

VDC Interview Transcript

Subject: Ohio Ballet

Informant: Dr. Margaret Carlson, Producing Artistic Director, Verb Ballets

7.9.20

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Home of Dr. Carlson

Beachwood, OH

Key:

CF: Candace Feck

MC: Margaret Carlson:

JC: Jessica Cavender

MDB: Megan Davis Bushway

JC: Good. Ready to roll.

CF: I'm Candace Feck. It is July 9, 2020 and I'm speaking with Dr. Margaret Carlson in her home. It's great to be with you, and thank you for having us here. I know that you were connected to Mr. Poll's very first company. I wonder if you could talk about what led you to him and to that experience.

MC: My first acquaintance with Heinz Poll was as a 16-year-old or 17-year-old student. He had been brought to Akron by a team of ladies, Gena Carroll,¹ Francia Albrecht,² Nan Klinger.³ They were looking for somebody to come as a master teacher to bring ballet to Akron. And so in the very beginning, having heard of this, I was very interested. And the nice thing that they did, in the beginning, is that it was all on weekends because Heinz was still living in New York. So he was doing a lot of commuting, and that worked for me, being a high school student. So I would go down on weekends. And the driver that took us down most of the time was one of the parents of Jane Startzman,⁴ who also was part of the very earliest group founded by Heinz Poll. I can tell you that I was *absolutely* terrified of him. If you had asked me to walk up and say hello to him, I would *not* have

¹ Served as assistant director of Ohio Chamber Ballet and as director of the Dance Institute for 28 years.

² 1918-2014: Francia Adeliade Albrecht was a founding member of The Women's Board of Ohio Ballet, served on the Board of Trustees from 1983 to 1987, and received the BRAVO award in 1988. As a devoted friend and patron to the Cuyahoga Valley Youth Ballet, she provided scholarships for aspiring young dancers. In 1982 she received the University of Akron Honorary Alumna Award for outstanding achievement and dedicated service. She was very proud to have established a lasting legacy through the Francia Holliday Albrecht Dance Performance Studio at the University of Akron. Her devotion to the arts and the Akron community culminated in receiving, together with her husband, Fred, the Bert A. Polsky Humanitarian Award in 1988. In 2007 she was honored with the Akron Area Arts Alliance Lifetime Achievement Award.

³ 1931-2003: Nan Klinger, Founding Artistic Director of the Cuyahoga Valley Youth Ballet (now renamed Ballet Excel Ohio) in 1975, was a pioneer of the concept of a pre-professional youth ballet company performing original ballets. An Akron native, her early ballet training was with her mother, Gertrude Holvey Harris. She also studied extensively at the American Theater Wing, and attended Kent State University.

⁴ Performed as professional dancer with Ohio Ballet and guest artist nationally for 19 years, performing works by Heinz Poll and other master choreographers. Also employed as artistic administrator, executive assistant and company manager for Ohio Ballet. She also owns the license to four of Heinz Poll works. She directs the Heinz Poll Summer Festival, and is Director of Events at Akron Civic Theater.

been able to do that. He was a very powerful presence in a room! And he had this loud, low, booming voice. So as a teenager, you know, you just kept your mouth shut and did what you were told to do.

There is a brief interlude here as sounds issue from the laundry room.

CF: You were terrified of him?

MC: Yeah. So anyway, to the point of going down on the weekends, that continued for a while, and down in Akron things were also developing there to where they started thinking about having a company of local dancers, so that process was starting at the same time. By the time it really came to fruition, I was just graduating, and I ended up — just by the luck of the draw, Cleveland Ballet⁵ was starting to be founded at that time, Dennis Nahat⁶ and Ian Horvath⁷ had moved to Cleveland. And I ended up going into that company. So it wasn't until many years later that I caught up with Heinz again, and by then that was when I was more on a professional level. So we were colleagues, if you will. And then even later than that I worked overseas and when I came back, it happened to be when Heinz was just retiring from Ohio Ballet.⁸ So at that point, it became a friendship.

So the relationship started as a terrified student and then went to one of colleagues working together in the same building and sharing the love of dance to then being somebody whom I felt became a very good friend. And at the end, I think I was at the hospital every day. A lot of people were there, but I was there every day, trying to listen to his stories and listen to him talk about himself.

CF: If you don't mind, can you give me the year for the teenaged experience you described? I think I have the year when you joined the company...

⁵ The Cleveland Ballet was founded in 1972 by Dennis Nahat and Ian Horvath (1943–1990) as a dance school, the School of Cleveland Ballet. In 1984, Horvath resigned, leaving Nahat solely responsible for the company and school. In 1986, the company was founded as the "San Jose Cleveland Ballet," a co-venture that offered the dancers added performing exposure, and each city a ballet company for a shared investment. In 2000, the Cleveland Ballet ceased operations.

⁶ Dennis Nahat was born in Detroit in 1946. Trained in music as well as ballet, he was offered a scholarship in viola at Michigan State University, but chose instead to accept a dance scholarship to New York's Juilliard School of Music, where he studied choreography with José Limón. Nahat co-founded the Cleveland Ballet with Ian Horvath, and became its associate artistic director and principal choreographer. He made his debut with the City Center Joffrey Ballet in 1965. Between 1968 and 1971 he was principal dancer of the American Ballet Theatre, co-founding Cleveland School of Ballet in 1972.

⁷ Ian (Ernie) Horvath (1943–1990) was a native of Cleveland, and trained in ballet with Charles Nicoll in Cleveland and at the School of American Ballet and the schools of the Joffrey Ballet, Ballet Theater and Ballet Russe in New York City. He danced with the Joffrey Ballet from 1964 to 1966, joined American Ballet Theater in 1967, and was producing director of the Jose Limon Dance Foundation. He co-founded the Cleveland Ballet (later the Cleveland-San Jose Ballet) in 1972 with Dennis Nahat, and was its artistic director until 1983.

⁸ Co-founded in 1968 as the Chamber Ballet by Heinz Poll and lighting designer Tom Skelton, the Ohio Ballet was an important cultural institution in northeastern Ohio, based at the University of Akron. Under Poll's choreographic direction, the company largely performed his contemporary works, but also included a roster of selected commissions by other notable choreographers. Ohio Ballet closed in 2006 due to financial difficulties.

