

VDC Interview Transcript

Toledo Ballet: Marie Bollinger Vogt, Founder; Mari Davies, Executive Director; Lisa Mayer, Artistic Director.

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Toledo Ballet
5327 Monroe St.
Toledo, 43623

Key:

CF: Candace Feck

MBV: Marie Bollinger Vogt

MD: Mari Davies

LM: Lisa Mayer

MDB: Megan Davis Bushway

CF: I'd like to begin with you, Marie, since you go back the farthest. I'm curious: in 1939, when you started the school, what was the dance scene like here in Toledo?

MBV: You know, I was so busy with my own thoughts on dance and my own students, and developing what I wanted to do that I don't think I even knew that there *was* a dance scene in Toledo.

CF: What gave you the idea to build this company at that time? Who were your influences? Where had you studied?

MBV: Well, it's difficult to know how an idea pops up. I just was so in love with dance, and of course I was studying music, piano, and I was at the [Toledo] Art Museum for eight years, taking classes in Design and so forth, that everything just seemed to come together. My students, my girls — and a boy or two — inspired me to begin to do performances for a public. So I found a public and decided that I wanted to do a ballet, and not just my own *divertissements*, so I continued to do that in the way of developing a company. I found an audience! And there was constantly a search for more men, because there were very few at this time, but I found them. In the middle of the night, I found some of them! And thank goodness, several of them had fathers who had lumber companies — important to the development and building of scenery, so that was very helpful to me too. Not only the musicians and the dancers, but the lumber companies.

CF: Were there other ways, in addition to the support you found in the lumber industry, that the businesses and industry of Toledo supported the development of your company?

MBV: Yes [the lumber companies], and the newspaper, of course. I remember that when we did performances, I would call *The [Toledo] Blade* — that's why *The Blade* is so important to me, and to all of us, and I'd ask for somebody who would write a story about a performance that we were going to do, and they were always very helpful; I'd hear a little chuckle on the other end of the line, because they knew I was very persistent.

CF: (laughing) “It’s *her* again!”

MBV: Yes!

CF: I’m interested in hearing what any of you knows about this bold and determined idea Marie had in 1939 to do this, and to carry it on for so long — and against what I have to imagine were great odds, as is usually the case for the arts, especially in medium sized cities. And I also wonder what you might add about how Toledo grew, along with the school and company?

MBV: As with most of our performances, the parents were very important, the parents of the dancers who were performing. But, of course, what I was doing was very innocent — I didn’t do huge performances; I did something that we could do with the accompaniment of a pianist. So everything was very innocent, but it continued to grow; in scenery, for instance, the parents would be out in their driveways, building scenery — self-supporting scenery. For *The Nutcracker*, for example, the first scene involves a living room with a Christmas tree. Well, we would be out building first a Christmas tree out of the wood that we would have. And for the second scene, the scene of the snowy forest, we would turn around the backside of the Christmas tree to create the next scene for the snowy forest. Very simple scenery, which would develop over the years with real scenery designers and people who would build things for us. Now here, at our new, beautiful studio, we have a place where we build scenery; we can open a huge door and carry the scenery into the performing area of the studio, without having to cart it on trucks to us, which was very labor-intensive, and also fairly expensive. But now we can do this! This new studio helps us in many ways.

CF: It’s a beautiful space! Where did you stage those early works?

MBV: Anywhere we could! We danced all *over* the city! There were many school auditoriums, and little theatres — high school auditoriums, for instance — and Collingwood Center on Collingwood Boulevard was open to us. Then people began to see what we were doing, and we would be *invited* to perform in such places as The Peristyle,¹ once it was finally built, at the museum. And we danced in Bowling Green. We even carried our dancers to New York for a World’s Fair² performance!

CF: What year? Do you remember?

MBV: I don’t remember the year — it was a World’s Fair... One of the composers for a ballet that we had performed was on the Arts Commission in New York and had been here to see our performance of her music, liked what we were doing, and made possible the invitation to go to New York. I think we had about fifteen dancers, plus my husband who was the supervisor, and we went on a bus to New York, and stayed in a hotel — I cannot remember the name — and we danced in the Tiparillo Pavilion at the World’s Fair. When they were not dancing for the cameras, the dancers were allowed to go all over the Fair and ride any of the rides they wanted to, and it was a great experience.

CF: Let’s talk about that legendary long-running Toledo Ballet *Nutcracker*, when that started, and how you kept it going.

¹ Designed and built as part of a major 1933 expansion of the Toledo Museum of Art, the Peristyle is a 1,750-seat concert hall inside the museum.

