the company, but for me personally, she'd spend some time with me and talk me through things. But as far as day-to-day studio work, that was really, especially that first few years, it was really all Stuart. He taught all the classes. He handled all the rehearsals, did most of the choreography. He was smart enough even in 1980 to know that one voice isn't always going to work for a company. You need to show the dancers different ways. And even though he was very prolific as a choreographer and very varied in his musical choices and his interests, it's still... you get to that place where you know the dancers and the dancers know you, and that shorthand kind of takes over for choreography a lot of times. So things could get homogenous and he didn't want that from his work. So he always made sure that we had other experiences.

CF: Can you tell me what Miss Jo was like?

GR: Oh, my!

CF: Of course we have records, but you *knew* them.

GR: Yeah. Yeah.

CF: I'm trying to get a feel...

GR: She was — they both were kind of “Old World,” old school — that dance teacher with that iron spine. Not, from what I was told, *not* overly enthusiastic with praise, but plenty of criticism. So a lot of dancers that worked with her that I knew, either because they stayed when Stuart stepped in... or just dancers in the community — we still knew each other. But again I heard that she could be, what's that word Jon Rodriguez<sup>3</sup> would use? (He uses the French here): *Formidable*. She could be

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<sup>2</sup> 1950 - 1991: Stuart Sebastian was born and raised in Dayton, OH, where he studied with the Schwarz sisters and eventually became a principal at the National Ballet of Washington DC. In 1980, he returned to Dayton Ballet as director and choreographer, bringing in new dancers, including Mr. Robinson.

<sup>3</sup> 1930 – 2015: Rodriguez moved to Dayton from Detroit in 1965 to dance with Dayton Ballet, beginning a long association with the company as dancer, teacher, choreographer and director. He was named co-associate director of the company in 1972, and in 1974 became founder and co-director of The Professional

terrifying. She had a *presence*.

And I go back and think women starting *any* kind of business, whether it's a dance school or a factory, when they did, the iron will you had to have to keep going, especially in the time period when they were developing the school and the company. These weren't easy times for women to do *anything* on their own. I imagine banks weren't willing to give them money for loans...It all came from the community, it seemed. And then they started to get recognition, like with the Ford Foundation<sup>4</sup> and Balanchine's School of American Ballet Theater.<sup>5</sup> This company — once I met Stuart and found out about it — it was a *dancer factory*. There were so many people that came through the school that went on to achieve high professional careers.

CF: Donna Wood among them, right?

GR: Donna Wood,<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Gribler.<sup>7</sup> He was until several years ago— and this is after 35 years or so — the *face* of Pennsylvania Ballet.<sup>8</sup> He's known regionally, nationally, internationally, as a fine teacher and a choreographer. Camille Ross<sup>9</sup> — when I came — I think her name's Camille de Ganon now. When she left here, she went on to American Dance Machine,<sup>10</sup> which is like a repertory company in

Touring Company. Among many other accomplishments, he served as artistic director and coordinator of the Wright State University Dance program for 20 years.

<sup>4</sup>Based in New York City, the Ford Foundation is an American private foundation with the mission of advancing human welfare. Created in 1936 by Edsel Ford and Henry Ford, it was originally funded by a \$25,000 gift from Edsel Ford. By 1947, after the death of the two founders, the foundation owned 90% of the non-voting shares of the Ford Motor Company. (The Ford family retained the voting shares.) Between 1955 and 1974, the foundation sold its Ford Motor Company holdings and now plays no role in the automobile company. The Foundation offers support for artists and thinkers who make work that advances social welfare. The Ford Foundation makes grants through its headquarters and ten international field offices. For many years, the foundation's financial endowment was the largest private endowment in the world; it remains among the wealthiest.

<sup>5</sup>The School of American Ballet (SAB) was founded in 1934 by George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein as the first step in their quest to establish an American ballet company. Fourteen years later, New York City Ballet was born. SAB has remained NYCB's official academy ever since, providing the vast majority of the company's dancers as well as training dancers for other companies around the globe.