MC: Yeah, because I was never *in* Ohio Ballet *as* Ohio Ballet, because in the beginning, it was called Ohio Chamber Ballet.⁹ And so I was a part of that very earliest group, but then my transition went in another direction after that. So that was in the late 60s, it was probably 1967, 1968, and 1969 maybe.

CF: That sounds right. So were you one of the eight women in *Elegiac Song*?¹⁰

MC: No, I was not. He did that after I had left. But *Elegiac Song* is in the rep of *our* company. And in fact, I have a meeting tomorrow with the conductor of BlueWater Orchestra,¹¹ and we are considering bringing that back to be on a shared program with the orchestra.

CF: What was it like to be in that early Chamber Ballet? Tell us about it.

MC: The studio that it was in was this very old church, and it was one big room. It was actually located on the University of Akron¹² campus. But then when the campus expanded, they tore it down and moved into the ballet center, which was *another* church, where they were able to create multiple studios, and that's where Ohio Ballet resided for most of its existence. But prior to that, it was in this one big room. All I remember is that there just being... it felt like there were *hundreds* of people in the room, and Heinz would be in the front teaching the class. You'd be trying to find your space to even have room because it was so popular, so many people in the very beginning, there were so many people involved because it was so *exciting* to have somebody who was a European and then had come from South America, and was a New Yorker, he just had an international experience to draw from that none of us had ever seen before.

CF: Were you close enough to him at that time to be privy to his decision to leave New York and come to Akron full-time?

MC: I was a teenager. I had nothing to do with it.

CF: What do you know about that? Was Tom Skelton¹³ here?

⁹ The original ensemble company that became Ohio Ballet, formed by Heinz Poll and Tom Skelton in 1968.

¹⁰ the first work Heinz Poll created (1968) in Northeast Ohio, rooted in the choreographer's memories of wartime Germany.

¹¹ Founded in 2010, BlueWater Chamber Orchestra is a professional ensemble dedicated to sharing music with new audiences in metropolitan Cleveland, Ohio. With its theme of "From Cleveland, For Cleveland," BlueWater features world class professional musicians who live in Northeast Ohio presenting concerts for the communities of Cleveland and beyond.

¹² a public research university in Akron, Ohio, part of the University System of Ohio. The dance program, housed in the School of Dance, Theatre and Arts Administration, offers the BA and BFA degrees. It also houses the Dance Institute, founded in 1967 and offering recreational and pre-professional programs for students ages seven through high school. In 2015, The University of Akron and DANCECleveland launched (National Center for Choreography) NCCAkron—only the second such program in the nation—where the country's top dance professionals create new work.

¹³ (1927-1994): an acclaimed lighting designer for dance and theatre, who co-founded Ohio Ballet with Heinz Poll in 1968. In addition to Ohio Ballet, he designed lighting for, among others, the American Ballet Theatre, The Joffrey Ballet and the New York City Ballet. His method was published as 'The Handbook for Dance Stagecraft' between October 1955 and December 1956 in *Dance Magazine*.

MC: No. I'm trying to think... Jane Startzman might be able to give you that. And maybe Barbara Schubert.¹⁴ Certainly, Jane and I were the two people that were there in the very beginning, but there was a team of ladies. One of them was Kate Firestone,¹⁵ of Firestone Tire and Rubber; one was Francia Albrecht, who later became a benefactor of the university. One was Nan Klinger, who had a big ballet studio in Akron, and the other one was Gena Carroll. And it was actually Gena Carroll's home that Heinz lived in for... it was many, many years.

It was a long time before he actually decided, "Well, I guess I'm going to be here, even though I've already been here for 7, 8, 9 years. I guess I'm going to be here. Maybe I should get my own house." And so he moved out of Gena's house. And so Andy Carroll,¹⁶ who was Gena's son, danced with Ohio Ballet and then went to Pennsylvania Ballet¹⁷ — he was a young boy. So he grew up with Heinz being a father figure to him as well as his ballet teacher and then later being his director.

And so I knew Gena. She was the original director of the Dance Institute,¹⁸ which was also housed at the University of Akron. And so at that time, because Heinz was there, you had this synergy going on that led to several very important things. One was the founding of the Dance Institute, which was a training school. The other was the decision to house it as part of the university, making it... at that time for a university to have an extension course or an extension wing for children in kindergarten all the way on up, that was *very*, very unusual. So they were setting *that* up, and then the university through Heinz — the first group of dancers that were hired were not paid, but they were given scholarships. And for four years, they worked on their degrees in dance, which were through the University of Akron, which had just been designed — all because of Heinz. And so he was directing the company and they were the first cohort to go into the university program. And then when they graduated, they then went on salary with the company and that allowed the company in its growing phase to... it's very hard to start a company from scratch and say, "Okay, we're going to

¹⁴ Barbara Schuele Schubert, American performing arts association administrator. Certified secondary teacher, elementary remedial reading teacher, Ohio. Board directors, John Carroll University, since 1990; Stratford Shakespeare Festival America. Schubert served as general manager of Ohio Ballet, 1987-1990, and edited *A Time to Dance: The Life of Heinz Poll* By Heinz Poll, The University of Akron Press, 2008.

¹⁵ Born near Calcutta in 1935, and settling in the UK at the end of WWII, Catherine Foss Boulton joined the Royal Ballet School in London at age 14. Two years later, she joined the Royal Ballet, and stayed with the company for eight years. Heinz Poll credits Firestone with having drawn him to Akron. "Kate Boulton Firestone, an Akron resident who had been a soloist with the Sadler's Wells Ballet, urged me to start something there." In 1968, he and Catherine Boulton Firestone established a school, the Dance Institute (now independent of the Ohio Ballet).

¹⁶ Now Associate Professor of dance at University of South Florida in Tampa, Andrew Carroll has an extensive background in the performing arts, which includes performing nationally and internationally for nine years as a soloist with the Pennsylvania Ballet Company in Philadelphia, and as a principal with the Ohio Ballet prior to that.

¹⁷ Now Philadelphia Ballet, Pennsylvania Ballet was founded in 1963 by Barbara Weisberger, a protégée of George Balanchine, through a Ford Foundation initiative to develop regional professional dance companies. A Philadelphia cultural institution, the highly acclaimed company is noted for its focus on Balanchine repertoire.

