

VDC Interview Transcript  
Schwartz Sisters  
Bess Salyers Imber

8.20.18  
Total Time: 1:05:51

Home of Bess Salyers Imber  
7915 Dayton Liberty Rd.  
Dayton, Ohio 45417

Key:  
CF: Candace Feck  
BS: Bess Salyers  
JC: Jessica Cavender (VDC film team)  
JD: Jane D'Angelo: (Ohio Dance Director)

CF: I'm Candace Feck, and I'm speaking with Miss Bess Salyers at her home in Dayton, OH. Today is August 20, 2018.

CF: What an honor to get to meet you and talk with you about your late friends and associates, Hermene and Josephine Schwartz. You, yourself, are spoken about in reverent tones by those with whom we have talked thus far. We are fascinated with these two sisters who began so much that has now become an integral part of the dance landscape of Dayton, OH, the Midwest and beyond. I wish I could have known them, and we hope we will get to know them a little bit through you.

I recall reading that *your* mother had studied at Bott's Dancing School with Miss Jo...

BS: ... Mm-hmm...

CF: ... and that your mom wanted you to study with her.

BS: Yes!

CF: So let's start there, if you'd like — unless there is something to say before that. How old were you when you met them?

BS: Well, I started when I was six, and the philosophy of Miss Jo was that you learned through depicting fairy tales. She was interested in technique, but she was *far* more interested in imagination, and even in the *morality* of fairy tales. So when we were six, we got a *seriousness* that not too many children...often adults maybe play *down* to children; she wanted us elevated to the adult world, and beyond! And so we had imagery of the castles and knights and rivers and wind (outdoor sounds interrupt us, and we ask Miss Salyers to repeat). She was very interested in the imagery of fairy tales, so we danced about all of the court dances of kings and queens, and the outside natural world of the winds — some of them evil, some of them good winds — the rivers and birds, talking birds, and flowers, so that's where I started — that's where all of us started, in the world of fairy tales, you might say. Then, when I became seven, in 1947, I joined her children's ballet company, and that became very...I mean, it was *always* serious, even those fairy tales...but this was even *more* serious.

Even when we were young, Miss Jo, was tall, she had a demeanor of...I would say, Joan of Arc. She had a dancing stick that she would beat on the floor to emphasize how much more we could do, how much better we could be, and many lectures on past dancers who gave their all, and so we were constantly being inspired by the past. And her demeanor — she never let up, even when she was out in the lobby, talking, she was still Joan of Arc! She was just fascinating, and she prided herself that she never laughed, and she rarely smiled. It was *extremely* serious. And also *very* strict, so we were kind of little warriors, or little knights or something, and when we pranced down the diagonal, we were the horses — the royal horses, and everything also was — your ballet slipper had a diamond on it, so we put the diamonds on each one to point our toes — (we are again disturbed by the noise of cars passing).

CF: You were talking about the diamonds on your shoes, and you were just talking about the costumes a bit... Would you repeat what you were saying, about the costumes?

BS: Yes, in *every* class, when we were young in the children's ballet company, it was *always* about King Louis XIV, it was always the royalty and that we were dressed like them, with diamonds on our slippers to point our toes, and beautiful costumes to make us stand up like a lady. And the carriage of our neck, even, was supposed to be a swan neck, so the imagination was paramount. We did do tendues to the front and to the side and so on (she laughs), but it was *because* of the king, and we were working towards royalty and presentation. It was never really *about* technique. And then, as we got older, she just *demande*d more and more strength — way beyond, I feel, what maybe is done today (I am maybe not that familiar with what's going on with the young today), but we had to be *powerfully* strong in order to be graceful, is what she was saying. We had to make it look effortless, because she felt that the world was *thirsting* for the ethereal. And to *be* ethereal, you had to be *extremely* strong! And so there were developpés where you held your leg out until you were almost *trembling* (she laughs, remembering) — but it was done for this wonderful purpose. And she just was on *fire* about it. I often think — she said that she was Jewish but she didn't go to synagogue because *this* was her religion, and I believe that's what she felt. And she felt also that the closer you got to perfection, the more you became inspired and you entered that world of inspiration. And that's where she wanted her dancers to go — to that world. So when we got onstage, we weren't supposed to be *us*, we were to be other-worldly and also dedicated, we were to show our dedication to the arts, I guess you would say. (This speaking is constantly interrupted by outdoor sounds, including cars roaring by...)

CF: Well, I know that you have made some notes, and we want to hear everything that you would like to share with us, but I have a couple of questions about what you've said so far.

BS: Okay.

CF: How did it feel to you as a child to enter that world? Did you ever bristle at it? Did you ever feel like "This is too hard"? How did that feel to you at the time?