<sup>6</sup>One of many highly acclaimed dancers to come out of the Dayton Ballet Company. Donna Wood was raised outside Dayton, the fourth of seven children in a middle-class family. She began studying dance with the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company at the age of five, and trained extensively in ballet under Josephine Schwartz of the Dayton Ballet on weekday afternoons. During high school she spent six summer weeks with the Dance Theater of Harlem. Wood moved to New York in 1972 and joined the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in September of that year. Five years later, she became a leading dancer with the company, where she remained until 1985.

<sup>7</sup>A Dayton native, Gribler began his career with Josephine Schwarz, a founding member of the Regional Dance Association Northeast. His 10 years of study at the Schwarz School of the Dance included six years of performing experience with the Dayton Ballet. In 1975, at the age of 17, he was offered an apprenticeship with Pennsylvania Ballet. He joined the Corps de Ballet in 1976 and was promoted to Principal Dancer in 1982. Gribler served as Ballet Master for Pennsylvania Ballet from 1986 to 2014.

<sup>8</sup>Founded in 1963 by Balanchine protégée Barbara Weisberger, Pennsylvania Ballet was established through a Ford Foundation grant to develop regional professional dance companies.

<sup>9</sup>Camille Ross, now Camille Ross de Ganon, danced with the American Dance Machine.

<sup>10</sup>American Dance Machine was a theatrical dance company created by Lee Theodore, which played on Broadway at the Century Theatre, opening Jun 14, 1978 and, in total, running 199 performances. It was

New York of Broadway show-stoppers, so that those bits of choreography weren't lost in time. The shows were never performed, so you didn't lose, like, some Bob Fosse<sup>11</sup> choreography — Michael Kidd,<sup>12</sup> Matt Mattox,<sup>13</sup> things like that. Oh, Donna Wood, goddess at Alvin Ailey!<sup>14</sup> There's lot of people that came through the school. Beth Saidel was at Joffrey Ballet.<sup>15</sup> And these are just people I had heard of when I got here. So it was very interesting. Miss Hermene didn't come around as much as Miss Jo. So I really got to know her in their home, which was a wonderful setting, because Miss Jo's habit — both of their habits — was to not have the *entire* company over at their place. They lived in Dayton Towers over near the post office, and to me, it looked like an Upper West Side apartment — it was all parquet floors and there was a little step-up from the door into the main room... It looked like something you'd see on the Upper West Side. So they would only have, like, three or four people at a time, because that's all the room there was around their table. And it was quite interesting, because she would... Dance was sort of at the periphery of the moment while we were there. Sometimes she'd have us play games, which would help you get to know each other a little better — icebreaker games. There were cocktails, of course, and everybody had to contribute to the meal. You had to get in the kitchen and do *something* to help out, because Miss Jo was not going to do that all by herself. So yeah, my contact with them was social. Seeing their regard in the community, like when they would come to the theater, it was like the great-grandmothers of dance were there, you know. Even Virginia Kettering,<sup>16</sup> who studied with them as a child — to be just an observer and new to the community, to see these continuing attachments... and to be at my age now and have friends from when I first started training that were now like going on late 40s, I think my one friend, 46 years... So you did get that value, and knowing who Virginia Kettering *was*, but seeing her just be girlfriends with the Schwarz sisters was really interesting to me.

CF: I bet.

GR: Yeah, Miss Jo, she could be harsh. She could be a harsh critic, but she'd seen it all. And I never thought she was wrong. A lot of people had trouble with her delivery, which could be brusque. She

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duplicated with a second cast for the American Dance Festival at Duke University in 1978. The show was a "Living Archive" of Broadway theatre dance, great theatre dances saved from oblivion. Films were made of the performances to preserve original Broadway choreography and can be found at the Lincoln Center Library of the Performing Arts in New York City.

<sup>11</sup> Noted actor, director and choreographer, Bob Fosse (1927-1987) was born in Chicago, Illinois. His signature movement style included the use of turned-in knees, the "Fosse Amoeba," sideways shuffling, rolled shoulders and "jazz hands."

<sup>12</sup> Michael Kidd (1915 – 2007) was an American film and stage choreographer, dancer and actor, whose career spanned five decades, and who staged some of the leading Broadway and film musicals of the 1940s and 1950s.

<sup>13</sup> Matt Maddox (1921 – 2013) was an American jazz and ballet dancer, a Broadway performer and a specialty dancer in many Hollywood musicals.

