

VDC Interview Transcript

Subject: Ohio Ballet

Informant: Richard Dickinson, Associate Artistic Director, Verb Ballets; former dancer and associate artistic director for Ohio Ballet

7.9.20

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Home of Dr. Margaret Carlson
Beachwood, OH

Key:

CF: Candace Feck

RD: Richard Dickinson

JC: Jessica Cavender

CF: It is July 9th, 2020. We're at Maggie Carlson's house in northeastern Ohio, and I'm talking to Richard Dickinson. I had asked you where you came from. Maybe we should start there because I'm curious about how you made your way to Heinz Poll? Maybe we need to start before that...

RD: Probably *way* before that. I made my way to Heinz Poll via Tom Skelton.¹ So I was a soloist in the Boston Ballet² and Tom Skelton was one of our major lighting designers there. And we did a production of *Rodeo*,³ Agnes de Mille's⁴ famous ballet. And Tom is the lighting designer for that ballet. And I was dancing the lead role of the wrangler guy, and I met Tom then. And Tom just kept in touch with me over the years. Once a year, "How are you doing? Back in Boston? Good to see you again" — that kind of thing. Then I turned thirty-six and it's time to stop your career, or at least

¹ (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*.

² An American professional classical ballet company based in Boston, Massachusetts. The company, founded in 1963 by E. Virginia Williams, and Sydney Leonard, was the first professional repertory ballet company in New England.

³ The original ballet was choreographed by de Mille for the Ballet Russe de Monte-Carlo, a dance company that moved to the U.S. during World War II. In order to compete with the rival company Ballet Theatre, the Ballet Russe commissioned de Mille out of a career of relative obscurity. She was given considerable creative control, choosing Aaron Copland as the composer after being impressed by his previous ballet, *Billy the Kid*. Though Copland was initially reluctant to compose "another Cowboy ballet," De Mille persuaded him that this show would mark a significant departure from his previous work. De Mille herself played the lead, and the premiere at the Metropolitan Opera House on 16 October, 1942 received 22 curtain calls. The other principal dancers in the cast included Frederic Franklin and Casimir Kokitch. Though de Mille herself was not entirely pleased with the premiere, it was attended by Rodgers and Hammerstein, who approached de Mille afterward to request that she choreograph their upcoming production of *Oklahoma!*.

⁴ 1905-1993: an American dancer, choreographer and author, de Mille choreographed for ballet, Broadway and film, including the ground-breaking choreography for *Oklahoma* (1943), the ballet *Rodeo* (1942). She was the author of many books, including a 1991 biography of her lifelong friend, Martha Graham, entitled *Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham*.

the dancing part of your career. And I moved to LA to study Feng Shui⁵ of all things. I took up architecture for three years, had my own firm, Baker and Dickinson Architects and Designers.

I didn't have an architect license at the time, but my partner did. So we did the design of Chinese houses and Chinese temples in LA for three years. And then I was teaching at Stanley Holden's⁶ in West Hollywood. And there was a lady there, Debra — I can't remember her last name, but she said, "I just got a grant from the Ohio Arts Council⁷ and I would like to do a piece with you, to perform at the big theater in Columbus." Not the Ohio [Theatre], but the state, or whatever it is. And I said, "Sure." And I was probably thirty-nine, forty years old at this point. And I was like, "Are you sure you want to *do* this with me?" I said, "Okay." So off we get into this duet, very contemporary. You know, not quite my ballet style, but very contemporary. We came through Columbus and performed it for an Ohio Dance event because it was an Ohio Arts Council thing.

I met — we just spoke about — John Giffin,⁸ Vicky Uris.⁹ I met these writers that moved here from New York, I met this great guy, Michael Milligan.¹⁰ I was just like, "If I want to keep dancing, this is where I want to be." Because I still had the bug, but I'm old — well, *older* for a dancer. So I said,

⁵ An ancient Chinese art of arranging buildings, objects, and space in an environment to achieve harmony and balance. The words "feng shui" are Chinese and translate to "wind" and "water," producing the meaning "the way of wind and water." With roots in early Taoism and Buddhism, Feng Shui is a practice designed to achieve harmony with the environment.