¹⁸ Dance Institute at The University of Akron offers recreational and pre-professional programs for students ages 7 through high school. Founded in 1967, Dance Institute is nationally recognized for a curriculum that prepares students for careers in concert dance performance and dance education. Schubert is also an informant in this exhibit of the VDC.

pay everybody and we're going to hire all these dancers, and we've got all this money to do it." It doesn't work like that.

So it was a very smart way of building things. And by the time of the end of that four years, what you had then was a school for grades K through 12, you had a university dance program in place, and you had a professional ballet company in residence. And so you could literally, as somebody who's a kindergartener, work your way through the entire system and then end up as a dancer in the company — and one of those people was Amy Miller.¹⁹ Amy Miller, some of you may know that name. And she was one of the people that I remember when I was director; I later came back as the director of the university program, the School of Dance at the University of Akron after I retired as a dancer.

And so I came back, and I actually remember Amy as this little girl taking classes at the Dance Institute. And then Heinz took her into the company at age 16. I don't know how she finished school, but she couldn't go to school anymore in the normal way. And so it was fabulous, and then Heinz, because having come most recently from South America, they had a program there with National Ballet of Chile,²⁰ where they would take ballet up into the hills and into the remote areas, bringing dance to people everywhere in Chile.

So he brought that concept with him. And that was what started the Summer park performances that Ohio Ballet did for some something like 30, 31 years. And they kept expanding the number of parks that they were doing their performances in. And so today, once he passed, we now have the Heinz Poll Summer Dance Festival,²¹ which other than this year — because of COVID, has been canceled — but the concept still continues bringing ballet to people throughout the city of Akron through its park system.

CF: It's quite impressive how the city of Akron has been involved in supporting this whole endeavor from early on. I wonder, was Catherine Firestone's presence part of that?

MC: I think that it's a really an important component to the success of the concept, that team of women. You had the name Firestone, the Albrechts²² and then you had Gena Carroll, and had Nan Klinger. And that isn't everyone, so I apologize for anybody's names that I'm forgetting right now at

¹⁹ Amy Miller is a NYC-based dancer, choreographer, educator and advocate. Formerly with the Ohio Ballet, she was also a founding member and artistic associate of Cleveland-based GroundWorks DanceTheater, and remains Artistic Associate there. She is now a Gibney Company Director alongside Nigel Campbell, and a performing member of Gibney Dance Company.

²⁰ The Chilean National Ballet, founded in 1945, is Chile's oldest professional contemporary dance company. In 1951, Heinz Poll joined the Ballet as a dancer, ballet master and teacher.

²¹ Sponsored by the City of Akron, The Heinz Poll Summer Dance Festival was established to honor the legacy of the founding Artistic Director of Ohio Ballet, and continues the tradition of free public performances by respected dance companies, each presenting a unique dance experience but all sharing the common thread of Poll's commitment to the highest artistic standards. The Heinz Poll Summer Dance Festival was created in 2007 following the demise of Ohio Ballet and presented its 14th season in summer, 2021. Free performances by professional companies in Akron parks during the summer is a tradition that began in 1974 with Poll himself. The City of Akron has been a sponsor of the outdoor dance performances for forty-seven years, an achievement unique to Akron, Ohio among American cities.

²² Francia Adelaide and Frederick Ivan Albrecht

the moment, but these ladies were a powerhouse. And they were *determined* that Akron was going to have a major ballet company and a major ballet school and that it was going to be unique and comprehensive. And they achieved that. For its time, it was very, very unique.

CF: Well, it still stands out, in terms of a city/university/independent choreographer, if you will. That kind of a partnership, I think, is rare and it is especially rare for it to be that successful.

MC: Yeah. And to still be continuing today. Heinz Poll left a legacy to the city of Akron, a legacy of dance — and ballet is *absolutely* loved in Akron. My company, Verb Ballets,²³ has a large presence in Akron and many of those old followers, they come and they come to our performances and they tell us how much they miss Ohio Ballet and they comment that Verb Ballets is so similar to Ohio Ballet and I always think to myself, "Well, actually, the company's modeled after Ohio Ballet," because what I learned and what I saw the company doing just made so much sense to me — the comprehensive nature of it, and the type of repertory that Heinz, over the years, brought to fruition. He was not a classical ballet person. Ohio Ballet didn't do *Swan Lake*.²⁴ They didn't do *Sleeping Beauty*.²⁵ They didn't do *Nutcracker*.²⁶ But they did really profound interesting work. Paul Taylor²⁷ came in, Kurt Jooss,²⁸ who was Heinz's director down in Chile. They were able to do works that no other company ever was allowed to do because of Heinz's friendship. They did Balanchine²⁹ works and, of course, many, many works by Heinz.

²³ One of Northeast Ohio's oldest and most respected dance companies, Verb Ballets has gained a reputation for artistic excellence and exemplary community engagement since 1987, under the leadership of Dr. Margaret Carlson, former principal dancer for Cleveland Ballet, and Richard Dickinson, MFA, former Ohio Ballet dancer.

²⁴ choreographed in 1875-76 to the score by Tchaikovsky, this is perhaps the most iconic ballet representing the classical era. Originally created by Julius Reisinger, the staging most widely seen now is attributed to Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov. In this reference, it is used, as is often the case, as a signifier for traditional ballet itself, writ large.

²⁵ a full-length ballet in a prologue and three acts, first performed in 1890 at the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg. Like *Swan Lake*, the work has become one of the classical repertoire's most famous ballets, and like *Swan Lake*, the music was composed by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (opus 66). The score was completed in 1889, and it is the second of his three ballets. The original scenario was conceived by Ivan Vsevolozhsky, and is based on Charles Perrault's *La Belle au Bois Dormant*. The choreographer of the original production was Marius Petipa.

²⁶ an 1892 two-act ballet, originally choreographed by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov with a score by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. The libretto is adapted from E. T. A. Hoffmann's story "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King." This ballet, in particular, has become almost synonymous with the success of a ballet company in the U.S., and so it is significant that Heinz Poll would not stage it with his Ohio Ballet.

²⁷ 1930 - 2018: Paul Belville Taylor was a prominent American dancer and choreographer, one of the last living members of the so-called "third generation" of America's modern dance artists. He founded his eponymous Paul Taylor Dance Company in 1954 in New York City, and left a legacy of 147 choreographed works, as well as a legacy of other important American dancers and choreographers, including Twyla Tharp, David Parsons, Laura Dean, Dan Wagoner, Christopher Gillis and Senta Driver, among many others.