² The World’s Fair referenced here is most likely that of 1964

MBV: Well, it only started with a *divertissement* and a piece of music; I was studying music and I probably was playing that piece and thought it was very beautiful. We didn't start with a huge orchestra and orchestral scores, but with simple music and in simple halls. Not so simple was the [Toledo] Museum of Art, which seated 400 people and was used for lectures on Sundays. I know my mother took me and my sister to the Sunday lectures on music. The lighting was very simple, too; there was only — what was it, now? — instead of red, blue and white, there was orange, blue and white, because the director of the museum did not care for the red. So we had to do as well as we could with the orange, blue and white. And there was a piano on the stage, so there wasn't much room to dance, but we did!

CF: Perhaps, Mari and Lisa, you might have something to add regarding that long-running tradition...

MD: Well, the first one was performed in 1941, and with the establishment of the Toledo Symphony,³ then the symphony began to accompany *The Nutcracker*... so it went from a lone piano on the stage to, to this day, accompaniment by the Toledo Symphony, which is fabulous.

MBV: That was when Wolfgang Stresemann came from Germany to be the conductor and director for the symphony,⁴ and we met and he said "Marie, we must do some business together!" And so we performed *The Nutcracker* there on a stage at the new Peristyle [Theater], and Mr. Stresemann declared that the stage would be divided, front to back, with blue screens across the stage, the orchestra performing behind the blue screen, the dancers in front, which didn't give either one of the organizations much room to perform! And he would stand on a ladder behind the blue screens, conduct his orchestra, and over the screens he could see the dancers and would perform for them. Well, the next year, we were on the full stage and the orchestra was in the pit, because we both knew — the orchestra director and I both knew — that we couldn't continue this way. But it was a great pleasure to work with the Toledo Symphony and with the new conductor.

CF: The Toledo Ballet preceded the Toledo Symphony, right?

MBV: Yes, it did — in a very innocent way, yes.

CF: Anything anyone would like to add about this remarkable record? The longest continuously running performance of *The Nutcracker*...

MD: ...in the country — not just the state!

LM: Right, and we're in our 76th year this year. I mean, when you think about that, it truly is amazing.

MBV: Lisa, you could talk about the stages now, compared to the little auditoriums...

LM: Well, yes, when you think about what you started with at the Museum, and what we have at The Stranahan Theatre now — really, it's the size of this studio and then, of course, you've got all the Broadway shows coming through — it's equipped with everything. And the auditorium itself is

³ The Toledo Symphony Orchestra was established in 1943

⁴ Stresemann conducted the Toledo Symphony from 1949-1955.

huge. It seats 2,400 — so we've come a long way; times have changed, obviously, and we're changing with them. But we've been at The Stranahan at *least* since I was a little girl, which is a while back... I started with Marie when I was six years old. That's when I started performing in her *Nutcracker*, and we were at The Stranahan then, so I'm not sure how long you had been there at that point. Do you remember when you moved to The Stranahan?

MBV: No, but we did change from the Peristyle, which was beautiful and wonderful for the orchestra and the music that was performed there. But the auditorium only seated so many, and there was no overhead ability to hang curtains, and so we thought that we had to move. We moved to The Stranahan, which had just been built, too.⁵ It seated 2,400, and offered all kinds of electrical equipment that we could use for our lighting.

LM: Yes, very high-tech still, compared to The Peristyle today, where lighting is still very simple compared to The Stranahan...

MBV: And with so many more seats to seat people.

LM: 2,000 more, right? I mean, it went from 400 to 2,400.

MD: And Marie, being Marie, established these incredible relationships with people from all over the world, and so she began bringing guest artists to be featured in her *Nutcracker*, and has maintained lifelong relationships with the likes of Evelyn Cisneros, Violette Verdy, Soili Arvola, and you know, the list can go on, but to this day, you know, we bring in world-renowned guest artists and they become part of our family just because of the dynamic that she (gesturing to Marie) initiated, really.

MBV: That's true, we become like family.

MBV: And we hear from those dancers all over the world.

LM: And your relationship with Soili [Arvola] has been a really strong relationship to this day, and she still comes to us and teaches our summer intensives; a few years back she staged *Giselle*. And when I was Clara in *The Nutcracker* — I think I was nine and ten years old — Soili was our principal, then. And so I still bring her back; it's just a tradition that I love to keep up. She's such a beautiful person, and still an incredible dancer to this day. And those things are very important, and now we have these great relationships with Renato Penteadó from Miami City Ballet and Mary Carmen Catoya — they've been with us for the last ...

MD: Since 2008.

LM: Yes, and they're just very warm people. The tradition continues, so hopefully we'll keep that one up.

CF: You mentioned that you met Marie as a young student here. So you're from Toledo?

LM: Yes.