⁶ 1928 -2007: a British American ballet dancer and choreographer. Born in London, he joined the Royal Ballet in 1944 and won notice for performing numerous character roles, especially "Widow Simone" in the 1960 production of *La Fille Mal Gardée* by Frederick Ashton. After retiring in 1969, he moved to California to teach and perform, establishing the Stanley Holden Dance Center, where he became a respected teacher to generations of Southern California and internationally known dancers.

⁷ Founded in 1965 to foster and encourage the development of the arts and assist the preservation of Ohio's cultural heritage, The Ohio Arts Council (OAC) is a state agency that funds and supports quality arts experiences to strengthen Ohio communities culturally, educationally, and economically.

⁸ Currently Professor Emeritus at The Ohio State University, Giffin received a BFA in dance from the Juilliard School of Music and an MA in dance from OSU. Among numerous other achievements, he danced with *Les Grands Ballets Canadiens* in Montreal and the Wuppertal Dance Theater directed by Pina Bausch, and toured with Agnes de Mille's Heritage Dance Theater and was dance captain for the Broadway revival of *Brigadoon*.

⁹ Uris was a member of the OSU dance faculty for twenty years. She graduated with a BFA Degree in Dance and Theatre from NYU School of the Arts, and an MFA in Dance in 1989. In 1975, she joined the Paul Taylor Dance Company. Prior to joining the Taylor Co., she performed with Norman Walker, The New York Dance Collective, Sandra Neels, Bowyer and Bruggeman, Rosalind Newman, and was a guest artist with the Connecticut Ballet and Annabelle Gamson. Since 1981, she has choreographed over sixty works for modern repertory and ballet companies and for her own groups. Three of her works have been recorded in Labanotation.

¹⁰ 1953 -1995: a graphic designer and performer, lived and worked in Columbus most of his adult life. He served as art director and graphic designer for the Ohio Arts Council from 1980 to 1987, then as graphic designer of the Office of Communications at the OSU College of the Arts until he became too ill to work in 1993. Though he had no formal training in dance, Milligan brought energy and charisma to his work as a dancer.

"Okay, I'm going to audition around." So I auditioned around — Dayton Ballet,¹¹ no, too old; BalletMet,¹² of course, too old, dah-dah-dah... all these places. Well, I went to Ohio Ballet and just so happened that Tom was at Ohio Ballet when I was auditioning. And he told Heinz, "You got to take him." So I got a job at Ohio Ballet with the idea that their ballet mistress was going to be leaving the next year. And so I was a dancer for a year and kind of a ballet master in training. And then the next few years I became a dancer and a ballet master, mixed. And then as time goes on, I became associate artistic director. And that's the history of how Heinz and I got to meet each other.

CF: That's amazing. I know it's not pertinent to this situation, but what happened to the architecture firm when you... I mean, there you were and then you came here and...

RD: Right. It went along for a while. It was with a friend of mine, Tim Baker. And he got another partner and he still studied Feng shui. In fact, he moved to Taiwan to study full-time Feng shui. And he actually became a professor at a university in Taiwan of Feng shui. He learned Chinese and all of that, but that kind of went wayside. I still love architecture. I have lots of architect friends and it's part of my life and who I am.

CF: I think dance and architecture have so much in common, it's that using space and...

RD: ...structure...

CF: Right!

RD: Yeah. Talk about structure. You can't have a house if you don't have a good base. You can't dance if you don't have a good base, the choreography, spatial arrangements, it all works.

CF: Had you known about Heinz Poll before you were investigating a move to Ohio?

RD: I did not. I knew about, of course, Tom Skelton because of his lighting design, but not so much about Heinz until I got here and then everybody in Ohio knew who Heinz was (he laughs, remembering). He was like this icon in the dance world. And so of course I wanted to know him, and get to meet him and learn what it was about him that made him so special.

CF: In 1988, he was well into it, right? He had gone, I think, from the Chamber Ballet¹³ to Ohio Ballet in '74.