BS: Well, no, I was very grateful. But a lot of us cried because we weren't good enough, but I don't know — that was kind of part of it, I guess. I was just really *grateful* — because I've had a lot of wonderful teachers, but *nobody*, nobody *anywhere* has *ever* inspired me like Miss Jo. Just *powerful*. People, I'm sure — others — have talked about her. She just walked in the room, she was a *tower* of *passion* for what she was doing, and she expected it out of us — and she got it! We had — in *Billy the*

*Kid*<sup>1</sup> — she had to hire some football players, and they came in, you know...well (she laughs, recalling the transformation), by the time they were in that *Billy the Kid*, they were noble, they were kind and courteous, they were proud of what they were doing. I mean, she could change — she prided herself that she could take anybody off the street and turn them into an artist. Maybe not a dancer, but (we are interrupted again) — they would appreciate art.

CF: Where did *she* get it? What do you know about *her* training and background?

BS: Well, that's a *wonderful* question. This is my supposition: her mother was extremely artistic, had *beautiful* sculpture in the home... They were German immigrants and everything was cleanliness and order, and probably she was raised very strictly, maybe, but also I feel like she danced for Doris Humphrey and Weidman<sup>2</sup>, way back in the early days, and she got inspired by Botts Ballet. I know that Pavlova came, and inspired a lot of young women in Dayton, but also the war — and first the Depression, in 1929. They lost, *everybody* lost, everything, and somehow she had that fight in her that the arts were going to *save* everybody. And then the war — the lost family members in the concentration camps and I think she wanted to fight for them, so to speak: "I'm going to *do* this for them." Also, she had a terrible injury when she was twenty-nine — she fell on cement while she was dancing on a tennis court and they didn't operate correctly. So I think maybe she was just a *fighter*. She was constantly fighting, and she expected us to pull up and she knew that the dance world *and* life was very difficult and she wanted to make us *so* strong.

*Note: At this point, the pre-scripted transcript actually begins:*

CF: What about her sister? I do want to know about Hermene, as well, and where was *she* in all this, if you know, because she was the older sister. Is that right?

BS: Mm-hmm. She was the exact opposite. She *laughed*, she was dear, she was motherly. She would say, "Oh, Jo!" (She laughs). *But*, she dedicated *her* life to her sister, and she believed in what Miss Jo stood for. And Miss Jo kept wanting to expand, expand, so we finally got in the Northeast Regional Festival and then she had... (more car noise outside).

CF: She wanted to expand and you finally...

BS: We got into the Northeast Regional Festival<sup>3</sup>, which was wonderful. So, we got to be inspired by many, many companies and then she would invite guest artists to come. Violette Verdy<sup>4</sup> came and

<sup>1</sup> Eugene Loring's classic American ballet of 1938.

<sup>2</sup> Two of the very early shapers of the American modern dance movement. They often worked as a team, and in this capacity they also taught during the annual summer program at Bennington College, where dancers from around the country went to study and learn from the originators of the form. It seems that Josephine Schwarz associated herself with the company during her three year-stint during the early 30s in New York.

<sup>3</sup> A reference to Miss Jo's tireless efforts and eventual success in building a place for the Dayton Ballet to be a part of the burgeoning regional dance movement.

<sup>4</sup> Verdy (1933 – 2016) was a French ballerina, choreographer, teacher, and writer who worked as a dance company director with the Paris Opera Ballet in France and the Boston Ballet in the United States. From 1958 to 1977, she was a principal dancer with the New York City Ballet, where she performed in the world premieres of several works created specifically for her by choreographers George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins. She was Distinguished Professor of Music (Ballet) at Indiana University in Bloomington, and the recipient of two medals from the French government.

set a ballet on us, plus *Concerto Barocco*<sup>5</sup> was set on us, eventually. Pauline Koner<sup>6</sup> came, and on and on. She was just constantly trying to raise the bar, I guess you would say.

CF: But where did *she* study? Did she get out not just from Botts?

BS: Well she went to Adolph Bolm<sup>7</sup> when she was nineteen, for the summer. She loved ballet, and then when she went to study with Wigman<sup>8</sup> she loved modern dance. So once a week we had to take modern dance class, and I don't know where she got all of this, but she was interested in Virginia Tanner<sup>9</sup>, who introduced choreography to young children, so that's what *we* had every week: we learned how to do counterpoint, theme and variation, and how to build dynamically from low to high energy. We learned all the floor patterns and figure eights when we were *little*. It was *wonderful* — I *loved* it. She would have us stand by the piano. We listened to Mozart or Bach or whatever, and “This a fugue, and this is how a melody — Chopin goes here and there and there, and then finishes. And then *you* go out and you do it, now you *dance* that.” The music, that was another thing. She would get these high school students and work with them to be able to not only play the classical pieces for our classroom, but to improvise. So she would be able to show them how to play bells *booming*, or waterfalls flowing and then put the bells in there, and then we'd go out and dance that. It was just *wonderful*. We had so much wonderful music, and it just breaks my heart sometimes, when I see people use these tapes now, that they don't have — they can't *afford* a pianist. And I'm so *sorry*! She had several pianists that went on to play for teachers in New York City, and one of them was the pianist for Eliot Feld<sup>10</sup>, who put his piano on stage, his pianist.