<sup>14</sup> The preeminent African American dance company in the U.S., Alvin Ailey Dance Theater, was founded in 1958.

<sup>15</sup> Originally founded as a touring company by Robert Joffrey (1930 – 1988) and Gerald Arpino (1923 - 2008) in 1956, the Joffrey Ballet was based in New York City until 1995 when it moved to Chicago following Rbert Joffrey's death. It has endured to the present, remaining one of the premier dance companies of the U.S., noted for an eclectic repertoire that draws upon the classics, new works, and fusions of modern dance and ballet.

<sup>16</sup> 1907- 2003: A leading philanthropist and patron of the arts in Dayton, OH.

didn't have a lot of time to soft-soap things.

CF: Were they of Eastern European heritage?

GR: I think they were. They were Jewish. I'm not sure if it was Polish or German or Austrian. But Schwarz is a pretty German or Teutonic name. Not a lot about their family history. I mean here, their family, they talked about their brother Gus, whom I met — and met his children. There's Joanna,<sup>17</sup> the niece who cared for them in their later years. They were very close-knit. And Miss Jo would — every now and then, I'd get a postcard out of nowhere from Miss Jo. When she moved to Colorado? And they would always be these... I keep one — it was a postcard of the building of the San Francisco Bridge. So I was like thirty-something, and she would always sign off her notes “Old Miss Jo,” which I thought was just wonderful.

CF: And you have that... could we get a scan of that?

GR: Oh, sure. Yeah.

CF: What an artifact!

GR: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely.

CF: You were around then, of course, when Miss Hermene died.

GR: Yes, yeah. Mm-hmm.

CF: Do you remember anything about...

GR: I remember Miss Hermene passing, Jeraldine passing, Miss Jo — these are like state occasions in the dance world. Miss Hermene was really...she liked being in the background. That's where she did all of her work. The costumes she made, people are still using — and they're intact. So her artistic input to the scenic elements of it were really important. That left Miss Jo free to focus on the artistic. So they had that great kind of partnership that you always hope you get in any kind of artistic endeavors, so you're not doing it all. I'm not sure who was the business mind of the two of them, but I imagine it was Miss Hermene. I imagine she kept the books tidy.

CF: Do you recall anything about the funerals? Anything of historical interest?

GR: I think at Miss Hermene and Miss Jo's *and* at Jeraldine's funeral — they were all recognized by state government, the national government. Funding organizations in DC knew who Jeraldine was and they knew who the Schwarz sisters were. Grants were coming through all the time. So when Stuart assumed directorship, those grants still kept coming through. So yeah, this was the passage of Titans. It wasn't just a minimal thing going on...

CF: I'm so curious! Well, has any of Miss Jo's choreography survived in the repertory of the company?

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<sup>17</sup> Johannah Schwarz Franke, b. 1932.

GR: There were a couple of instances where it was for one of the major anniversaries, maybe the 50th. Cannot remember what year that was. Well if this year was the 80th, it was 30 years ago. That's so crazy to think I've been here that long. So 30 years ago, I think it was for the 50<sup>th</sup> — they brought back one of Miss Jo's big works, and it was to music by an American composer, Paul Creston<sup>18</sup>. I cannot remember the name of the work. It was an experience of Americana — kind of along the lines of Martha Graham's *Appalachian Spring*,<sup>19</sup> that view. But it certainly had — to me, coming from the South — a look of what Ohio would have been, turn of the century. I cannot remember the name of that piece! And I wasn't in the ballet because I was in three other ballets on that program. Stuart always tried to have you not, if he could, not have you do a complete program, which was wise. Because if you went down, it was just a horror to replace.

But I did get...I had to know the work in case somebody went down and I had to go in. It had a time — not a timeless — it had a feeling of the time it was created. And I think she was really happy to see it up there. I *know* she was, and she was very proud of it, too. And the costumes looked... The work that Miss Hermene would put into these costumes, it was like the way they put work in the costumes for the *Ballets Russes*.<sup>20</sup> I mean it was *couture*. Everything was hand-stitched, the right fabric, the right weight, the right amount of petticoat under the skirt to make it stand just a certain way. That attention to detail for those kind of period costumes is really clear.