⁵ The Stranahan Theatre, formerly the Masonic Hall, was built in 1969

CF: You studied with Marie, and then went off to ABT [American Ballet Theatre]?

LM: No, I did the ABT national training, but I danced with a lot of ABT dancers; I was a freelance ballerina when I moved to New York City, and then I ended up getting into musical theatre, and ended up doing many Broadway shows. So, yes, I met Marie when I was six, my mom was taking ballet with her for many, many years; she would drag me along to class with her, and I'd be sitting there in the lobby of our old studio at Cricket West, and I was just sitting there watching and I begged her to let me start ballet classes. And she said, "Well, if I let you start, you're not quitting." So, here I am, still! But she inspired us — my mom danced with her for many years, and then continued on in *The Nutcracker* for...I don't know — a good twenty-five years at least, doing her *Nutcracker* every year.

MBV: And when you flew off, and became quite a professional and danced all over the world — there was a photograph of you in Russia, and you were advertising...

LM: I had done a Coca-Cola commercial with Bill Cosby...

MBV: Coca-Cola, yes! And for that reason, I purchased stock in the company! I thought "Well, Coca-Cola is going worldwide, because *our* dancer is advertising it" — and it has done very well for me.

LM: Right, yes. And so I danced, primarily touring different countries with Gen Horiuchi from New York City Ballet, and we partnered. He's small and I'm small, and that worked out well. Then we actually ended up doing Broadway shows for a long time. Gen had stayed principal dancer with New York City Ballet while doing that, and I actually used his choreography for our production of *The Nutcracker*, which since he was with the New York City Ballet for so long, is very Balanchine-based. We still have a great relationship with Gen who is now the head of St. Louis Ballet.

CF: When did you come back?

LM: Ten years ago. I lived in New York for twenty-two years. My husband and I came back in 2006, and around that same time, it magically happened that they were looking for an Artistic Director. Mari and Marie had both contacted me. So that was ten years ago — exactly ten years this coming January. So we're back. My husband, Michael Lang, is from Indiana, so we're both back home — well, he's *closer* to home, and my family still lives here.

MBV: And they brought their two children!

LM: Yes, we have two girls, and my youngest one was only six months old when we came back, so she's ten now — *going on thirty* — and my older one is thirteen. So it's moving fast. Time is moving quickly.

CF: Mari, how did you become associated with this school and company?

MD: You know, life is so serendipitous! I had actually left teaching, after teaching for about twenty years. I had just decided I didn't want to do that anymore, and I was regrouping, and a friend of mine had just been hired as the Executive Director of the Toledo Ballet and she needed a part-time grant-writer. And I said, "Yeah, I'll help you out. I'll write some grants." And that was in September

of '05, and eight months later I was named the Executive Director. It was just this totally *vertical* experience. It was like being shot out of a cannon — but that was 2005, and here we are!

CF: Did you arrive with any dance background?

MD: I danced a little bit as a child, but my daughter really grew up dancing. She danced here for awhile, but we also lived overseas for awhile. So, I've always been exposed to dance and the arts, and I'm a classically trained pianist...

MBV: These women are family! They're *family*.

MD: It's been just an incredible experience to watch what's happened with the company in the last ten years, and the kind of reinvention and expansion of the curriculum and the types of performances that we do. There has never been a dull moment.

CF: When did the school come into being?

MD: Well (looking at Marie), she opened her school in 1939!

MBV: Now, at first I did a few classes for my piano teacher, Otto Sturmer⁶ — I studied piano, so in exchange for classes and so forth — but then I was invited by the owner of La Vaque Studio to join them and their faculty to teach ballet. They had a nice, long room, and I conducted classes in that nice, long room. But I required more space and more room, because there were more students coming, so we put some of them in the basement and then we enlarged — or Mrs. Sturmer enlarged — the room that we were teaching in, and it still was not quite sufficient for all of the dancers who were coming in. So I thought, “Well, I had better open a studio where I could accommodate all these dancers,” and at the same time, a lovely young woman came from Riga, Latvia, out of the throes of the war over there — with her husband and her little boy, and her name was Velta Cernonok. And she was from Riga, Latvia, on the Baltic Sea, and they had suffered a great deal; they made their home here in Toledo. She was very charming, and her students adored her, and she was very good in her profession, and she taught for me and with me all her life here until she died. We miss her very much! And when we moved from the Bach Conservatory to Cricket West — I waited for a very long time for the front area of the Cricket West; I didn't want to teach in the back of the Cricket West. So finally, it was available to us. From there, I received a letter from the manager⁷ of the Franklin Park Mall saying, “Mrs. Vogt, I've always thought it would be very nice to have the arts in the marketplace, and you will fulfill that dream of mine. Won't you bring your ballet to Franklin Mall?” And I was very happy to do that, and we were there for so many years. And not only down in the lower area, but then they built an area on the rooftop. *Dancing on the Rooftop* —there's a song that, I think, echoes that! So then we danced on the rooftop, and had many pupils. And then the Board of our ballet, which is a very important area of the ballet company — business area — decided that we ought to move and build our own studio, which we did, and we're sitting in it right this minute! It accommodates four rooms, or studios, for the classes, and as I explained, it accommodates the building of scenery and so forth. And the business end of it, which Mrs. Mari Davies handles