CF: Who was that? Do you know that pianist's name?

BS: Peter Langiaru.

CF: I did not know until today about the children's ballet company. So in addition to founding the

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<sup>5</sup> One of Balanchine's early neoclassical works, set to Bach's Concerto in D Minor for Two Violins, premiered in 1941.

<sup>6</sup>1912 – 2001: An American dancer and choreographer, Koner was inspired to become a dancer after witnessing Anna Pavlova in *The Dying Swan*. Noted performer, choreographer and teacher, she studied with Fokine, and was later associated with Doris Humphrey. She danced in the companies of Fokine, Michiko Ito and Jose Limon.

<sup>7</sup>1884 – 1951: Adolph Bolm was a Russian-born American ballet dancer and choreographer, of German descent.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Wigman (1886- 1973) was an early and important German expressionist dancer, closely associated with Rudolph Laban's work. One of her students, Hanya Holm, widely disseminated Wigman's ideas and methods in the U.S.

<sup>9</sup> 1915 – 1979: an American dance instructor and founder of the University of Utah Children's Dance Theatre. Born in Salt Lake City, Utah, she began her formal dance training at the University of Utah. She studied with Doris Humphrey in New York City before returning to Salt Lake City in the early 1940s to establish her school for creative dance for children. In 1960, Tanner was instrumental in gaining a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to bring important choreographers to Salt Lake City to set work on dancers at the University of Utah. In 1966, through her efforts, a larger grant from the Foundation was awarded to the University to establish Utah's Repertory Dance Theatre.

<sup>10</sup> An American modern ballet choreographer, performer, teacher, and director, who works in contemporary ballet. His company and schools, including the Feld Ballet and Ballet Tech, are deeply committed to dance and dance education in New York City. Feld has choreographed nearly 150 ballets since 1967,

Dayton Ballet Company, she first, perhaps, or simultaneously, founded this children's company?

BS: Well, she started with the Experimental Group of Young Dancers and that was high school and older women who studied with her, and then she added the children's ballet company *to* them. And she, this was kind of another thing, she wanted to make sure that once a week we all got together because she *felt* that the young people should see where we were going, and I *loved* that we got to be with *them*, the older group! So she started with the older group — that was called the Experimental Group for Young Dancers. I had the date down here when that started, and then we came along in 1947. Oh, 1937 was the start of what you might call the Dayton Ballet.

CF: Right.

BS: And then she put the children's ballet company, and so at the Dayton Ballet now, we have DB2, but I don't think we have a children's ballet company at the Dayton Ballet. This was seven year olds to thirteen year olds.

CF: How large a company was it?

BS: Oh there were quite a few. I have pictures of us little ones, and then there were... by the time they got to be thirteen, some of them didn't want to put in the time so there were maybe fifteen of us by that time.

CF: And would you perform locally? Would you tour?

BS: Yes, she tried to have us perform six times a year. We performed at the Dayton Philharmonic, and we were always in the band show in the summer time. And she was a *great* believer in lecture demonstrations, so we were always going to schools, showing what a *barre* looked like, improvisation, and modern and ballet were always together. It was like they weren't even separate. She wanted to show young kids what we were up to. *Plus*, she gave lecture demonstrations at Dayton Art Institute twice a year for adults. And this is what the Philharmonic does now: they stand up and they say 'Tchaikovsky is doing this, and the first movement is doing that...' — well, that's what she did way back. So it was wonderful.

CF: Was she herself an immigrant or was it her family, her parents?

BS: Her family.

CF: She must have had a marvelous education to know all of this. Do you know where was she educated?

BS: Just at Steele High School<sup>11</sup> — that was the only high school. Paul Laurence Dunbar<sup>12</sup> came from there. Everybody went to Steele here in Dayton. But this is a very good question because I

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<sup>11</sup> Steele High School was named after Robert Steele, a Dayton educator. It stood on the SE corner of Main Street and Monument Avenue, overlooking the Great Miami River. It was built in 1894 and was home to all of Dayton's high school students until 1906. The high school was closed in 1940 and was demolished in 1955 to make room for a parking lot. Currently, the CareSource building stands in its place, while an obelisk serves as a monument to the original site of the school.

don't know *where* she got this *profound* passion. I mean it was *fierce*. You trembled! Men, grown men, bank executives, trembled in front of her. (She laughs, recalling.) When she asked for money and explained *why* we were going to present *Billy the Kid*, or instance, they got on board! They were excited! She got Eugene Loring to come here and set it. And that *is* powerful music.

CF: Where was all of this happening?

BS: Well it started in Jane Reese's house and then it moved to Memorial Hall, where I studied. And it was mostly just two rooms: there was a studio and then there was a dressing room and office. So it wasn't a very big space, but then we got to move to the Victoria, the *whole* upstairs and we had two studios! Oh, it was such a wonderful luxury! So that's where they are now.

CF: Great.

BS: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

CF: So you really were with her from six years old on?