²⁸ (1901-1979): a famous German ballet dancer and choreographer mixing classical ballet with theatre; he is also widely regarded as the founder of Tanztheater. Jooss is noted for establishing several dance companies, including most notably, the Folkwang Tanztheater, in Essen. He spent the years of 1947 to 1949 in Santiago Chile, with the National Ballet of Chile. Several of his former dancers were there, and thus it is more than likely that Heinz Poll would have been influenced by them during his ten years in Chile.

²⁹ George Balanchine (1904-1983): Considered the "Father" of American ballet, Balanchine emigrated from Russia and then to the U.S. through Europe, and co-founded what has become the foremost ballet company

CF: Well, in a way, I'm taking a little segue here, I don't want to get too far off-track. But didn't Amy Miller, like you, go with David Shimotakahara³⁰ into GroundWorks³¹ or into New Steps?

MC: New Steps³² was a project that at the time it was started, I was head of the dance program at Akron, and still very much connected to Cleveland Ballet because I had retired from that company. And between David Shimotakahara, myself, and Ginger Thatcher,³³ who was a dancer with Cleveland Ballet, we came up with this idea to help current professional dancers have opportunities to choreograph for those who had an interest in perhaps going further in their careers, post-dance. And that was number one. Number two, the dancers and the choreographers had to come from only those two companies. And so what we were able to do was to bring the dancers from two competitor companies — it was very competitive — coming *together* as dancers, to work and to create. And we produced the performances. It was a very successful program. I think every show we did was sold out. At that point, Mary Verdi-Fletcher³⁴ was working with Cleveland Ballet as their Outreach Program (director). And so she started participating in the New Steps project, as well. And

in the world, the New York City Ballet, as well as the School of the American Ballet (SATB). Balanchine had been a Russian citizen who escaped to Paris in 1924, where he performed with the Ballets Russes. Having arrived in New York City in 1933, and after many attempts to begin a ballet company as well as many other professional engagements, he co-founded NYCB with Lincoln Kirstein in 1948. Balanchine created over 400 choreographic works for the company, and some of his most accomplished students have gone on to form their own ballet companies, which continue to promulgate the distinctive Balanchine style.

³⁰ Founder and Artistic Director of GroundWorks DanceTheater; *Dance Magazine's* "One of 25 to Watch"; Co-founder, New Steps; Principal Dancer, Ohio Ballet; Cleveland Arts Prize 2000 for Dance; eight-time recipient, Ohio Arts Council Individual Fellowship, 2010 CAC Workforce Fellowship. Shimotakahara performed along with his wife, Pandora, as a featured dancer in Ohio Ballet, beginning in 1983 until his retirement from that company around 1998. He founded GroundWorks in 1998, determined to challenge existing preconceptions about dance. *Shimotakahara serves as an informant for the GroundWorks DanceTheater Company featured in this collection.*

³¹ GroundWorks DanceTheater: Founded in 1998 and critically celebrated as an "artistically significant" ensemble, GroundWorks explores the nuances of the human experience through unique and adventurous choreography. This eclectic work attempts to bring audiences face-to-face with performances of passion, intellect and humor. From its Northeast Ohio base, this group of artists has sought to introduce both dance lovers and neophytes to an experience that is unconventional, yet deeply human. From performing in unusual settings, collaborating with composers of new music, and featuring live musicians onstage, GroundWorks strives to enrich its work with subtle layers of meaning to deepen the impact and enjoyment for the audience. GroundWorks' repertoire includes works by selected guest choreographers and interdisciplinary artists. GroundWorks has commissioned 34 premieres from nationally and internationally acclaimed choreographers.

³² 1989-1997: Margaret Carlson, Ginger Thatcher and David Shimotakahara started a choreography project — called New Steps, as a way to encourage dancers who were transitioning or were interested in starting to choreograph, a way to give them opportunities to have that experience — in much the same way as Heinz Poll had done for his company.

³³ Associate Choreographer/Assistant Director for the new musical, *Little Dancer* (formerly known as *Marie!*), with five-time Tony Award winner, Susan Stroman, Director/Choreographer. Ginger is also currently Rehearsal Director for Complexions Contemporary Ballet. Thatcher was also a former principal dancer of the Cleveland Ballet, and co-founding director of New Steps Choreography Project in Cleveland, OH, for which she received an Achievement in the Arts Nomination.

³⁴ President and Founding Artistic Director of Cleveland's The Dancing Wheels Company and School (1980), Verdi-Fletcher has been a pioneering force in the development and success of physically integrated dance worldwide for nearly four decades. She and her company are a separate subject of an exhibit in this collection.

so you also had that very early on contribution of artists with disabilities that nobody had seen before either.

CF: Wow, would you have been the linchpin in terms of your connection to Cleveland Ballet and connection to Ohio Ballet, because David just came right into Heinz's company, correct?

MC: Right.

CF: Ginger, I don't know for sure...

MC: Virginia Thatcher had danced with other companies, but not Ohio Ballet and she came in, was with Cleveland Ballet for many years. Then she went to Lar Lubovitch,³⁵ and now she's assistant choreographer to Sue Stroman³⁶ for a lot of her Broadway shows — that's what she's doing now.

CF: Well, I wonder if we backed up just a tiny bit to before while you were sixteen when you first met Heinz. What was the dance landscape like here pre-Heinz? We know that Cleveland Ballet was getting set up, that Mary was getting set up, but in the Akron area perhaps...

MC: Back in the 1960s, there were no professional dance companies in the region. There were a number of schools, some of them quite good. And in Cleveland, there was an organization called The Ballet Guild of Cleveland.³⁷ And what they were trying to achieve was to create a performing and training opportunity for students from multiple schools in the area to come on weekends and become part of the Ballet Guild of Cleveland and learn ballets and perform with RDA, Regional Dance America.³⁸ And it was actually the Ballet Guild of Cleveland; it had run its course, and then when Dennis Nahat and Ian Horvath came to Cleveland, they went to the Ballet Guild of Cleveland board to say, "We understand you have an organization here, and we are looking to start a professional ballet company here in Cleveland." So the Ballet Guild of Cleveland worked with Dennis and Ernie to create Cleveland Ballet. So I guess that's a little bit of how the Cleveland story came out. In Akron, there were a number of very good studios in Akron. But there was, again, no professional ballet company. And so this group of ladies just said, "There has to be ballet here." And so they just did what they did.