¹¹ founded by two sisters, Hermene and Josephine Schwarz, Dayton Ballet is the second-oldest regional ballet company in the United States and one of the oldest professional ballet companies in the United States (only the New York City, the San Francisco Ballet and the Atlanta Ballet are older professional ballet companies). *Dayton Ballet founders, Hermene and Josephine Schwarz, constitute a separate feature of this collection.*

¹² an academy and professional company that has its origins in the early 1970s, with the establishment of the Columbus Civic Ballet. BalletMet serves Central Ohio as a major cultural and educational resource. Located in the heart of downtown Columbus, BalletMet includes a black box theatre performance space, seven dance studios, administrative offices, costume and scene shops. *BalletMet is a separate feature of this collection.*

¹³ Forerunner to the Ohio Ballet, originally consisting of Poll's students at the University of Akron, where he taught ballet for many years, the company began in 1968 and turned professional in 1974, later taking the name Ohio Ballet.

RD: Uh-huh (affirmative)

CF: So things were established and maybe that was still the money days of the NEA and the Fords, and...

RD: Towards the end — the '70s were the *big* time. The CETA grants,¹⁴ remember the CETA grants that the government was giving out? That all went away, and things started to struggle in the late '80s. I remember a couple of seasons where we had hardly any money at all. And Heinz in his genius said, "Well, let's do a ballet and we'll put them in sweat pants and T-shirts." It cost very little money but, of course, his choreography sold the ballet. So, yes, we were going through with that transition of how do you get past the wonderful era of the '70s into the '80s and into the '90s, which is continuing on even today, that whole "How do we get it back? How do we get dance back?"

CF: So what was the company like when you joined it then in '88?

RD: It was... I want to say "transitional" comes to mind. He had a very good company for a while. And then there was a period of time there where he lost a few of the good dancers. And then there was a period of time before the good dancers came back again. So there was a lot of training, a lot of hard work, very demanding artistically and technically from the dancers. A lot of them had to be trained. Well, he didn't really like classical ballet because he had that Kurt Jooss¹⁵ background. So he had a special mix of very Vaganova¹⁶/very Kurt Jooss, whatever that means. It's like moving big, but moving precisely and moving technically correct, but that bigness of the movement.

¹⁴ The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) federally employed more than 10,000 artists – visual, performing, and literary during a span of eight years (1974 – 1981). This was the largest number of artists supported by Federal funding since the Works Progress Administration (WPA) of the 1930s. It is estimated that an additional 10,000 arts support staff were funded as well. During its peak year, 1980, CETA funding for arts employment funneled up to \$300 million into the cultural sector and the economy of the United States; in comparison, the National Endowment for the Arts budget that year was \$159 million. Unlike the WPA, which included artists in its original design through five specific projects, CETA was designed as a generalized program to provide training and employment for economically disadvantaged, unemployed, and underemployed persons. Federal funding was decentralized under CETA, taking the form of block grants to States, which were then parceled out to county and municipal governments.

¹⁵ (1901-1979): a highly regarded and influential 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.

¹⁶ a ballet technique and training system devised by the Russian dancer and pedagogue Agrippina Vaganova (1879–1951). It was derived from the teachings of Marius Petipa, throughout the late 19th century. Vaganova perfected and cultivated this form of teaching classical ballet and turned it into a viable syllabus. The method fuses elements of traditional French style from the romantic era with the athleticism and virtuosity of Italian Cecchetti technique. It is designed to involve the whole body in every movement, with equal attention paid to the upper body, legs and feet.

So first I had to learn what Heinz wanted. That was the most important thing. Listen to what he said. And then how does that translate? Listen to Valerie. Valerie Grieg,¹⁷ I think was the ballet mistress at the time, that first year that I was there. And she was very helpful in the transition in terms of how it all worked. So I don't know if I adequately answered your question, but it was transitional just because I was transitioning...

We are briefly interrupted by a phone ringing in the room...

CF: You were saying... did you adequately answer? Yes, you did, but I think you were saying a little bit more about transition...

RD: Well, yeah, it was transitional in terms of *myself* transitioning from... I thought I was not a dancer anymore, into learning the style of a very *strong* artistic director — and also learning what Valerie had learned from Heinz in the past, and other ballet mistresses had learned also.