BS: To '57, so I was 57. And she's the person that I was most with in my entire life, more than my mother, my father. She was... but she kept her distance with everybody. We never, I wouldn't say that we were close, because I just admired her so. She kept her distance from *everybody*. I don't know if she *had* any friends. She was kind of... it was like being in a convent, she was kind of the head nun, or something. I mean she was just *saintly*, in other words. I don't know where it came from, I really don't...

CF: The family, perhaps...

BS: She just was on fire for dance — more than *any* teacher that I had in academics or in dance — I've had some wonderful ballet teachers and modern dance teachers, but this was woman was...

CF: Now, we have a tractor! (referring to the latest noise outside) I think it's a tractor...

JC: I think it's a tractor, or a helicopter!

CF: I'd prefer a helicopter because maybe it would fly away!

BS: It is a tractor...

CF: Well, maybe it will leave — this is the hope.

We are all reduced to laughter at the absurdity of our soundscape...

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<sup>12</sup> 1872 – 1906: Born and raised in Dayton, Ohio, where he is also buried, Paul Laurence Dunbar was an American poet, novelist, and playwright of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. One of the first African American writers to establish an international reputation, Dunbar was president of Steele High School's literary society. His first poems were published in a Dayton newspaper when he was 16.

BS: Oh no, yay! It's not going to come straight through.

CF: No, that's a very loud sound. I don't know what we would do, if he were going to continue...

BS: Oh, that is funny.

CF: Well let's see, where were we, really?

BS: We were talking about where her passion came from.

CF: It's so curious!

BS: Mm-hmm (affirmative). *Very*.

CF: Did she never aspire to leave Dayton? Or did she just want to make things happen here?

BS: Yes, uh-huh. She would go off — to get inspired — she went to New York to study with Balanchine's School for a while, but she was in favor — we had carpools to Cincinnati, we saw Jose Limon and Alvin Ailey and we saw the Sadler's Wells Ballet Company. So we did get to see that, and she read a lot too — she read every dance book that she could get her hands on. And she also loved to read about Leonardo Da Vinci, and painters. So maybe she got inspiration from those books. I've got the strangest feeling that World War II was in on this... It was a powerful, *terrible* thing, especially that they lost family members in the concentration camps. That could be a motivating factor. However her sister wasn't this passionate, but her sister was *so* wonderful, and made beautiful costumes, and was also an *outstanding* photographer for all the programs and publicities.

CF: I thought one of them was involved directly in the war...

BS: Her sister went to the war for three years, by the way — as a nurse.

CF: That's it — that's what I thought, so she *had* to have some passion about it.

BS: Oh yes, and her sister won a medal for her bravery in that war. So, you know, you don't realize unless you have reporters, or maybe people talking about this, what I'm talking about, nobody knows what this war does to people — until you see a movie. So, this is my kind of gut feeling, and also she had an injury and therefore she lived through her dancers, maybe — maybe that was another point. She would also say that she was like Michelangelo: she knew exactly where to get to us, to make us more brilliant — *chisel* us to make us more brilliant. And then she could watch her “sculptures,” you might say. Maybe that was another reason. I'm not sure... But I was so — I felt like I was so lucky to have been around it, this *fire* that she had...

CF: So, let me see, where to go from here. She studied with Adolph Bolm, but she didn't perform with him or...?

BS: I don't know too *much* about that school. That was ballroom, tap and ballet. And I'm not sure if they put on maybe a recital or something? Then when she was 14 she started teaching in her dining room; she charged 10 cents a lesson, and her maid played the piano. And then when she was 19, that's when she started the school at the Reese home and Jane Reese was a *beautiful* photographer,

Bolm ... she was for three years she was with Doris Humphries company, so maybe that was, of course, very inspiring... She loved Wigman. She was only there for two weeks — it was during the depression. So that was the German influence.

CF: Her family definitely had means, then, or she would not have been *able* to study during the Depression...

BS: Well, no, they were middle class, maybe even lower middle class. Her father was an insurance salesman. The money, I found out, was \$200.00 to go to Mary Wigman, to go by boat and study for two weeks. And they took *all* the money they had ever earned, starting from fourteen, for that trip. So it wasn't that their parents... their parents weren't able to give them anything.

CF: So they both went? Both sisters?

BS: No, Hermene stayed home at that time. The only time Hermene left was when she became a nurse for the war. Then Hermene ran the studio all by herself — I mean, Miss Jo did.

CF: In so many ways, you know these very strong women, at that time, they seem like prototypes of feminists without the label. They were *very* forward thinking, and *very* independent...

BS: Yes!

CF: They really made their own decisions; they didn't rely upon anybody else. I thought I read that you said that one of them, probably Josephine, gave up marriage.

BS: Yes, uh-huh...

CF: Was there an actual marriage proposal or did she just choose to foreclose that option?