CF: They made it happen.

³⁵ an American choreographer and founder of his dance company, the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company in 1968. Based in New York City, the company has performed in all fifty American states as well as in more than thirty countries. As of 2005, he had choreographed more than 100 dances for the company.

³⁶ an American theatre director, choreographer, film director and performer, Stroman has won numerous awards and accolades, including five Tony Awards.

³⁷ An early Cleveland Ballet Company, formed in 1959 by John Begg after the merger of the Cleveland Ballet Center Company and Dance Horizons, Inc.

³⁸ Originally National Association for Regional Ballet (NARB), later continued by Regional Dance America (RDA), its prime purpose has been to decentralize dance in America by fostering quality at all levels of development in order to provide pre-professional performance opportunities for dancers and audiences throughout all North American communities. RDA was founded in 1988 to promote the artistic development of dance companies throughout the United States, particularly outside of major metropolitan areas, where dance was seldom seen.

MC: Yeah.

CF: Well, as a sixteen-year-old coming to study with Heinz, you must have had some dance background yourself from this area. You were born here in Akron?

MC: No, I was born in Salt Lake City but was raised in Cleveland and trained at an early school. Back in those days, there was a circuit called the RKO circuit³⁹. And these were like almost a vaudeville show, or like the Rockettes, in that they were shows that traveled around and it was the RKO circuit. And my ballet teacher had come from that. So that was my first teacher. And then from that, I went into the Ballet Guild of Cleveland, when I was about twelve. And that was where I shifted my focus to train. And so then Heinz Poll came to town and I started going to Akron to learn about that. But I was so much a part of the Cleveland situation that when Cleveland Ballet actually formed, I was already there with that.

CF: It's so interesting to hear about what those early years were like, and what was here before, and how, once again, it's a group of women that make something happen.

MC: (observing the room): It's all women in here today, too!

CF: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Gosh.

So how long did you dance with Ohio, well, the Chamber Ballet?

MC: It was only during those high school years. So it was probably, in all, maybe two years.

CF: Did you ever lose your fear of him? I mean, how did that happen?

MC: When I became Director of the School of Dance at Akron, Heinz, of course, was the director of Ohio Ballet. And he remembered me from those early days. And we would chit-chat. It was always very professional. I think he appreciated that I was the person that *was* the head of the dance program; he did say that several times. But it wasn't until I eventually left the University of Akron because I was hired as a dean in Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts,⁴⁰ so I left the country. And when I came back, I went back to work for Cleveland Ballet. And then Heinz had just retired. When I came back, he had just retired. And it was the beginning of what would be the demise of both companies, Cleveland and Ohio Ballet. At that point, Heinz was living in Barbara Schubert's backyard; she had a carriage house. And he was just enjoying his retirement, I think. I joined Verb Ballets and was really keen to do some of his works. Ohio Ballet was gone at that point. So I went to Heinz, and I asked permission, "Could we consider doing some of your ballets?" And

³⁹ Originally, a theatre chain and subsidiary of **R**adio-**K**eith-**O**rpheum, one of the Big Five studios of Hollywood's Golden Age.

⁴⁰ Established in 1984, HKAPA is located near the north coast of Wan Chai on Hong Kong Island that provides practice-based and professional diploma, advanced diploma, undergraduate and postgraduate studies in Chinese opera, dance, drama, film and television, music, and theatre and entertainment arts. Its educational policy reflects the cultural diversity of Hong Kong with an emphasis on Chinese and Western traditions and interdisciplinary learning. The highly ranked academy enrolls approximately 750 students for its full-time programs and around 770 students for its Junior Music Program and Gifted Young Dancer Program. Furthermore, its extensive EXCEL (Extension and Continuing Education for Life) program offers part-time personal enrichment courses and in-service professional training to nearly 8,000 students each year.

that was what started the process of us, actually, for the first time, working together in a studio. And he would come to the rehearsals. He did the casting. Heinz was never anybody to mince words. So if he didn't like it, you knew he didn't like it. And he didn't care how it came out. But he did something very interesting with *Elegiac Song* because that came up earlier in the discussion.

That piece when it was done, all of the dancers were on half-pointe, except the central figure — she was on pointe. And at the time that Verb Ballets, where it was at that point, the girl that he felt could do the principal part the best because of what he was looking for dramatically, was a modern dancer, she did not dance on pointe. And so he re-conceived it for her. And I think for him, that was a very fulfilling thing, because he came from such modern roots. And he really liked and wanted to see that earthiness. And she brought a very different interpretation to the ballet. Subsequent years of doing that work, we brought it back, we've restored it to the original, it was just for that particular dancer, that he sort of re-conceived it.

CF: Yes, I was really interested in his German expressionist roots, and his years at the Folkwang School, and I had to do a quick check — Pina Bausch⁴¹ came after he was gone. And from everything I've read, of course, you mentioned bringing in Paul Taylor. Laura Dean⁴²...

MC: Yeah, Laura Dean.

CF: He really was interested in ballet with a modern aesthetic.

MC: And although that's very common *now*, the vision that Heinz had of bringing the modern world, the contemporary world, to the ballet world — that was very cutting-edge and very experimental at that time. And, if you were a die-hard classical ballet person, you might have looked a little sideways at it. But I thought it was really exciting that he was doing that, he was the first person to say, "Well, why can't ballet dancers do a piece by Paul Taylor? Of course, they can." And so the other thing if you were to look at the company, he tended to hire very athletic dancers, the females, as well, were really powerful athletic dancers. So they weren't your typical what you would think of as a ballet dancer, ephemeral...

CF: I was thinking about one of his many unorthodox successes, which was to dare not to have a *Nutcracker* — to do what he wanted to do and to not do what he didn't want to do, and to make it work. And I understand he did it all pretty much on a shoestring budget. Maybe somebody else is better equipped to talk about that...