CF: What was the size of the company?

RD: Yeah, it was anywhere between ten and twelve dancers. I don't think we were ever above twelve. We were always around ten, and some years we could afford twelve. I don't think we were ever *below* ten. So it was in that range.

CF: What was it like moving to Akron, Ohio after being in LA and Boston?

RD: Well, it was culture shock, you know. I tried to live in Akron; it didn't work. I actually built a house with my architecture... I built a house in Medina,¹⁸ on like three acres of land. I thought I could try being out in nature, instead. That didn't work. I ended up moving to Cleveland Heights and commuting back and forth every day for ten years, I think it was — back and forth, back and forth. I love Cleveland because there's the museum, there's the science museum, there is Severance Hall¹⁹ that you could go to. There are these things that make me feel warm and comfortable. I *love* Cleveland for that reason.

CF: And you stayed?

RD: I stayed, yeah. Made it my home.

¹⁷ 1922 – 2013: Originally from Melbourne, Australia, Grieg had a long and storied relationship to and influence on the art form. After taking up her career in Australia, UK and the U.S., she returned to the U.S. in the early 1960s, studying in New York at the Juilliard School and then moving to Cleveland, Ohio, where she worked with the Ohio Ballet. She was also the founding coordinator of the dance department at the University of Akron, Ohio. Her ideas about ballet training were codified in her book *Inside Ballet Technique: Separating Anatomical Fact from Fiction in the Ballet Class*, published in 1994 by the Princeton Book Company.

¹⁸ a city in Medina County, Ohio about 33 mi south of Cleveland and 23 mi west of Akron. The population was 26,094 at the 2020 Census.

¹⁹ a well-known concert hall located in the University Circle section of Cleveland, Ohio. Opened in 1931, Severance Hall was named after patrons John L. Severance and his wife, Elisabeth Huntingdon DeWitt Severance, and serves as the home of The Cleveland Orchestra.

CF: I've asked others who started *early* with him what the dance landscape was like at the time that he was *forming* the company. But by '88, I mean...

RD: He was *it*! He was an icon by '88. He was pretty well known, pretty well established, had *his* way of doing things, his way of thinking, that he wanted to do things. Other companies had their way, but he had a definite style. We would go to The Joyce Theater²⁰ every two years and perform. And that was very important to him because that laid the groundwork for how the company would behave for two years. That was like a focal point, and everything revolved around the repertory that you did for those two years before the Joyce, was what you were doing at the Joyce.

You pick and choose a few pieces and then you would do those over and over again, so that they would be good when you got to the Joyce. You don't just do one piece and then put it at the Joyce. And then you would rehearse it, tear it apart, *totally* tear it apart. Rehearse it, put it away, come back in, tear it apart again. Rehearse it, put it away, do it again so that by the time you were ready, you were ready. And that was, I think, pretty amazing and pretty spectacular that everything was for *that* — there was a goal. And boom, everybody was “on page” for that. Everybody knew what was coming.

CF: Were you still touring at that point?

RD: We were touring a *lot*. Yes, we toured a lot. Again, you could do the same repertory over and over, which built what you could do. But yes, touring, I think, was very important for the company. We went to California, Florida. I don't know how many times we went to North Carolina, South Carolina, areas through there. A lot of colleges, I think we did a lot of colleges on the West Coast. I think we did get a few theaters in there, but mostly theaters at colleges were what booked us.

CF: You were with him then until he retired and maybe saw the demise of the company as well? I don't know...

RD: I don't see it as a demise of the company. Well, depends on what you think about that... I have *very* strong feelings about that. And I'm just going to say it: I think we had a board president at the time who didn't want Heinz around anymore, and he did everything in his power to get Heinz out. I think that was the problem. He had this friend of his, this Jeffrey Hughes,²¹ that he wanted to be artistic director and he did whatever he needed to do to get that guy there. It didn't matter if the guy could choreograph or not choreograph or teach a class or not teach a class or run a rehearsal or not run a rehearsal. That didn't matter. He was friendly, he was nice, he was this and that, but it should have been Heinz's decision to leave, if you ask me. And it just didn't happen that way. And of course, that's just *my* opinion. There are other people in the world that probably think differently about that but...