⁶ Sturmer served as Dean of the Toledo Conservatory of Music

⁷ James Rouse

sufficiently (she looks to Mari on her left and then to Lisa on her right)...It's quite helpful, having this large building, isn't it?

LM: The space just keeps getting bigger and bigger.

MBV: So that's how we developed and grew.

CF: Such an ambitious endeavor! I don't know if you had any idea when you began in the late '30s/early '40s, that you would be sitting here seventy-some years later. What would you say were some of the big landmarks in the growth of the company? And perhaps, also, what were some of the big challenges that you faced along the way?

MBV: Besides boys! Men!

LM: That's *always* a challenge!

MBV: Money, of course. But the parents developed the business end of the ballet. And we were able then to pay for a Director of the business end, which is the position that Mari Davies has assumed — and more! *And* to hire proficient faculty to assist me, and then take over when I decided I wanted to retire. So the Association incorporated, and has been able to handle those situations.

LM: (Looking to Marie) Because it was all *you* before; there was no Board. (To me): It was all Marie.

MBV: And I'm very happy with the way things have developed, and with the people who are in charge of the dancing and the business ends of the studios. We've grown, and I can see no ending to that growth.

LM: And I think the major challenge, from what I know in my history, is space — you know, just the growth that has happened over the years. When I started, I was at Cricket West with Marie, and you know, it was a hard floor — cement underneath with tile. Ugh! I wish I had grown up now with these sprung floors, but... So that was a challenge, which I didn't realize until years later, but it was a small space, and — (turning to Marie), for *Nutcracker*, I don't know how you did it — I mean, we had a *huge* cast for *Nutcracker*, and somehow we made it work. There was a small studio on the bottom floor, and then you went up the stairs to the top floor, and we all somehow packed in there and (laughing), I just remember massive amounts of bodies just trying to be packed in there for the big rehearsals.

MBV: There were 150 in the cast!

LM: Yeah! And I really honestly don't know how she did it — truly a testament to her passion for it, because I think I'd pull my hair out! We have this space now (gesturing broadly around the room), where we have these huge hallways and lobbies and other places, because our cast is around the same, 150. But I think that one of the big challenges, too, Marie, was maybe when the fire happened at Cricket West.

MBV: Yes. And I was down at the Toledo Club with my husband, dancing — there was a dancing club that we belonged to, of course — and we heard that there was a fire. We quickly drove to Cricket West, and we could not get close to it — had to park at least two blocks away because there

were the fireman there with their hoses — and the water would freeze as soon as it got onto the ground. But there was our Cricket West, two blocks away, being consumed by this fire! And it's amazing the people who came out to help: Bob Bell from the Toledo Symphony⁸ was there trying to get our piano out of the studio so that it would not burn, and it was amazing that they were there! But people were fond of us and wanted to help us.

CF: How long ago was the fire? When did it happen?

MD: During the '60s...⁹ You know, the funny thing is, I was at an event a couple of nights ago, at a table with a number of couples, and a number of men at this event had made it a point to come up to me and Marie and say that she taught them ballroom [dancing]. She worked with the attorneys, and choreographed for their Gridiron Show,¹⁰ so these men who are now in their sixties, seventies and so on were like "Marie, you taught me such-and-such! You taught me so-and-so!" It's amazing.

MBV: Well, I taught them ballet! It was in 1949. My husband was just president of the Bar Auxiliary, and invited me to teach these men for the Gridiron Show. And that was for our May production — I think it was on May 17 that year. We danced to "Floating Down the River on a Sunday Afternoon," and they wore ballet attire — underwear under their tutus — and my [future] husband stood on one side of the room. We were married four months later! And the men are still very sweet about having performed in that Gridiron Show.

LM: And that's what's so amazing now about the generations that have gone through the Toledo Ballet and studied with Marie. You know, my mom is 84 now and she studied with Marie for many, many years, and now her granddaughters are studying with me, and I'm running it — but there are so many people in Toledo that, you know, have come through Toledo Ballet, and Marie has touched their lives...

MD: She can't go anywhere unnoticed. There is no incognito with "*Madame*"!