⁴¹ (1940 – 2009): a German dancer and choreographer who blended movement, sound, and spectacular stage sets, developing an influential genre known as *Tanztheater*. She created the company Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch, which performs internationally. Bausch had been accepted into Kurt Jooss' Folkwang School at the age of 14.

⁴² an American postmodern dancer, choreographer and composer who is known for her rigorous whirling structured dances and driving rhythmic music scores. She often incorporates repetitive phrases, geometric patterns, spinning, whirling and unison ensemble movements into her choreography. Her signature movement is whirling, non-spotted spinning and turning which can be seen in most of her 109 works. She is also known for her collaborations with Steve Reich, a number of commissioned works for the Joffrey Ballet, and works for her own dance companies.

MC: Barbara Schubert, for sure.

CF: Barbara, yes. But I wonder, as a person now you have your own company, you've been in Hong Kong, you've been at the University of Akron, you've been at Cleveland Ballet, you've been everywhere. How did he do it? I mean, it's a model that you just don't see succeeding for thirty years most any place else.

MC: I know that Ohio Ballet had its financial ups and downs. There were a number of “near-death” experiences, if you will. But Heinz was also, I think there were times that he probably didn't get paid for doing his works. There were times when he gave a lot. I know for him, it was really always about doing whatever you have to do for the dancers: “you can forget about me.” And I think that's why when he passed away, he chose the works that were allowed to succeed him. He did sixty works, seventy works. But he only allowed a handful to be done after his death. And each one of those works was given to one of his dancers. And his reasoning for it was, “I want them to be able to make some money. And so by having one of my ballets, they're going to have to get paid to give permission to do my work.” They were not obligated to be the people who staged it themselves — like, David Fisher⁴³ inherited some of the works — he can't stage a ballet, he was the musician, but he really cared deeply about those dancers and David Fisher, that were with him for many years and gave so much of themselves to him. And he might never have expressed that to them. In fact, I doubt he ever did. But it just shows you at the end of his life how much it mattered. And I can also say, when he was writing his book, this was after he had retired, and we were becoming more friends at that point. He did give me the manuscript; it was in a shoebox. And he could type, it was hand-typed. And he gave it to me and said, “Please read it and tell me what you think.” Which, I did and a couple of grammatical things here because English was his second language.

But I learned a lot reading that. I didn't know all of his *earliest* background growing up in Germany and some of the experiences he had. And he openly talks about coming out of the closet while he's in the German Navy — that was pretty risky behavior. And even the way he escaped Germany, it's all in his book, if you haven't read his book, but it's a memoir. He didn't want to call it an autobiography. It was a memoir. If he remembered some of the facts incorrectly, it didn't matter because it was how it was existing in *his* mind. And that was the story he wanted to tell, was where his mind was at.

And the friendship with Tom Skelton began in New York, I'm pretty sure. And that continued through the end of Tom's life. And that's another very unusual thing. Tom Skelton was the associate *artistic* director of Ohio Ballet, he was not a dancer, he was a lighting designer! And I don't believe any other dance company has ever done that, to have an artistic director who's not only not a dancer, but he's a lighting designer. And so what you got with that is when Heinz was creating

⁴³ 1946-2020: born and raised in Akron, OH, Fisher received a Bachelor of Science and a JD from the University of Akron. He did Postgraduate at Stanford University and the University San Diego Law School and was a student at Juilliard School Music and the American University in Rome. He had been a faculty member of the Kent State University, and had numerous other prestigious professional music associations. Fisher served as the Music Director for Ohio Ballet from 1973 to 2005, and continued to accompany many professional dance performances for dance companies throughout Ohio.

works, you had that concept of the designer there, at the very beginning. And Tom is credited with having created lighting design for dance, and I believe Jennifer Tipton⁴⁴ trained under Tom.

And so that was the other groundbreaking thing, the idea of using sidelight for dance. And the other weird thing is one time — I'll never forget this, because Tom worked on Broadway shows, he got Tony Awards. And he would work on his designs at the ballet center in the lobby, he'd have all these papers out and one day, I'm just looking at it all and anyway, he's explaining, "I have to mix this in with that, and I have this wavelength and that wavelength," and he goes, "It's really hard because I'm colorblind." (She laughs) So, just take that in, for a minute. He did it *all* mathematically.

CF: Gosh, that's fascinating; I never knew that.

MC: Yeah.

CF: I'm curious about this, and I'll have to track it down if you don't know. But William Forsythe⁴⁵ has worked that way, having the lighting designer very much in from the beginning and through the process. And he also worked in Germany for an extended time. I wonder if it's comes from the Folkwang School;⁴⁶ I don't think Forsythe was there. But is it part of the German way? I don't know. Or is it mere coincidence?

MC: I think there's no doubt that Heinz was, of course, heavily influenced by the fact that he was German, and the Folkwang School that he went through, he talks in his book about how he got into that school. I think everybody knows he started out as a figure skater; he was not trained as a dancer, he was trained as a figure skater. And at one point, he was hearing a sound and he wanders into a building, and it's a theater rehearsal going on. And he was just so taken in by it, really, he said, "I want to do this, I want to do this."

⁴⁴ One of the foremost and most celebrated lighting designers of her time, Tipton was born in Columbus, Ohio, graduating Cornell University in 1958. While performing as a dancer and rehearsal mistress, she noticed the importance of lighting, and studied dance lighting with Thomas Skelton, becoming his assistant; she has in turn trained many other important lighting designers. Winner of a MacArthur Prize in 2008, she has served as Professor (Adjunct) of Design at the Yale School of Drama since 1981.

⁴⁵ William Forsythe is a highly influential American dancer, choreographer, educator and artist who served as Artistic Director of Ballet Frankfurt from 1984 to 2004. After the closure of Ballet Frankfurt, he founded The Forsythe Company, which he directed from 2005 to 2015. Forsythe is currently a Professor of Dance and Artistic Advisor for the Choreographic Institute at the University of Southern California Gloria Kaufman School of Dance and a frequent guest lecturer at numerous universities and cultural institutions. He is an Honorary Fellow at the Laban Centre for Movement and Dance in London and holds an Honorary Doctorate from The Juilliard School in New York.