CF: I'm curious too, as a dancer coming from Alabama to Dayton Ohio — you were in Birmingham, right?

GR: Yup.

CF: How did the dance landscape seem at the time, here in Dayton? The cultural landscape? How did it strike you as you settled in?

GR: This? I felt like I fell into a cultural honey-pot. First, seeing DCDC<sup>21</sup> when I first got here was astounding. The level and the quality of the dances and just especially how the company has established and reestablished itself through all these decades I've been here. The ballet itself was not only strong, but so strongly supported within the community. One of the things that I enjoyed that Stuart wanted to push, which was kind of the same thing that I came from in Birmingham, was that we are part of the community. We're not separate. Yes, we're artists, but we're artists in Dayton. So, outreach — even though it wasn't called that then — was prime, we were always at some school somewhere doing a lecture demonstration. And you hope that one kid goes, “Hmm, I'd like to know more about that.” You're not trying to get someone to don tights ten minutes after you've left the school. You just want *one* kid to look at what we do as a profession and not as a hobby, as a lot of

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Creston (1906-1985): Born Giuseppe Guttovveggo, Paul Creston was an Italian American composer of classical music.

<sup>19</sup> One of Martha Graham's best-known works, this evening-length dance premiered in 1944, with a score she had commissioned from the composer Aaron Copland, and set design by Isamu Noguchi. Based on an American theme, the dance considers life on the frontier through a marriage celebration.

<sup>20</sup> The touring ballet company begun by ex-pat Russian impresario Sergei Diaghilev that introduced major innovations in the artform, including colorful and often non-traditional costume designs designed by important visual artists of the time, such as Bakst, Benois, Picasso, Matisse and others. The company toured from 1909 - 1929, when it splintered into several groups following the death of Diaghilev.

<sup>21</sup> The acronym for Dayton's highly acclaimed Dayton Contemporary Dance Company

people think. And in the lecture demonstration, we'd encourage them to look at things besides just the dancing part: maybe you want to be a musician; maybe you want to compose music for dance; maybe you want to go into scenic design, make costumes, design sets; maybe you want to be that alchemist that creates the lighting where pink and yellow don't always make orange. You know what I mean? So I enjoyed that very much and that was part of the pedagogy at the University of Alabama, that we keep our connection with the community. So a lot of it was a fit going in, it wasn't a big transition. Professionally, it was. But as far as the ethos behind what we were doing, it felt natural and continual to me when I got here.

CF: Hmm, that's good to know. Besides DCDC and the Dayton Ballet, do you remember much of the rest of the dancing at that time?

GR: Let's see. Throughout the years, there was... Debbie Dorrado — it's so weird that I can remember one thing about something, but not the other thing— had a company that was modern jazz that was...so, their identity was separate from DCDC and I would say it was Dayton Dance Theater. I think that's right. Because all these DD, DDC,<sup>22</sup> DDDC... Yeah, I think it was Dayton Dance Theater. There was one of the dancers from DCDC, Michael Groomes, who started his own company, SMAG.<sup>23</sup> S-M-A-G which is actually, those are the initials of his sons, Shawn, Michael and Gavin. And he's been going now I think longer than 15 years. Barbara Pontecorvo,<sup>24</sup> one of my partners at Dayton Ballet opened a school in... First, it was right across the street from the baseball field, even before there was a baseball field. And she was down there for a number of years and now she has a huge facility out in Springboro. Just celebrated her 25th year. There are *more*. Jeanette Pop School<sup>25</sup> was here, and now her daughter Audra<sup>24</sup> is running it and I trained Audra at Dayton Ballet. There was Debra — oh my God, Howard: Howard School<sup>26</sup>, which was underneath Meadowlark restaurant. It's now still a dance school but with different owners. And he actually came through Dayton Ballet while I was ballet master there. That continuum. Yeah, people don't vacate once they've had an artistic experience here, it seems.

CF: That's wonderful.