MBV: I want to say that my husband, who is deceased now, Ted Vogt, was a lawyer — a fine lawyer, and had many lawyer friends, whom I enjoyed, too. But he was always at dress rehearsals at the Peristyle, and at the Symphony at The Stranahan. He would come from the office, his hat still on his head and his briefcase under his arm, and would watch everything — and advise on everything, too! And there were a couple of years when we needed men to operate the lighting. He would remove the hat, remove the coat, and get on that stage and work with the other men on the lighting for the ballet, so my Ted was very helpful; he loved not only *me*, but the dance, and he loved all the dancers who were performing.

⁸ Robert Bell joined the Toledo Symphony Orchestra in 1956 as a 17-year-old percussionist at Woodward High School, and went on to become its CEO. Currently, Mr. Bell serves in an Emeritus capacity, as Chief Artistic Officer.

⁹ The fire occurred on Dec. 5, 1970. According to the Toledo Blade, "A firewall helped prevent the fire from spreading to three stores and the Toledo Ballet School in the northeast corner of the building."

¹⁰ The Toledo Gridiron Show, an annual event hosted by the Toledo Junior Bar Association, features satire, comedy and revelry.

CF: You have established so many strong community partners throughout your history, and not many ballet companies or schools could boast of this level of community support. Was that just instinctive on your part?

MBV: It just happened. It was a friendly city, with people who were supportive to us and wanted to help, and enjoyed what we were doing. They believed in us.

CF: Would you have anything to say about the WWII years — about keeping this company afloat during the war years, the early 1940s, just as you were getting established? Was it difficult then?

MBV: So many of my friends at that time were going off to war. And I lost a number of my friends. And I wanted to do something; I even went down to where it was and I asked them “What can I do? How can I help with the war effort?” “Mrs. Vogt, go back and continue your dancing,” they would say. However, there were entertainment groups, you know. People who are professionals, who would perform, dance, play the piano...and I danced at one of those events, but you know, it was classical Spanish dancing. I’m not sure that was what the boys were looking for! But I did want to help! And I lost several boys, several men who were very dear to me, and I’ll never forget them.

CF: The size of the company from early on to the present, the tremendous development — did it come in little spurts? Did it develop gradually? How did you get so big? And what were the major moments of expanding?

MBV: Well, it started everyday with the enrollment, and the students at the school...

LM: Right, with the space. And that’s where I think, you know, continually going to a new studio, building a new studio: moving to Cricket West — I’m not sure how many students there were at that time, but I don’t think we could have housed what we have today. We’re around 240 enrolled; it depends — it goes up and down, and that depends on the economy and other things these days. But we have a lot of little ones, all the way through adults who have been dancing with Toledo Ballet, as well — some of the older women that we have, and even men who still dance with us. So I think the company itself when we moved to the Stranahan for *The Nutcracker*, it just became more visible with the Symphony, you know, everything just worked together to grow...

MBV: It just grew!

MD: And her reputation, you know, just kept evolving — and her reputation for offering, you know, a superb product in dance: she was the go-to. I mean, there was no question, no question.

LM: Right. And really the only one in Toledo at that time, for sure. Just like in every other city these days, especially the size of Toledo, you have a lot of dance studios. Whether they have the serious ballet that we have, and that we continue to have, or other genres, there are just more places for people to go. That’s always the challenge now.

MD: And largely, we know — certainly with Title IX — there are so many more activities offered and available to kids and girls, in particular. There is so much for them to choose from, and that is a challenge. But you know, when you’re a proven product, anyone who has a child who is interested in exploring dance or pursuing dance knows that the place that Marie founded is the place for the training.

CF: Well, I'm curious about a historical fact: I *think* that you were the second ballet company in the state of Ohio...perhaps, after Dayton.¹¹

And you know, some ballet companies in Ohio have come and gone during that time! So it's pretty remarkable, I think, that you have sustained your growth and your foundation in the city all this time. Would you have advice for somebody who would want to start an enterprise such as this? Anything you would want to pass on about how to do it and hang onto it?

MBV: Well, you have to *love* what you're doing — and continue to love it through the thick and the thin. And that has a lot to do with it, yes? You just have to love your students and all those who help you — and [you have] to be sincerely in *love* with your work!

CF: What about partnerships with other dance organizations around the state? How about state or private funding?

MD: Yes, absolutely. The Ohio Arts Council is wonderful! They've been supporting us and supportive *of* us for a long time. You know, and we have private funders, and there are wonderful foundations that certainly believe in a lot of what we do in terms of our outreach. We've got incredibly innovative outreach programs that are resonating very well with funders, so we're really proud of that.