²⁰ Joyce Theater (The Joyce): a leading presenter of dance in New York City and nationally, the 472-seat dance performance venue is located in the Chelsea neighborhood of New York City. The building opened in 1941 as the Elgin Theater, a movie house, and was gut-renovated and reconfigured in 1981-82 to reopen as the Joyce Theater.

²¹ 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.

CF: Well, it *didn't* work. Heinz got his name off of things, and Hughes went elsewhere, and the company was over! So that's what *I* mean about demise.

RD: Right. Right, right, right. But if you call yourself an artistic director, you have to *be* an artistic director. You have to be able to choreograph and teach and do things that need to be *done* and Jeffrey just couldn't *do* that. He tried to, but it wasn't *successful*, so...

CF: Again, a little bit off-topic for our purposes, but did you go straight away with Maggie and to Verb Ballets?²²

RD: No. I went from Ohio Ballet to Hubbard Street Dance Chicago.²³ Lou Conte²⁴ called me and said, "So you can deal with Heinz, maybe you can deal with me." (He laughs.) So that's what I did. And then I lived in Chicago for a couple of years and then Lou retired also so that all worked out there. But he was right. Yeah. But it's good! They know what they want, but I got to meet Twyla Tharp and all these people that I was just like, "Oh! Okay!" So it was good for me to go away and then come back and be refreshed. I came back and went to college. I got a master's degree at Case. And then I went out and had a school of my own in Warren²⁵, and then even went farther away to Youngstown and ran a ballet school there for a while. Then I came back and did Verb [Ballets] after that. Yeah, so wide range!

CF: Yes. I had forgotten. I read about Hubbard and about Ballet Western Reserve;²⁶ I just had forgotten it. That's quite an amazing trajectory of yours. And I'm sure it was a case of picking up something everywhere you went...

RD: Yeah. I don't ever feel like I have a job! I don't work; I just do what I love, and hopefully, people feel that it's worth giving me a little bit of money for. So that's how I've done my whole life. People say, "What do you do to make money?" I go, "I'm a dancer and I teach dance and I choreograph." It's like that's what I *do*, that's what I *love*, that's who I *am*. That's my persona. That's...

CF: ...your life.

²² A nonprofit organization located in Shaker Heights, OH Verb Ballets is a professional contemporary ballet company dedicated to performing high quality, thought provoking works by contemporary choreographers from across the nation.

²³ Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, originally the Hubbard Street Dance Company, emerged in 1977 from a studio located at the corner of Hubbard and LaSalle streets in Chicago. Now in its 44th year, Hubbard Street is the premier contemporary dance company based in Chicago, performing in downtown Chicago at the Harris Theater for Music and Dance and at the Edlis Neeson Theater at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. The company also tours nationally and internationally throughout the year.

²⁴ Lou Conte is the founder of Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, which grew out of the Lou Conte Dance Studio, when in 1977 several aspiring young artists approached dance teacher/choreographer Conte to teach tap classes. At the time, the studio was located at the corner of LaSalle Street and Hubbard Street, which is how the company acquired its name. Conte served as director for 23 years, during which he developed relationships with choreographers including Lynne Taylor-Corbett, Margo Sappington, Daniel Ezralow, Nacho Duato, Jiri Kylián and Twyla Tharp, all of whom helped shape Hubbard Street's repertoire.

²⁵ Richard Dickinson's School of Ballet was located at 160 N Park Ave, Warren, OH, 44481 (about fifteen miles north of Youngstown).

²⁶ Founded in 1962, Dickinson was artistic director of BWR (Ballet Western Reserve), beginning in 2007.

RD: That's about it. I can't do anything else. I suppose I could probably stack boxes at Walmart because they would be very straight and orderly and organized.

CF: I love it. Was your time, say, from '88 to maybe '99?

RD: '99, yeah.

CF: Would you care to relate a highlight that stands out from that time?