⁴⁶ The Folkwang University of the Arts is the central training center, and the only one in North-Rhine Westphalia, for Music, Theatre, Dance, Design and Academic Studies. It has brought various disciplines and art forms together under one roof since 1927, and is based on the Folkwang idea of an interdisciplinary co-operation between the arts. The company prototype of the Folkwang Tanzstudio was founded by Kurt Jooss in 1928. In the thirties it was regarded as the 'cradle' of German Expressive Dance. Several prominent artists have been associated with the school, including Jooss, Pina Bausch, Reinhild Hoffmann and Susana Linke, among others.

So he goes down to audition for the Folkwang School as a drama person, but when he got there, they had no openings, they said, "We have openings in dance if you'd like to audition for dance." And so he goes, "Okay," and so he gets in, and there started this incredible life story of a man. In the documentary that I did, when Heinz was in his final months, it was a precious gift, he allowed me to go into his home, he was in the hospital and he gave me full access to his home. He said, "Go through my underwear drawer, I don't care. All of my letters, and my photos, and my life is there. Just go through it and do with it what you want." And there's one photo of him in there when he's at the Folkwang School, where he's leaping up and he's in a sauté, fifth position. And you see these beautiful legs and feet. And that's even more amazing because when he was in the military, he got frostbite because he was in the Russian front. And they were going to amputate his toes. And he said to them, "Please don't take my toes off. I'm a figure skater. And just wait one more day." And so they waited and he actually started to heal and so they never amputated his toes. And so then knowing that, and then coming across this photo, which would have only been a few years later, where you just see this beautiful picture.

CF: Was Jooss there? Is that when he connected with Kurt Jooss? Do you know?

MC: No, as far as I know, Heinz connected with Kurt Jooss when he was in Chile, Kurt Jooss had established the National Ballet of Chile, in Santiago. And that was why Heinz, through the British underground, escaped Berlin, got as far as the UK, and then ended up going to South America. And I believe, that's where they joined up. I could be very wrong in that; maybe they did know each other at the Folkwang School. But I know that that was where it really came to fruition.

CF: Did you decide to do your documentary after his death, or when did that happen?

MC: Heinz was in the hospital. He was still working on the concept that he would get better. But what they discovered, they said, "Well, he needed a kidney transplant." So when they took him in, that was when they discovered he had been born with only one kidney. And it was this enormous, ginormous kidney that must have, in utero stuck together and it became one big kidney, so he was not really a candidate at that point for a transplant. And so he was making decisions about... he was presented with an option to go through some chemo treatment. And he initially said, "Well, of course, if there's a chance I must," and then a few days went by and he had changed his mind and he said, "No, I'm not going to do that." And so at that point, they put him into palliative care. And it was during that process that I got permission to go through his belongings. And what we had what we were actually trying to do, we had put together a weekend of performances at The Ohio Theater, two different programs of *all* his works. And he was supposed to be coming from the hospital. And he was supposed to take a curtain call at the end. At first, it was no problem. And then his health started to really fail. And the day of the performance, it just so happened that one of our dancers, her mother was a dispatcher for ambulances. And they actually had an ambulance ready, up until the last moment, he was going to get into that ambulance. He was going to get onto that stage. And he was going to take a bow. And we did not even know until curtain if he was going to be there or not. We'd left it completely open. And so the program started off with the documentary and the last words are, "And now presenting Heinz Poll." And it was supposed to be the curtain going up on him in a chair taking a bow, but he wasn't there. So instead, "And now presenting Heinz Poll," it was the first ballet. And he only lived maybe another week, I think.

CF: Is there something to say about the demise of the company? Do you feel that's something that you can speak to?

MC: I don't feel like I'm the person to comment on how Ohio Ballet went down other than to say Cleveland Ballet also went down. And what happened in the 90s was that all that money that the Ford Foundation⁴⁷ had filtered through the country to establish the arts throughout the country, so that you didn't have only the east and west coasts. That all happened in the 90s. Those organizations never started with the benefit of endowments and other kinds of back-up reserves. They were sprouted instantly. And so when the economy shifted, and when the funding was all withdrawn, it wasn't just Cleveland and Ohio Ballet, many, many arts organizations across the country went down. And they may have each had things specific to them. But I prefer to look at it as a larger whole: it was the era; it was the loss of funding. And organizations that never had an opportunity to get solidly on their feet to begin with were the ones I think that suffered the most.

CF: I read about Jeffrey Graham Hughes⁴⁸... I know that a couple of years into Hughes' leadership of the company, Heinz disavowed himself of it — requested that his name be taken off everything. But how was he chosen? Do how you know?

MC: Mm-nnn (negative). What I can tell you about Jeff Hughes is that he was a dancer with Cleveland Ballet. We were good friends. When I was in Hong Kong, I was also on the board of Hong Kong Ballet and they lost their director very quickly and they needed an interim director to come in. And I recommended Jeff Hughes. So Jeff came to Hong Kong as the interim director of Hong Kong Ballet and did that for two years. And then they brought the director in and the director liked his work and had him come sit in a number two position. And in that capacity, Jeff did great work. He was loved by the dancers. He worked well with the board. You know, he did great work. So when Jeff was hired to be the new artistic director of Ohio Ballet, I had nothing to do with that; I was working in Hong Kong.

I was aware that Jeff had applied for the job because he and his wife were living with us in Hong Kong. From the beginning, they thought they were going to be there a few months and then they were there for four years but they lived with us. And so I don't really know the story of what happened. I certainly was hearing things but I wasn't enough a part of it to really comment beyond that on it.

CF: It's a tough question to ask, but what do you think was Heinz Poll's greatest contribution to this area?

⁴⁷ Based in New York City, the Ford Foundation is an American private foundation with the mission of advancing human welfare. Created in 1936 by Edsel Ford and Henry Ford, it was originally funded by a \$25,000 gift from Edsel Ford. By 1947, after the death of the two founders, the foundation owned 90% of the non-voting shares of the Ford Motor Company. (The Ford family retained the voting shares.) Between 1955 and 1974, the foundation sold its Ford Motor Company holdings and now plays no role in the automobile company. The Foundation offers support for artists and thinkers who make work that advances social welfare. The Ford Foundation makes grants through its headquarters and ten international field offices. For many years, the foundation's financial endowment was the largest private endowment in the world; it remains among the wealthiest.