CF: I've read about some of your outreach work. Would you like to talk about it? Maybe you could mention how some of that came about, and what you're doing, in terms of outreach?

MD: Well, it's part of our mission. So, we certainly do a lot of performance outreach. Collaboration last year with the [Toledo] Symphony and the [Toledo] Museum [of Art]. We have a program in Adaptive Dance for Children with Down Syndrome. We have had numerous collaborations with the library and the zoo and other organizations throughout the city; we like to take ourselves *out* into the community, and make dance available to those who might not otherwise have access. So our student performances, obviously, are huge.

LM: And the First-Steps program.

MD: Yep! — which is educational outreach, promoting literacy in kindergarten classrooms, that we've done for a long, long time.

LM: Some of our teachers go out to the kindergarten classes in our schools; there's no time like that time to introduce ballet to the kids. It just feels good to be able to do that for the community.

MD: Right.

CF: Is that through the Artists-in-the-Schools program, or is that your own outreach?

MD: It's our own outreach.

¹¹ Dayton Ballet Company was founded in 1938, Toledo Ballet in 1958. These must be dates of incorporation, since Marie stated teaching in 1939...

LM: We've really been collaborating a lot with the Toledo Museum of Art, for many, many years now. We work beautifully together, and what a great organization to be involved with, for us. And this year, more things with the Toledo Public Library — very exciting things.

CF: What's next? What's on the dream board?

LM: Well, we have our 76th *Nutcracker* coming up, obviously. That's our tradition. Then in the Spring, we're doing *Tales of Grimm* — Michael Lang, my husband, is usually the director and choreographer of our Spring production, and so that's his baby; that's what he's working on this year. It's another way that we want to promote the literacy idea and working with the library this year. Because his whole thing — and all of us, I think, as parents these days, you know — with kids on their cell phones all the time, and not reading like they used to — so that's really his mission this year is to bring that into a story ballet. It will be a contemporary ballet, like we usually do in the Spring. So that's coming up, and continuing to grow the school, continuing to perform in Toledo and bring dance to the public, to promote interest in dance.

MD: And expanding our curriculum beyond the confines of classical ballet to contemporary ballet to hip hop to jazz to tap, to offer superb training in whatever dance form a child wants to explore or pursue.

LM: Staying relevant with what is happening in the world. You know, coming from New York after so many years, I still go back. And we always maintain our relationships, and watch, and stay updated on what's happening in the world, and one of the things that *is* happening in the ballet world with ABT, with everybody else, is that, you know, contemporary dance is *huge*. So that's what Michael and I brought back when we came back to Toledo, is just expanding the curriculum. We also did musical theater, we did Broadway shows for many, many years, so we have musical theater, we have acting; that's why we have more space, more studios — so that we can bring that to Toledo.

MD: I consider what we offer to this community to be like a Liberal Arts education in Dance. You know, I was a Literature major, and that's more than studying Shakespeare. So, to be a well-rounded dancer, certainly classical ballet has *got* to be the pedestal on that table, but the table also has to include the different dance forms in order to make a truly educated, enlightened, well-rounded dancer — in my opinion.

LM: The artistry that's involved with all of the different genres of dance, and as I talked about the reading and literacy, how that creates the whole artist. And music — I know you played piano, too, (she looks to Marie, who affirms this) when you were younger, and I was classically trained as well, and Mari as well. Just expanding that ballet mentality for the whole artist, and that's what's so important to us.

MBV: There's one thing that I keep hoping can be accomplished. I always went to the library; I think there was *no* book there on dance that I had not read. I would sit there and *pore* over these wonderful books, and now people don't do that so much because they have the iPads. They can read them, if they want to, but I just hope that they continue to go to the library because there are things there that you can consume without having to put them on an iPad. That's my concern.

LM: Michael last year did *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*¹² and the students were mostly aware of just the Judy Garland movie, which was wonderful, but the original story, the actual story — it was great seeing some of our dancers walking through the halls, actually *reading* Frank Baum's book. It introduces a whole new experience for them, and yes, we love to see them read. Because although iPads are wonderful, and technology is wonderful, it's definitely a mission of ours is to bring these stories to life. And they're introduced to them, and there's nothing better, as far as I'm concerned, nothing as wonderful as having that book.

MD: Yes, and I think even with *The Nutcracker*, our student performances, almost half of the house is the public school third graders. And, you know, what kind of sums it all up is one day a couple of us were in the lobby as the performance was letting out, and all the kids were going in their queues to get on the bus. And this little girl just bolted across the entire lobby to Candessa, who plays the maid and does the outreach preparation for the kids, and she threw her arms around Candessa's waist and said "This is the best day ever in my whole life!" You know, you can't *buy* that! You can't package that. It was really profound.