BS: Well she said that she was in love with a poet from Yellow Springs, but she told us that — I mean she was very serious when she told us this. “Of course,” she said, “I would *not* have made a good mother.” (She laughs): I'm laughing, but she... that she *knew* that, about herself. And none of the other siblings was like her. They were all like Hermene, very down to earth...

CF: How many siblings were there?

BS: There were two brothers and then she and Hermene: four children.

CF: Are there descendants? I know there's a niece out in Colorado...

BS: Yes, mm-hmm (affirmative).

CF: Johanna, I believe.

BS: Yes. She went into the dance world, modern dance world. I'm sorry I don't know about her anymore.

CF: But nobody else, nobody from the brothers, or...

BS: No...



CF: So we could go through my questions and you could go through your notes, and I hope that you *will* look at them and see if there is something that we haven't mentioned...but I'm just thinking that here we are, talking about these two women, and as you said, not very many people even *know* about them, what they accomplished, what they did, what it was *like*...

BS: Mm-hmm.

CF: ... but *you* know quite a bit.

BS: Mm-hmm.

CF: And what things do you think are really *important* for people to know? You've done us a great service in vividly describing the stature of Miss Jo, her power and her passion. But what 33:56else would you like people to know?

BS: Well, I feel that what she really wanted everybody to know was that the arts, and particularly her love for dance, could save your life. She wanted people to know that the arts were the way to God! She wanted people to know that this was the most noble and highest calling, to be an artist — and it was something to be taken extremely seriously, and it was to save the world. Because she felt that everything in the world was very difficult. And the arts were the way that you could make it through it, through the struggle. I believe that that was what she really wanted people to know.

CF: Well, *you* learned it!

BS: (laughing): Yes, I did! But, oh my...

CF: Oh, my?

BS: Oh, *my*! It was...I don't know if you know, for instance, Joe Duell.<sup>13</sup> You know, my student, her student. We watched him grow up. He had that fervor. He went into that world — oh, Lord! It just overwhelmed him, and he committed suicide. You know, it's just...it *can* destroy you, that fervor. And the competition, and the jealousy and the back-biting that he had to endure was awful. And I think maybe she *knew* that — she wanted us to be able to *take* that. But he left when he was sixteen...maybe she wasn't able to give that to him enough; I don't know what happened there. In a way, you have to be strong to be able to *take* that world — or, *I've* come to the conclusion — the *whole* world! Not just *that* world! When I was in high school, we had some wonderful English teachers, wonderful chemistry teachers, a *wonderful* geometry teacher, but they *never* had *this* kind of vision: where life was going to be *rough* and if you just study Algebra, you're going to *make* it, you know (she laughs at this). But I'm sure there are some math teachers out there who would believe that — maybe Einstein, I don't know! But she *believed* that you aren't going to make it unless you try for *perfection*, especially in the art world.

CF: It must have been very difficult for her when the Duell boy took his life.

BS: Oh, yes. On all of us. I mean, in the dance world, we kind of closed down. Actually, a lot of people knew him, in all of Dayton. And I mean, I just know some back stories about that, why that

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph Duell: 1956 – 1986:

happened, and it's just so, it's just so awful. You don't know if anybody... well, Miss Jo could have taken it. She could've taken what he had to take. So anyway, to kind of emphasize that this is what the struggle is, when you go to the top. It's different when you're in a school, in a city, and it's just kind of lovely, everything is *lovely*. And going to the Northeast Regional ballet [festival], that was *lovely*. It's going to the top that is hard.

CF: Well Donna Wood also came through...

BS: Oh! Donna! Oh, Lord! Donna Wood and the Duell boys and Jeff Gribler — when they walked into the studio the first day, you *knew* they were on the yellow brick road! (She laughs.) And Donna, she was bigger than life! I remember I was so... I wasn't able to choreograph on her, but I would set this phrase and I would go back and sit in my chair, and she showed me something that I had no idea was *there*. Oh! She was fantastic. Now there's a girl, she came from eight children and very poor, and she had... Miss Jo knew right away she had great talent, so she was on full scholarship. And *there's* a person, who comes out of nowhere, so to speak, and is fantastic! Jeff Gribler, the same way, oh my God, you gave him a combination and you wondered where did he get that? — that powerful energy! I think it was the, you know I call it “on fire.” I know with me, I wanted to die — she made me want to die, every time I performed! I thought to myself (laughing), “If this is the way I could die you know, this would be great!” I'm sure she wouldn't want me to say that, in a way, but I felt that strongly about it — I mean, she *made* you feel that way. But I guess it's just... I read about Leonardo Da Vinci: he came out of *nowhere*. Now Mozart, he had nice grounding, but some people just... Donna Wood, Jeff Gribler, Becky Wright.<sup>14</sup> She was a soloist with the Joffrey, and so...

CF: Something that has been curious to me is the extraordinary humanity of these sisters, and the fact for example that when this group of African American grandmothers came to them and said to them, “We want our children, our grandchildren to study...” that rather than say, “Well I'm sorry,” they made something happen. Could you talk about that at all?

BS: You mean how a grandmother...