⁴⁸ Artistic Director Emeritus of Ohio Ballet, Hughes succeeded Heinz Poll as Director of the Ohio Ballet. He has also served as the Interim Director for the Hong Kong Ballet, as Ballet Master at Alonzo King's Lines Contemporary Ballet, Artistic Director, Tucson Regional Ballet, and the Executive Director of Ballet Tucson.

MC: There is no doubt that without Heinz there wouldn't have been an Ohio Ballet, there would not have been the incredible growth of ballet in this region. We had Cleveland Ballet, of course, but Cleveland Ballet was in Cleveland. And so by having Ohio Ballet as a very different kind of a ballet company than Cleveland Ballet, this whole region... When you look at the amount of resources going to ballet, Cleveland Ballet's budget at the end was \$11.5 million. I think Ohio Ballet's at the *height* was maybe \$3 million. So you're looking at \$14 million all going towards dance. And that's *sizable*. And that has definitely left a legacy.

But the other legacy is the number of dancers that stayed here, and have gone on now to do their generational contributions to the art form. And you have Jane Startzman, who was with him from the beginning, and now she's the director of the Heinz Poll Summer Dance Festival. She works with us a lot. You had David Shimotakahara, who's with GroundWorks; you have Richard Dickinson,⁴⁹ who's our associate artistic director; Judy Shoaff,⁵⁰ went to Findlay and started a wonderful ballet school in Findlay.⁵¹ And so those dancers then became the next generation to do it differently but to still make a substantial contribution.

CF: What do you think, having known him so well in so many capacities, what would you like people to know about him that they might not know?

MC: Heinz had this *outrageous* sense of humor. And it was *so* outrageous that you didn't know whether to go uhhh (drawing breath in) or to laugh hysterically, it was always right on the edge of being highly controversial or just plain totally hysterical. And he never lost that, even until the very end, that sense of humor. At one point, when he asked me to read his manuscript and he was living in Barbara Schubert's, what would you call it?

CF: Guesthouse?

MC: Guesthouse. Yes. He was living in the guesthouse. I came in — I think I was bringing it back to him. And we're talking and he goes, [with] that German accent: "I went grocery shopping today. And I have to tell you, I reached up to get a can. And I have lost so much weight from this chemotherapy that my pants fell down on the floor. And I had to grab my pants and go running out of that grocery store so that I could find a way to make my pants stay up." And I sat there wanting to laugh hysterically. But the reason why his pants fell down was this horrible thing, and I didn't know what to do...

⁴⁹ Currently Associate Artistic Director at Verb Ballets, Dickinson earned an MFA in Dance from Case Western University. He has served as director, dancer and company teacher at Boston Ballet II, Associate Director of Ohio Ballet (1986 -1999), and Associate Director of Hubbard Street Dance in Chicago prior to becoming Rehearsal Director at Verb Ballets in 2007.

⁵⁰ Originally from Ft. Wayne, IN, Judy (Shoaff) Reading began dancing when she was 8 years old. She attended the dance program at Indiana University and the Joffrey Ballet School in NYC. After travelling, studying and performing in Europe, she joined the Boston Ballet Company for five years before moving to Akron, where she danced for twelve years with Ohio Ballet. She currently directs a dance school in Findlay, OH.

⁵¹ The Findlay Academy of Ballet (FAB)

CF: How funny. Could I circle back, just a second? Because I don't think I got it clear. I don't know if we got off on to something else. You got all the stuff from his place while he was very ill. At the same time, he's writing his memoirs, which I think Barbara [Schubert] is working with, but you were *also* reading them. When did you decide to make the film, the documentary?

MC: I decided on the documentary about six weeks before he passed away. It was looking pretty clear that he wasn't going to be surviving the cancer. And I just felt that having read his book at this point I felt that there was just so much to say, but at the same time, the other thing I did was I went to the city of Cleveland. I went to the city of Akron, I went to the governor and I said, "This is what this man has done. And we're about to do this big tribute to him. And could you do a proclamation because of all of his achievements and contributions to the state of Ohio?" Which they did, and so I brought them all to his hospital bed and I said, "Look, Heinz," and I go, "this is from the governor. And look what he said, and this is from the city of Akron."

I just wanted him to see that he wasn't going to be forgotten. And he said, "My, you've been busy." And I think the very last thing I said to him was — and he was hard of hearing — so I leaned over and I said, "Heinz, I will make sure no one *ever* forgets what you've done."

CF: Seems that you've done that. And that's our project too, to extend that. Anything that you'd like to say that I didn't ask, or anything that Jessica or Megan would like to add?

MCB: I was curious if, in his own original work, she had talked about his humor...I haven't had the opportunity to see much of his work but did that show up in some of his choreography? And what kind of topics or what...

MC: He really, as a choreographer, leaned either to the abstract or to the dark side, just like you would have seen in most of Kurt Jooss' work, like *Green Table*.⁵² I don't really... not himself so much putting humor into his work. But the Pilobolus⁵³ piece⁵⁴ that he did, I think, was very memorable for a lot of people. And then instead of *Nutcracker*, what did he do? He did *The Match Girl*,⁵⁵ and she dies under a window with these rich people eating turkey. It's like, "Heinz, you're killing us. This is Christmas." But he went into the dark place a lot, I think.

CF: I mean, his childhood and living through the war and the harrowing escape... those leave permanent marks, right?

MC: Yes.

⁵² a ballet by the German choreographer Kurt Jooss. His most popular work, lasting about thirty minutes and subtitled "A dance of death in eight scenes," *The Green Table* is a commentary on the futility of war and the horrors it causes. First performed in 1932, it was the first work to be fully notated using Labanotation. It is in the repertoire of ballet companies worldwide.

⁵³ Pilobolus Dance Theatre was co-founded by a group of Dartmouth College students in 1971, and continues to perform over 100 choreographic works in more than 60 countries around the world. The signature style of the work comes out of a group creative process, and is marked by strength, athleticism and gymnastic dexterity that often emphasizes exaggerations or distortions of human and non-human life forms.

⁵⁴ In 1986, Ohio Ballet performed *Untitled* by Pilobolus at the Joyce Theater in NYC.

⁵⁵ *The Little Match Girl* is a ballet based on Hans Christian Andersen's 1864 poem.

I do see Jane's here. The other Jane, Startzman.

CF: Thank you so much.

MC: Thank you.

CF: Great to talk to you about such an important man.

MC: Thank you. All right. Happy to have the opportunity.