CF: Marie, were you born and raised in Toledo?

MBV: Yes.

CF: So, where did you find training as a young girl? Where did you study?

MBV: Oh, there was a Russian who came to town and taught at the Jane Franklin School for Girls. It was a private school, on the third floor, as I remember. I studied with him, and then he decided to open his own studio in the J.W. Green Building on the third floor, and I studied there. He came originally from Russia, but had a farm in the Detroit area. I know he was telling us about how he was trying to get his animals, his cows up into a truck so he could take them to market, and he would say "*Jeté! Jeté!*" I don't know whether the cows "*jetéed*" or not, but then I studied from a teacher in Detroit, Nicholas Tsoukalas. He had a specialty in Greek classic dancing, which I enjoyed. And I would go to Detroit — Mother would take me there — and I would study seven hours on a Sunday to try to get as much from him as possible. Then I did eventually go to New York and study at the School of American Ballet, which is the school of The New York City Ballet, and there was a teacher who taught classic Spanish dancing¹³ for the school, and I fell in love with the subject — *not the teacher* — but the subject! And I studied classic Spanish dancing and he was determined to make me a big star, but I met my husband at that time, and that was that. I'm trying to think where else I studied... I studied all over the country and all over the world, as a matter of fact, and the Cansino's out in California — Rita Hayworth's father¹⁴ — I studied with him, and then Lola Bravo in New York, the Gypsy Spanish dancing I studied with him. I just ate it up! And I can't remember any more than that to tell you.

CF: That's wonderful. Thank you. Is there anything else that any of you would like to say that has to do with the place of Toledo Ballet in the city, in the state? Anything at all that seems important to bring up that hasn't been raised.

¹² This production premiered in 2016

¹³ Jose Fernandez

¹⁴ Edwardo Cansino

MBV: We just will continue! I attend the Board meetings, even though I've retired, of course. But I do enjoy the work, coming to the studio to attend the Board meetings, offer my advice — whatever it might be. I enjoy the faculty and my (turning to her colleagues) dear Lisa and my wonderful Mari. Boy, we have traveled a number of places together to see dance, but I can't think of them at the right moment.

CF: Have some of your students gone on to professional careers?

MBV: Oh, yes!

CF: Why don't you tell us a little bit about some of those successes — besides Lisa, herself — or, perhaps, *starting* with her.

MBV: Oh, yes. I'm so proud of Lisa, and another girl went to Canada...

LM: Yes, Christy Stevens ended up in Europe, dancing ...

MD: Norway? One of the Scandinavian countries...

LM: Yes, I'm forgetting which company... but she was at ABT for a while. A lot of our girls right now are getting in to SAB, which as you know feeds into the New York City Ballet, and we have a lot of girls being accepted into SAB with full scholarships. And you know we've had girls go on to smaller companies...

MD: ...or Cincinnati Conservatory...

LM: Yes, actually we have two now at the Cincinnati Conservatory. We have some others into modern companies. We have one that is with DCDC in Dayton, and a lot of them end up teaching, a lot of them end up choreographing — or they get married or go into something else. Parents, as usual, I think, always get a little bit worried about their kids going into the dance world. And so a lot of them do end up going into other things; it is amazing, though, how much they end up missing it, and they end up coming back, whether it is to Toledo Ballet or taking dance somewhere where they live now.

MD: We have adult ballet classes, and a number of the women who take those grew up dancing here, and they want to just keep at it, you know, keep themselves in that world on a regular basis.

MBV: And Betty Roserot — and I tried to remember the show that she opened in New York. Her mother, and one of her sisters and I went to New York for the opening. And after the show, we went to one of the famous restaurants to wait for the verdict. And when the verdict came that this show was a keeper, everybody really celebrated! And (turning to Lisa), she danced all over the world, like you.

LM: One of my inspirations was Debbie Roshe. You know, when we grew up at Toledo Ballet, we only had ballet. She was older than me, so I always looked up to her, and she moved to New York, which I thought was so cool. She ended up doing Broadway shows, and then I was really even more enamored with that idea, too. It was always in the back of my head, and I started to do musical theater here in Toledo, then I moved to New York — and I knew if Debbie could do it with her

background in ballet, I could do it. So we have other people who have gone on to Broadway and Darrah Carr,¹⁵ who has an Irish company in New York, and we have Chelsea Koenig,¹⁶ who studied here and danced here and her family have a long history with Toledo Ballet, who has a company in New York City now — Spark [Movement] Collective — and so a lot of people going into that end of it, starting companies and continuing the tradition.

CF: (To the VDC team): Does anyone here have a question that hasn't been addressed, or a follow-up?