RD: There were *so* many highlights! Heinz and I became really good friends, just like Barbara and John²⁷ became really good friends. And we would spend weekends at his house in New Jersey, take off on Friday night after rehearsal late, get in there 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning to spend the weekend and come home seven, eight hour drive — I can't remember, exactly. And just hang out. Next thing you know is Jose Limón²⁸ walks in the door; Jennifer Dunning²⁹, the critic, would show up. And I was like, "Oh!" Paul Taylor was his best friend. I would just be like, "*Really?*" So those were...highlights. And just getting to meet them and sit down and hearing them talk. You go, "Okay, this brings validation to *all* artists and all dancers that you *can* do it." The big thing I heard from everybody is you have to be yourself. And that's so hard. I'm still trying to figure out what that means for myself. *They* figured it out. Heinz figured it out. And what is that? That honesty with yourself that they can come to. That is so powerful.

So to me, those were highlights. Getting to visit his farm, getting to know him, personally. And Tom — both Tom and Heinz became very close. Dance-wise, he choreographed so many ballets on me — *that* rarely happened! I think at Boston Ballet, there were two ballets choreographed on me the whole time I was there. Here, I don't know... I could probably think of five or six, maybe, that he originated me on and then I'd have to — because I was still dancing and somebody would get injured and he'd say, "Okay, learn that part." And I'd have to perform it that night! So I learned probably every male part in every ballet that he ever did and probably performed it throughout the years there. I do remember one time we were doing... In hindsight, I had a good connection. He would say something to me and I would *get* it. And I would be able to show him what he wanted; we had that kind of connection that was so good. But one time we were doing Paul Taylor's *Aureole*.³⁰ I

²⁷ a reference to John and Barbara Schuele Schubert

²⁸ José Arcadio Limón (1908-1972) was a Mexican-American dancer and choreographer who was an important figure in the American modern dance movement of the 1930s-1960s. In 1928, he moved from Los Angeles to New York City after studying for a year as an art major at UCLA. There, he studied and performed with Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman before launching his own eponymous company in 1946 with Humphrey as Artistic Director. The Limón Company continues to perform and preserve his works, and the technique he developed is highly regarded and widely taught. An acclaimed choreographer, he developed what is now known as 'Limón technique.' In 1968, he created the José Limón Foundation to carry on his work.

²⁹ Jennifer Dunning is an American writer and critic for The New York Times on the subjects of dance and ballet. She studied ballet and modern dance and in 1977 became critic and reporter for the New York Times. She is the author of the 1985 *But First a School: The First Fifty Years of the School of American Ballet*, the 1996 *Alvin Ailey, a Life in Dance*, and the 1997 *Great Performances: A Celebration*.

³⁰ The dance, *Aureole*, was created in 1962, and was Paul Taylor's first major success. Set to baroque music by George Frideric Handel, the work marks Taylor's departure from contemporary composers. *Aureole* showcases Taylor's trademark style of athletic, often idiosyncratic movement steeped in both ballet and modern techniques.

was doing the man's solo. And Heinz was never timid, but he would come up to me, [and] he was very timid. He would say (dropping his voice to a soft, imploring tone), "You know, Richard, that solo was a little too *internal*. You shouldn't really *do* it that way..." So I would be like, "Okay." So then I'd try it. Because we were [performing] multiple nights and the next night I'd try it again. And I'd be like (he makes roaring sounds, indicating that he was becoming very external in his performance...)

And he would come up to me, and then the next night he was mad at me. He said, "Richard, that's not the way that song should be done." He was mad, and he never would get mad. And I was terrified then, because I didn't know what he *wanted*. So I would work on it and work on it. And so finally in the afternoon before the last show of that weekend, I showed him... We actually had a rehearsal together and worked it out and we came to the right spot to make it all work. And I remember that was a terrifying and wonderful weekend — a highlight. You talked about a highlight. You try to come to a meeting with somebody and it just doesn't work out and then it works out and it's...

CF: Wonderful.

RD: It was happy. I feel bad for the people in the audience who saw that (the roaring sounds again), but what can you do?