CF: No, I guess, again, I just view Josephine and Hermene as ahead of their time in so many ways. They were very *inclusive*, they were very forward-looking. You know this was a time, really before the civil rights laws, before Brown vs. Board of Education... and they were, didn't they open up a school for these kids?

BS: Yes, uh-huh

CF: Where did *that* come from? I mean, again.

BS: It might have come from them being Jewish and the Jewish people being ridiculed and that World War II thing, they had empathy for the black people. And so Miss Hermene was the one that started the ballet, at the Linden Center, for the African Americans. And that was fun because we got to perform with them, and as Jeraldine said, those were the Jim Crow days, and so we were all up there on stage — white and African American dancers dancing together — at a time when African Americans had to sit in the back row, up in the balcony. There were separate drinking fountains, separate restrooms ... I couldn't believe I grew up in that and didn't realize how terrible that was. So

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<sup>14</sup> Rebecca Wright: 1947 - 2006

yeah, she knew that was wrong.

CF: But how she pulled it off, I mean.

BS: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

CF: There had to be criticism of her.

BS: I guess, but we never heard. I don't think *anybody* criticized Miss Jo.

CF: And if so, they didn't live to tell it!

BS: Oh, she was so powerful, and when she was going to do something, then it was done. One time the tiles were falling because the roof needed fixing at the Victory, and it was dangerous. She had buckets where the water came dripping down from the rain and this one time this tile came very close to this dancer. We had to do piqué turns around these buckets and so forth. She got the owner up there, and he was kind of all smiles, kind of like... Oh, I couldn't *believe* it, what she told him about the arts, how important they were. Did he know what he was causing to be hampered? Words came out of her that were, you know, could've been written as a *speech!* By the time she was finished with him, he was on to the contractor to get that roof done. That's the way she was with everything. She plowed right through. That was why she liked *Billy the Kid*, because pioneers were crossing the prairie.

CF: I guess it was Gregory Robinson who talked about dancing in that ballet.

BS: Oh yes, he was the lead.

CF: Yeah...

BS: He was great!

CF: He was wonderful to talk with.

BS: Oh, I'm sure he was, he is so dear! He came with Stuart in the 80s. I'm so glad Stuart also brought Barbara Pontecorvo — I don't know if you've heard of her...

CF: I don't know that name... (We wait again, for a car to pass).

BS: She started her own, I think it's for 25 years now, she has her own ballet company. She was a soloist with us for 10-15 years. Oh, a beautiful dancer!

CF: And what was her name?

BS: Barbra Pontecorvo. And she's also done dance on wheels — is that what it's called? — she does that and plus she has a wonderful company. She doesn't want a professional company, she only likes working with the kids up to teenage — 18. Then, she told me, she doesn't want to deal with the professional part. But she makes beautiful costumes, she choreographs...

CF: Where is she based?

BS: Franklin, Ohio. And I think she's been there about 25 years. So, she came with Greg, and I'm thankful that they stayed, those two, in this area.

CF: So your role with the company then became as teacher, as choreographer, as co-director? How about that transition from performing in the company to being on the faculty — or maybe higher, I don't know what all your positions were...

BS: Yes, when I came back for good — I went to study in New York for two years and then I came back and taught. Miss Hermene taught me *how* to teach their style, which I'm grateful for. And then I went to California for a year, but then at age 24, I came back and I danced until I was 32, lots of ballets, and choreographed as well. And then I stopped dancing at 32 and then I just taught and choreographed until I was 57. So I saw the Stuart era and all those eras and now they have the wonderful Karen Russo. She's dear.

CF: How amazing, what that vision was to start with, and how they built it and it's still going.

BS: Yeah, it's still going and I feel like, even though we've had to — the Dayton Ballet has had to merge with the Philharmonic and the Opera in order for *all* of us to stay alive, I feel like the Ballet or the Philharmonic or the Opera will not go down. I think they've got a good audience.

CF: How was it that Miss Jo decided to retire? I can't imagine how she did!

BS: Well Hermene died, lets see, in 1986. And Miss Jo got, maybe like me, a lot of arthritis because the very last time I saw her, she was in a wheelchair; she could not walk. She went out to Colorado to be with her niece until...I believe she was 92 when she passed away. So I'm not sure how old she was when she left us. Hermene died in 86.

CF: What happened to Hermene?

BS: Luckily she was on pain medication, but she had cancer and died. And the last time I saw Hermene she just was...

CF: Wait a minute-

BS: So sorry-

CF: Its okay, its automobiles, tractors, insects, what *else* could we have here?!

BS: Is that a helicopter?

CF: It's a plane, I think-

JC: Yep, I think it's a single prop.

CF: A single prop: flies low, makes noise. It'll go.

BS: Oh dear, if it could *make* noise, it will!

JC: Uh huh.

BS: Oh, I'm so sorry.

JC: No, don't be sorry.

BS: Usually it's very calm and quiet here...