GR: And just meeting other artists... I mean, a few weeks ago I ran into Andy Snow<sup>27</sup>. He was so collaborative with Stuart as far as the image of Dayton Ballet and getting photographs of performances and of the dancers out and into the community. And to run into him after not seeing him for a number of years. Artists all over town: Bing Davis<sup>28</sup> — I run into him and it's like we had

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<sup>22</sup> Dayton Dance Conservatory, formerly the Jeanette Pop School (see n.25); to Robinson's point, DDCE, Dayton Dance Conservatory Ensemble, is the elite performance program of this school.

<sup>23</sup> SMAG Dance Collective closed in May, 2018 after fourteen years.

<sup>24</sup> Barbara Pontecorvo, Director of Pontecorvo Studios, danced professionally with Houston Ballet, Chicago Ballet, Boston Repertory Ballet, Ballet Puertorequeno, and Dayton Ballet during her twenty year performing career and has taught ballet for most of that time. In 1992, she also founded and continues to direct Gem City Ballet.

<sup>25</sup> Originally established as Jeanette Popp School of Dance, Inc. in 1976 under the direction of Jeanette Popp. Following her retirement in 2010, she transferred ownership and direction to her daughter, Audra Kucharski.

<sup>26</sup> Now the Howard-Reboulet School of Dance.

<sup>27</sup> Noted photographer who came to Dayton for work in 1974, and has made it his home.

<sup>28</sup> Willis "Bing" Davis is an African American Artist and teacher, born in Dayton, Ohio whose artwork portrays his feelings for life and appreciation for African history and culture. Davis has studied, lived, and

lunch the week before. He's just so genuine and warm all the time. So these connections, it's been astounding. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. If I just really started to list all the people that I've...*outside* of dance — not just all the dancers that I've met and worked with — throughout these years.

CF: And you've worked with various institutions— I mean, besides DCDC and Dayton Ballet Company, you've been at Wright...

GR: Right. Right now I teach at Wright State University, I adjunct there with the dance majors in their beautiful new facility. It's one of the *best* studios I've *ever* been in. We've had people from Complexions<sup>29</sup> come, Dwight Rhoden.<sup>30</sup> We've had people from the Fosse Foundation<sup>31</sup> come. And to be able to say “And this is where you're going to be working...” because it is a giant studio! The new studio can be converted into a theater. So it's huge. And one wall faces the south and its windows from floor to two-and-a-half-stories ceiling, and it overlooks the woods at Wright State, rather than the other buildings. Yeah. It doesn't matter what the weather is, it's just beautiful to see. So I work there. I teach company class for DCDC a few times a week. I teach at JsquareDance. I teach at the Pop School, which is now the Dayton Dance Conservatory. I teach at Barbara's School, Pontecorvo Studios out in Springboro, and sometimes at Miami University. I guested at a school in Detroit, Michigan — Mary Grove College, an old Catholic College there. And every now and then a friend from the past, “Hey, can you come up for a few days and teach?” So, yeah — got a lot of jobs.

CF: It's great to hear how integrated the arts are here.

GR: *Very* much so. And everybody knows everybody — and maybe I'm the last one to know there's friction, but I've never known there to be a lot of contention within the community. It's ultra supportive — the connection between Dayton Ballet and DCDC, you know, total separate identities. But the amount of *respect* both companies have for each other, it's something you can't buy.

CF: Right. You have to earn it.

GR: Yeah. And people are just wonderful about stuff like that here.

taught in both Indiana and Ohio. He graduated from DePauw University in 1959, and from Miami University in 1967. He studied at the Dayton Art Institute, and Indiana State University from 1975 to 1976 and was also a ceramic and graphic artist who taught a ceramics class at Central State High School for 20 years. Davis' work is internationally known, and he currently runs a program called SHANGO Inc., a non-profit organization designed to provide a positive environment for Dayton's youth, where they can learn about art and culture through art expression.

<sup>29</sup> A contemporary ballet company founded in 1994 by Co-Artistic Directors Dwight Rhoden and Desmond Richardson, based in New York City and comprising about 14 classical and contemporary dancers. Complexions performs worldwide, provides dance education,

<sup>30</sup> A native of Dayton, Ohio, Rhoden began dancing at age 17. Prior to co-founding Complexions with fellow Ailey dancer Desmond Richardson, Rhoden performed with Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, Les Ballet Jazz De Montreal, and as a principal dancer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

<sup>31</sup> Presumably, this is the Verdon Fosse Legacy LLC, which exists to promote, preserve, and protect the artistic and intellectual property of Bob Fosse and Gwen Verdon.