CF: Obviously, there was a huge thing going on with the board; I don't know how long that went on before Heinz was ousted or whatever happened. But what about other challenges when you think of your time there? I know that the company often lived on a shoestring budget. As you said, sometimes they're just wasn't money. So there must've been crises many a time. I don't know. Is there anything in particular worth relating?

RD: I didn't have too much to do with the board of Ohio Ballet, so I only would hear things and talk to some board members that became friendly, that kind of stuff. Heinz never went to board meetings either. Tom always did the board thing. So I don't know that side of it at all. I don't remember too many crises at all. The fun things, like we got stuck on a bus in Michigan with three feet of snow and we had to perform and we couldn't get anywhere because the bus couldn't go anywhere. And we had to rush to get things done. That kind of crisis. But I don't remember... There were good times, because once we got some good... Xochitl³¹ [Tejeda de Cerda] came in and Luc Vanier³² came, and his girlfriend. I can't remember her name right now...

³¹ Xochitl Tejeda de Cerda came to the U.S. from Mexico, and danced with Ohio Ballet for eighteen years, seventeen of which were under the direction of Heinz Poll, and one more year after his retirement. She also performed with GroundWorks DanceTheater...

³² Founding Director of the School of Dance at the University of Utah, Vanier was a former principal dancer and company choreographer with Ohio Ballet whose choreography has been produced at the Joyce Theater in New York City and toured nationally. In 2001, he graduated with his MFA from the University of Illinois and became a certified teacher from the Urbana Center for the Alexander Technique. Since then, Vanier has lectured and presented his research nationally and internationally on the integration of the technique and developmental movement in dance curriculum. In 2011, he co-wrote "Dance and the Alexander Technique: Exploring the Missing Link" published by the University of Illinois press. Before joining the University of Utah, Vanier served as associate director and head of dance at the School of Theatre and Dance at Texas Tech University.

But the company, all of a sudden, blossomed and all these dancers came that were ex-professional dancers or were professional dancers from bigger companies, Alberta Ballet³³ and National Ballet of Mexico,³⁴ I think is where Xochitl came from; I'm not quite sure, that could be wrong. But still, they came to Ohio and started dancing. Then that was Heinz in his *prime*, I think, because he had people he could really work with and choreograph on and who understood what hard work [was] and how to make it work both emotionally and physically and weren't afraid to... Sometimes he lost his temper. Well, a *lot* of times he lost his temper! But still, how do you work with that?

I would always tell the dancers listen to *what* he's saying, not how he is saying it. And that was so important because he said the right thing. He *always* said the right thing. Sometimes his voice was (he makes angry onomatopoeic sounds) but that's okay because you would learn, you would grow. Every day I learned something new, *every day*. There wasn't a day that went by that I didn't look forward to going to work because it was...I thought, "Okay, okay..." He used to refer to — we danced in a Church in Akron. It's very cliché, but (he lowers his voice to imitate Poll): "This studio is my Church. Outside of here, I can be your friend. Inside of here, I am *not* your friend. We are here to work, to make this ballet *happen*." So, things like that were just great.

CF: Well, I'm thinking that about midway through your time with the company, Tom Skelton died. That had to be a very low point.

RD: Yes. O, boy! We were at the park, one of the metro parks, and Tom was sitting in the car and very, very ill. But he wanted to talk to me. We were doing this... I wish I could remember the name of the ballet. It'll come to me in a second... But it's a ballet about children. David Shimo³⁵ owns the rights to it, but it'll come to me. So anyway, Tom called me over to the car and he said, "Richard, I think it's very important that you remember this. See how I've done the lighting dividing and the half and the boys half is pink and the girls half is blue? It's not supposed to be that way, but I did it on purpose so that when they flip sides, then it's all very correct." And he just wanted to point out his lighting, and how it all worked. He did the same for different ballets that I own. Why is the lighting like this? And he passed away soon after that. Yeah...

CF: And of course if you were so happy in the job, you must've been *bitterly* disappointed to see it end.