CF: No, I don't think we notice it when we're not recording. Part of life. Okay, so you were just saying that Miss Hermene died and then Miss Jo had arthritis and wasn't able to do what she wanted to do. And then she left Dayton and went out to Colorado with her niece.

BS: Right, right. I just think she possibly got *exhausted*. Because at Wright State you'll be able to see the documentary and they will show her before she left. She seems very exhausted. It's no wonder. She wore herself out.

CF: Where did she live?

BS: Miss Jo?

CF: Where did they live here?

BS: Yes. They stayed in their home, their childhood home. It was lovely. It was just a regular house. Her mother's sculpture was in it, and it was beautiful, the sculpture. So I'm sure her mother was an influence on her.

CF: It sounds like it.

BS: Mm-hmm.

CF: What do you remember about the ups and downs or big moments that either really put the company and Miss Jo's vision forward or setbacks that she had to face, and how that all happened. Is there anything in particular that you can think of?

BS: Hmm. Everything was *wonderful* when I was young. Everything was going upward and onward. It says on the documentary that she had burn-out, and that's when she went to Balanchine's School, and that's when she got involved with Northeast Regional Ballet Festival. That was upward and onward. I loved that. I always felt it was just upward and onward. I never felt any kind of set-back. I don't remember, but I'm sure there *must* have been for her.

CF: The Depression years? That was before they started the company, so I guess that wasn't a factor. But the war years...

BS: Of course, during the Depression she went to study with Wigman. You know, she *never* let up. Never. Nothing would make her stop.

CF: I know you wrote, you said in an email today, that there was something about Miss Jo that you

felt that nobody knew but you wanted to tell. Have you told us already or was there something more specific?

BS: It's just my gut feeling about World War II. Because as you mentioned, where did she *get* all that? But Miss Hermene was in the war for three years and she didn't have this. So that *isn't* what's behind her. Isn't that *something*? And yet, what's behind Mozart? Or what's behind Leonardo Da Vinci? They were workaholics! I bet she only got maybe five hours of sleep, because she was *constantly* going, doing *something* to do with the Dance.

CF: I know one of the things that made Dayton Ballet somewhat different from other ballet companies at the time anyway, was that she did bring this sensibility of both modern and ballet *not* being separate.

BS: Right.

CF: *Again*, ahead of her time in that regard.

BS: Yes.

CF: Did she talk about that or she just did it? You just saw it happening?

BS: Well, she was *very* passionate about choreography. She started a choreography conference, in fact. In the summer, you went there for two weeks. I was luckily able to go to the one at Wright State. And she started The Craft of Choreography, is what it was called. I enjoyed, again, *enjoyed*? No, again I was ready to *die* for choreography. That was my love, really. I enjoyed performing and taking class, but choreography *thrilled* me, and it still does. I can look at choreography morning until night because she made it exciting about floor patterns. "Look at this floor pattern!" We were allowed to do all of these experiments every week in the modern classes. And the dynamics, the change of dynamics and how you could put energy in your body and how you could release it and what that *did* to the movement. Swinging movement and percussive — it was just everything we learned about choreography I loved.

CF: Well it sounds like — I wonder, having made the trip to Germany to study with Wigman, she had to be influenced by Laban, either directly or indirectly, and so perhaps some of those ideas about energy and effort came out of that tradition. Did she talk about that, as you remember?

BS: No, she didn't [even] talk about Wigman. I had to read about all that. But she certainly *taught* us that. *Every week* we had powerful modern dance classes, emphasizing choreography. And the music! Music appreciation, you might say, because we'd stand around the piano and listen to a fugue and then we'd go out there and create a fugue, etc., etc. — as I mentioned before. So it was *choreography*. Maybe she studied with Doris Humphrey, who wrote a book on choreography. Maybe that's where she got that.

Oh, I wish she was here and she could tell you, but you know, maybe *she* couldn't even tell you where it came from, this love and this desire! And also, I can't maybe tell you why I *attached* to it so. I was her shadow, you might say. I was her *great* follower — there were other dancers that didn't want to go in that direction. They wanted *joy* in their life, they didn't *want* all this seriousness. So they went off for the joy. She was not *into* joy. No, it was all very, very serious.

CF: How remarkable. It seems the city of Dayton would be vastly impoverished had the sisters not settled here.

BS: That's right.

CF: When I think about the Dayton Ballet, the people that have come through the school, DCDC coming out of that. And I didn't even *know* about this youth ballet, the children's ballet. It's amazing.

BS: Yes, it is. And then she made friends with all the other artists, the Dayton Art Institute. She made sure we looked at paintings. We went to Yellow Springs for the Shakespeare festivals and we were in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and so she *connected* us with all the music, the Philharmonic and so forth. So yes, she gave to Dayton, but she also attached herself to all the artists in Dayton.

CF: What did your parents think of her?