CF: Wow. Is there anything that I haven't asked that could...in terms of your thoughts of the Schwarz sisters...?

GR: Just that when I got here, the stature of the company was set. I walked into a done situation. So in the repertory and within some of the things I got to do that were, like, world class, I don't know if I would've ever gotten the chance to dance the title role in Eugene Loring's *Billy the Kid*<sup>32</sup> anywhere else. And we talk about the Schwarz Sisters! Miss Bess is...if the Schwarz Sisters were the nuts and bolts of the Dayton Ballet, Miss Bess was the heart and soul. I've always been conscious of what I... It even sounds trite to say, but what a *blessing* it was to work with her, to dance her ballets. You had to go where you rarely went. There was no other way to access the meat of the work without going really deep in some artistic terrain that wasn't always comfortable, but you got paid back. Sometimes you didn't know you were getting paid back. As dancers, sometimes we do pieces and you're like, "Oh, that felt great." And sometimes you're just skating through a mystery and it's done, and you've put your heart into it. Bess's pieces were that way for me. They were *difficult*, but there was a pay-off to them, spiritually. And just to know *her* and hear *her* stories about life with Miss Jo and Miss Hermene...

CF: We want to talk to her.

GR: Oh, she definitely has things to say. I wish Jon Rodriguez were here because the two of them were kind of the interim between Miss Jo's decision to start stepping down and creating a new artistic director for the company. So they carried the weight of it for a number of years. And again, Titans in the community. But yeah, Bess has a really special place in my heart and respect that's unbounded. I cannot thank her enough for the things, the way she mentored me and the things she brought out in me as a dancer. She could do *Billy the Kid* better than any guy I've ever seen. She knew that ballet backwards, and taught it to us verbatim — and as difficult music and difficult choreography, never a ruffle in rehearsal — just calm and open-hearted, sweet-natured, everything you'd want for someone to guide you through something like that. And I knew the importance of doing *that* ballet especially, and being an African American man. I mean I only knew of one other African American man that did that role. Was it John Jones? I think he was with Joffrey Ballet. So, it carried an importance to me and Bess was...that wasn't even an issue. It's like, "We got to get these steps down." She knew the visceral part of the dance as much as she did the actual steps, and that helps. And could *show* you — without demonstrating steps completely — could give you so much information about what you had to bring out. And that was part of her coming out of Miss Jo's legacy.

CF: That's amazing.

GR: Yeah. So do, if you get a chance to talk to her. Yeah, she's definitely, definitely...

CF: Is there anybody else you can think of that maybe we should contact?

GR: You should try contacting Jeffrey Gribler. He was one of the kids that grew up here; Dan Duell — the Duell Brothers dance in Chicago, Chicago Ballet. Rebecca Wright has passed on. Beth Saidel

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<sup>32</sup> A well-loved American ballet classic, choreographed by Eugene Loring (1911 – 1982), with a score by Aaron Copland, the 1938 ballet draws on the mythology of the American West.

is out there somewhere. Her parents live just downtown now, right across from the landing. So Burt could tell you where she is and then we probably get to her on speed dial. Camille De Ganon G-A-N-O-N, used to be Camille Ross. I'm just thinking of people who were here when I got here. Melissa Schwartz who is now, I cannot remember her married name...

CF: No relation to the Schwarz sisters?

GR: No. One of their "babies," though. She's here in Dayton. Greg Gonzales is in, I want to say, Sacramento. Gregory Gonzales, yeah. These were all *fine* dancers when I got here. Wendy Dubois<sup>33</sup> — she's in Warren, Michigan I believe. God, so weird, when you ask me, I have to think. Yeah, I'm just thinking of all those faces when I first got here. Mark Savage, he was when... They were high men when I came here.

CF: Was it unusual? Well, again, Stuart was, but was it... It sounds like so many people were native Daytonians who came through their school. Was it fairly unusual to get somebody like you from outside?