MBD: Do you want to talk about any original creations? I know you had mentioned work that your husband does in the Spring, but is there any other ballet that Toledo Ballet has cultivated that you'd like to talk about?

MD: *Museum of Dreams!*¹⁷

LM: Yes, that was a collaboration with the museum, the TMA. I think it was the first one where we had collaborated with such a big organization, and it really was a huge hit, and beautifully assembled. My husband does all-original productions — every year he does one — which is really, really difficult. He comes up with the music, and has to use music that we can use without having to incur the expense of the royalties. It takes a lot of time to find music that we can actually use.

MBV: He's very clever!

MBV: It's one of the most time-consuming things. He comes up with the idea, he's the director, he's the writer...

MD: It's completely grassroots. It's completely organic.

LM: And that's what he loves to do. You know, that's not done in very many places, where *every* year something like that is produced. A few years ago, we did *Giselle*, and we will do some more of the classic ballets; that is definitely one of my dreams, where we have that third production so that we would have *The Nutcracker*, then the Spring production, which is an original production and a more contemporary ballet, and then another one where we just do the classics. But, you know, it gets a little bit difficult in Toledo to sell those — it's more of a blue-collar town. That's my dream, though, to have the three and be able to bring those [ballets] back.

MBV: You will be able to do it. You will do it, I am sure!

I was thinking about the old days when the dancers came here to perform, and they didn't always fly — I don't even think they were flying — from city to city to perform; they came on the trains. And Johnny Carisa was with ABT and with his partner, Ruthanne Colson from Chicago — and one of the directors of the company — I don't think it was Dimitri Romanoff, but it might have been, in the club car at night as the train came from city to city, and one of the dancers had gone to the club

¹⁵ Darrah Carr Dance is a company located in New York, specializing in a blend of Irish and modern dance styles. Ms. Carr is also a dance scholar.

¹⁶ Koenig founded Spark Movement Collective, located in Brooklyn, NY, in 2009

¹⁷ The piece premiered in March, 2011 at the historic Valentine Theatre in downtown Toledo.

car to see Mr. Romanoff: “When do you think I will be able to dance *Swan Lake*?” And he said, “Probably never.” And so, that’s one of the stories that went around, you know. But the transportation — and then Johnny, and Ruthanne Colson from American Ballet Theatre where they were housed in Chicago, would stay at my home when they danced; we didn’t put them up in hotels and so forth at that time — we didn’t have the money — but they stayed at my home. And at night after rehearsals and after performances, they would come back to the house and we would have hot chocolate. I would stir it up in one of those blenders, and when you do that, and it’s hot and you put the lid on the blender, do you know what happens? It explodes, and there’s hot chocolate all over! Johnny said, “You go to bed, Marie. I will clean the kitchen.” So here is our world-famous star, cleaning my kitchen! We had good times, all of us, I think. When you think back, we loved each other. It was a wonderful situation.

LM: One of the other ones that I was thinking about that I grew up with was Suzanne Lounsbury...

MBV: Yes!

LM: ...who ended up at Cleveland Ballet. And it was interesting: when she was with Toledo Ballet, she was more into cheerleading, and Marie always had a hard time with that, of course, because it took away from her ballet training. So, she kind of left for a while, and then she ended up getting very serious with ballet again, and ended up at Cleveland Ballet.

MBV: You people have been very nice to us.

CF: It’s been a pleasure to talk with you, and to learn about your amazing accomplishments!

MBV: It brings back all these wonderful memories.

CF: Thank you for sharing them with us!

(We are wrapping up, when Marie adds another thought):

MBV: I have to say that our newspaper has been very helpful to us. Helpful to me — they just got a kick out of the fact that this girl wanted to publicize her little recitals, and then the thing grew...

MD: And now they’re one of our major sponsors!

MBV: Yes, and now they’re not only sponsors, but friends...

MD: ...and Vice-President of the Board.

CF: I can see that from the outside looking in, one might say “Oh, Toledo: it’s not the largest city in Ohio; it’s a mid-sized city...” And yet, you’ve been so successful, and what I’m hearing is that’s *why*: because you’re able to make all these true community partnerships, and you know each other, and the Toledo Blade knows *you*, and you know the people at the Museum. I think it works *for* you!

LM: And Dayton, as well. The two are about the same size, and both have had companies for so long

MD: That's exactly right — in spite of everything. Toledo is always considered the “orphan city” in Ohio, which is a real thorn in our side.

CF: And you have an amazing museum here!

MD: And the zoo! The zoo is one of the top three in the nation. I know Columbus has a nice zoo — I've been there a number of times — but Toledo's is totally amazing. We're kind of like the best-kept secret in Ohio. It's the weirdest thing...