BS: Oh, my mother thought she was wonderful! A couple of parents later on didn't like, as I told Jane — we were only allowed three excuses: you had to be sick *in bed* — you had to be laying-in-bed sick and you couldn't come to rehearsal or class. Or you had an SAT test or there was death in the *immediate* family; if it was outside of the immediate family, you had to come. So, a lot — not a *lot*, but a couple of parents didn't like that *at all* (she laughs).

CF: She demanded everything. She gave everything, and she demanded it back.

BS: She demanded everything. Right. And she loved all of dance. She loved Fred Astaire. All of it.

CF: Well I had never known about the Botts School.

BS: I know. I wish I knew more about that, but they taught ballroom, tap and ballet is all I know. My mother went on, she was in the Ziegfeld Follies for two years, doing what they had taught her. So she *also* started the dance in Dayton. I don't know too much about him.

CF: Is there anything else for the record? Do you want to review your notes? Is there something more that you feel is important? You've given us a lot.

BS: I hope I've done her justice. I don't know what else to say, in a way.

CF: Do you feel she was sufficiently appreciated by the city of Dayton?

BS: Yes, I do. I feel she was honored a great many times, starting *way* back when I was young, she was given honors. She and Hermene, both. Yes, I feel she received, thank goodness, her due. Yes. Because she also *loved* involving the parents. Oh, this is kind of fun: we had the Father's Night once a year, and so our dads brought us and watched, and she decided to make a ballet about it! So, when we performed it at the Dayton Art Institute, she had real fathers sitting on the stage.

CF: It's the mail truck! Oh no, he's going to stop with the mail.

JC: He's bringing you something. He's looking for your box...

CF: Okay, so she made a ballet about the fathers?

BS: Yes, and she had real fathers sitting up there, and they loved it. She was very serious, but she coached them on when to cross their legs and when to whistle (she laughs). It was really wonderful. They *loved* it. Because she was so *serious*, she wasn't joking about this. The piano was also on stage and they did this darling little ballet. He's going to back up, I think (the mail truck). I don't know *why* he's stopping.

CF: Just to taunt us. Just to keep us on our toes. He's sorting through his mail. While he's doing that (to JC), is there something more you would like to ask?

JC: No, I think you've covered it and what an amazing story!

CF: I know. I wish I had known them. I was talking to a former colleague who was a professional ballet dancer, and she remembers meeting them at the Northeast Regional. She said they were wonderful.

BS: Yes, they were.

CF: Hi there!

JS: (to the mailman) How are you doing today?

BS: Hi. Thank you very much.

CF: Thank you. We better wait for a moment if you're going to say anything important because he's got a noisy little vehicle there.

BS: Yes. Bye!

BS: When you mentioned the others that you've interviewed, would you say they've been this powerful too?

CF: I would say, actually, that they led us to *you*.

BS: No, I mean the other people that you have featured.

CF: Oh yes! Remarkable figures, all through this state. Each one different.

BS: I was going to try to read a book on leadership, and the furthest I've got, because I'm reading constantly, was that they do not smile — leaders that are true leaders. She did not *laugh* and she *rarely* smiled, and that's one of the characteristics, they said. However, Mandela — he smiled. Gandhi smiled. I don't know. It's a dilemma...

CF: I wonder whether women don't have the *luxury* to smile if they're leaders, but I don't know.

BS: Maybe!



CF: They have to *perform* their leadership in a way for people to take them seriously, but I don't know.

BS: I don't know either. I'm wanting to study that. I'm also very interested in the creative process, like Miss Jo was. I want to know where that comes from, because she called it another world, and it *is* another world. People talk about parallel universes. It's possibly a parallel universe because you listen to Mozart or Bach or something. That's not this world! Or you watch DCDC — that's not this world.

CF: That's true. That's true.

BS: I'm really fascinated by it. I'm even trying to study quantum physics to figure it out. The energy field. That was another thing Miss Jo remarked about in Africa, the way they taught dance was you stood next to the dancer and you caught the energy field. That's how you learned. And she was sorry that that couldn't happen. That's why she, at the Unitarian church, she had us little ones stand in between the two teenagers who were much better than us. She made certain that it was tall, little, tall, little at the *barre*. Same way everywhere, standing or trying to dance with their elegance. It would be wonderful if Violette Verdy could stand next to a child and dance with them. I must say that's what my mother did for me. We danced in the living room when I was in the womb, and on. And there's something to that, to dance right *next* to the professional. So the quantum physics idea about the energy field, she was into that. I wish that could happen more in the school system. So sad, they need mentors or whatever.

CF: I agree.

BS: Yeah.

CF: Thank you so much.

BS: You're welcome. Thank you.

CF: It's been such a pleasure to talk with somebody who really knew them in this particular — I want to say, *intimate* way — and yet you say it wasn't like she was your friend, but you spent so much time with her.

BS: Yes, I did.

CF: You knew her in a way, of course, we cannot know here.

BS: Thank you. Well, I really appreciate being able to — that people are interested in her and in dance.

CF: Yes, very much so. Thank you.

BS: Thank you.

CF: Okay, we can't fight the elements anymore. My Gosh!

BS: These cars!