GR: I think so. At the time, I think it was home-grown dancers that were in the Dayton Ballet. I'm sure people came from other places because the company was connected with national dance... Oh my God, my brain just died. Like RDA, Regional Dance of America. And there was a Northeastern segment, there was a Southeastern, Southwestern, Northwestern, and you'd have those four regions and then at one point all four regions would meet somewhere. So this was one way to farm out dancers, be seen in performance and be considered for auditions. But for the most part, I think most of the dancers that I knew when I got here grew up, came to Dayton or grew in Dayton, trained with Miss Jo. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

CF: (to JC): Do you have anything you want to ask?

JC: I don't know, I was just thinking about the sisters way, way back in the beginning. Like if for some reason, they had never been in Dayton, could you imagine what the landscape would have been? Might it just not have existed, do you think?

GR: Yeah, we do that drain-the-ocean kind of thing. Well, there wouldn't be a DCDC because Miss Jo wouldn't have gone over the railroad tracks, if you will, to teach kids that other schools wouldn't accept as students. There wouldn't be a Dayton Ballet. There wouldn't have been a Stuart Sebastian. There wouldn't have been the Duell brothers. There wouldn't have been Rebecca Wright. There wouldn't have been Donna Wood. That's a big pebble to drop into that pond when you start to look at it that way. Yeah.

CF: And there wouldn't be Gregory Robinson!

GR: True. I wouldn't have been in Dayton. Yeah. I wouldn't have been here with my connection with Dayton Ballet.

CF: Wow. That is remarkable. When we think maybe our individual actions are insignificant. Not so.

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<sup>33</sup> A dancer with Dayton Ballet 1979 – 1982, Dubois is Artistic Director at Ballet Chelsea in Chelsea, MI.

GR: And I mean the point of Miss Jo and Miss Hermene going to Jeraldine to teach at the time when it happened, especially looking at where we are as far as racism and what it is now, still, but to do that then, I am sure there were people who were not happy: on their board, they were not happy that that was happening. So to call it brave, I think, is minimizing it because we were just over the Mason-Dixon line. It's just an hour South. And when I grew up, that was a big piece of crayon across the map. So those things didn't happen. So for her to take that on for the reasons she did, to help Jeraldine more than to build up the esteem of the Schwarz Sisters at that point, because it needed to be done. Because she'd been away and she'd seen the possibilities. I think people...that's been kind of like a theme in my career that people saw my possibility before I did, and just let me be, let me flourish. That's a huge thing. And that happens in this business a lot more than people realize that that kind of heart and that kind of giving-ness, I guess, for lack of a better word. We may not be *rich* as performers, but there's a lot of richness in character and soul. And I think that's why I still have friends 46 years after. It was what we shared more than what we had, I think, that kept that connection. And I feel that so strongly here in Dayton: this is as much my artistic home as my training in Birmingham was. And a lot of my career wouldn't have happened if I hadn't been here. Again, just one thing falls on top of the other. Things just fall out of the air and that's good sometimes... I think so.

CF: So well said. Thank you.

GR: You're very welcome.

CF: If you think of anything else, email us. If any memories come to your mind, or any pictures turn up, the postcard. Jane will follow you like a dog until she gets it.

GR: Oh yeah, I know exactly where it is. I keep it, it's on view!

CF: A treasure.

GR: Yeah, it's, "Oh, there that is again."

CF: Oh, that's wonderful.

GR: Because it's just that ... they were so human. I mean, they weren't divas from the mountain top. They were just these two grandmotherly women who started a dance empire in a town like Dayton, Ohio. I mean it's unheard of. It really is. And it doesn't happen everywhere.

CF: Ohio has been very.

GR: But I tell you, for ballet to somehow be considered a patriarchy when you look at it, it was the moms and the grandmothers that got this going in the community — not the *artistes* who came in as directors. So this phenomenon of seeing more female directors of major companies, it's not a surprise to me because the ballerinas have been doing the heavy lifting all along, even though they've been the ones getting lifted. They're the ones that start the schools that teach the babies, and having gone through pedagogy from little ones to professionals, that's the hardest. It's like fish in a barrel. You just hope somebody heard one thing you said. So again knowing...the longer I was here — because I didn't know much about them when I first moved here — it was like, "Oh, a job. Great! I'll go." I knew more about Stuart, but I didn't know about his background until I got here. But the

longer I was here, the more I saw their stature in the community, and the way the community regarded them. There was never a pull-back. They were part of Dayton. They were right in that name of that town. In the “D” there, somewhere there was Miss Hermene and Miss Jo's scribble. And that was really important for me to see because, I came out of a university situation, so it was an academic adventure. But this was something, these women had planted that seed and this is how it branched out when I got here. And then to see how it's continued to grow... It's like we said, if they hadn't dropped that pebble in the pond, a lot wouldn't have happened in dance. Dwight Rhoden wouldn't have happened. Complexions wouldn't have happened. Alvin Ailey would have missed out on some really wonderful dancers. We would have missed out on some really wonderful dancing if that hadn't happened. And the quality of education here, when I got here, was very high. You don't get Ford Foundation scholars and scholarships to the school of American Ballet Theater. Rebecca Wright was soloist at American Ballet Theater, in the Baryshnikov years that was... yeah, it's easier to get into the Marines than to get into the ballet at that point. So the quality was very high when I got here.

CF: Amazing, just amazing context for us. I'm so glad... every little drop of information about it is really valuable.

GR: Oh sure, yeah. Their house was really sweet, not crammed full of dance memorabilia, but Miss Jo always wanted to give you something like a little trinket to take from the dinner party. She would always come through around Christmas and give you ornaments that came from her childhood. Yeah, like a little pipe cleaner, nutcrackers — I mean, they were adorable but handmade. But what — 70-something years of Christmas ornaments? It was time to give a few away. That side of her, I saw a lot more than the “Dragon Lady” at the front of the studio.

CF: And Stuart Sebastian — he also came from here?

GR: Yes, yes. He grew up here in the school. Had achieved soloist rank with the National Ballet, which was housed in Washington DC at the time under the direction of Ben Stevenson<sup>34</sup> and Frederick Franklin<sup>35</sup> — again, more Titans. And decided early on that he wanted to be a choreographer instead of a dancer. Moved to New York and had success, did some choreography for the Metropolitan Opera, which was a hard thing to do at that point, was doing some international choreography, and was going quite well. And then, as the Schwarz Sisters started to decide they wanted to not be so 100%, they were looking at who could be where. I think the Duell brothers were so *in* New York City Ballet that they weren't going to leave that, and you couldn't blame them at that time. So yeah, somehow they talked Stuart into it, or he talked them into it, or somebody talked somebody into it. But yeah, he took over that. And he wasn't much older than I was, which was interesting too — that. I think having someone that young come in, they were looking for someone for the long haul and not just “I'll do it for a couple of years and move on.”

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<sup>34</sup> Formerly a ballet dancer with Britain's The Royal Ballet and English National Ballet, co-director of National Ballet of Washington, D.C. (1971–1974), artistic director of Chicago Ballet (1974–1975), artistic director of Houston Ballet (1976–2003), and current artistic director of Texas Ballet Theater (2003–present).

<sup>35</sup> British-born dancer (1913–2014) and ballet master, Franklin (known as Freddie) enjoyed an extraordinary career, performing innumerable roles, teaching and restaging on various continents. He was especially known for his partnership with Russian ballerina Alexandra Danilova and was in constant demand as a consultant and stager, notably with the Cincinnati Ballet and the Dance Theatre of Harlem.

CF: And how long *did* he do it?

GR: He was 1980 - '90, '91. Yeah. And for a director, especially the non-founding director, that's a long time.

CF: Wow, well you are kind of “walking history book.”

GR: It seem like it, obviously. I didn't think I knew that much, but you know...

CF: Yep — it's in there.

GR: It's *in* there, it's in there. It's been, what? Thirty-something years...

CF: Well again, thank you so much.

GR: I really appreciate it. It's been fun! So I'll let Jane know I have that.

JC: We'll walk out with you and make sure she knows...

GR: I probably have some other things...

CF: Yes, you might have something more...

GR: I mean, she gave things to *everybody*, little things here and there. She gave me a silk handkerchief that has ice skaters — they look like ballerinas, but they're actually ice skaters, just out of nowhere — like, “Here, you can have this.”