RD: Yeah. Well, of course... The end was hard, because there was so much speculation going on. Wilma Salisbury³⁶ had said David Shimotakahara should get the ballet company when Heinz retires or whatever happens. And then Heinz said, "No, Richard should get the ballet when I leave." And then the board is saying no, this Jeffery person should get the ballet. So it was just so much...We

³³ Alberta Ballet (also known as the Alberta Ballet Company) was founded by Muriel Taylor and Dr. Ruth Carse in 1958 and became a professional company in 1966. The company is a resident company of both the Northern Alberta Jubilee Auditorium in Edmonton, Alberta and the Southern Alberta Jubilee Auditorium in Calgary, Alberta and performs its full season in both venues.

³⁴ Compañía Nacional de Danza de México (National Ballet Company of Mexico) is based in Mexico City. Its history dates to 1963 when it was first recognized as the Classical Ballet of Mexico.

³⁵ A shorthand reference to the artistic director of GroundWorks DanceTheater, David Shimotakahara.

³⁶ Currently an essayist at DANCECleveland, Salisbury served as Dance and Music Critic at the Cleveland Plain Dealer from 1968 – 2006.

don't need *that* in our lives. Anyway, there was a lot of speculation and then what happened, happened, and we moved on and nobody died from it, right? We're still here.

CF: Did you get some of his ballets when he died?

RD: Yes, I think I have five of his ballets. I think all of them have been set on companies. Yeah. A lot of them on Verb, but also did Tulsa Ballet³⁷ and Dayton Ballet. Yeah.

CF: That's a gift!

RD: Yeah.

CF: Are you involved or were you involved, Richard, with the Festival?

RD: Ohio Dance Festival?³⁸ I was on the advisory...

CF: Not the Ohio Festival, the Heinz Poll Festival.

RD: The Heinz Poll dance... no, I was never on that side of it. Jane [Starzman], I think, eventually had a lot to do with it. She was company manager, and then I think it was *after* the company that she did that, I think.

CF: That's right. So you've made Ohio your home now and you had certainly been around a lot of dance your whole life in very many places. What do you see as a person who lives here in Akron as his lasting legacy or his biggest contribution? It's hard to say biggest, perhaps, but what did Heinz Poll do for this part of the state of Ohio?

RD: It has to be a spontaneous answer, because I didn't come prepared for this question. But what I think he did is he left his *heart*, and he left his *integrity* here. He was a man of integrity, *great* man of integrity. And he would not do something that was just part-way or half-assed. And *everything* had that stamp of integrity on it. I can't say that enough times. And along with that was because his heart was attached to that, his whole focus, his love of dance, his love of movement was attached to making everything perfect, from what *he* thought perfect was — it could be different from anybody else, you know, everybody has their own opinion — but this is what *he* wanted. And it was his own singular point of view.

And it's what made Ohio Ballet *different*. You know, we could go to New York and make a statement, because we were different from other companies around. So we didn't point our toes as much as principal ballerinas of New York City Ballet,³⁹ and we didn't maybe straighten our legs and we didn't

³⁷ Begun in 1956, Tulsa Ballet Company of Oklahoma is regarded as one of the top ballet companies in North America

³⁸ The OhioDance Festival is an annual three-day event offering educational classes, performances and award presentations. The first statewide festival was presented at Kenyon College in 1981.

³⁹ Considered one of the foremost ballet companies in the world, NYCB was founded in 1948 by George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein. Its training wing, the School of American Ballet (SAB) has been associated with the company since its beginnings and has been instrumental in the development of the artform. SAB provides a highly selective and rigorous training program for dancers.

have legs that were “this” long. But we had heart and we had soul and we had energy and we could move and we had force and we had presence and we could *make* a statement. And that's what Ohio Ballet was.

CF: That's a great answer. You also had a really eclectic repertoire that was more unusual than maybe it is now with the German expressionist influences and the modern dance people he brought in, plus the ballet. I think that was a signature of the company, from what I know.

RD: True. True, true. People like Laura Dean⁴⁰ did at least four ballets on us. Fantastic to be around. Yeah, all the dancers had to be versatile and you never knew what was coming (laughing) or why he picked a particular choreographer. Lynne Taylor-Corbett⁴¹ was so different from everybody else, and *he* did most of the classical work. We had a lot of Balanchine⁴² though, in the repertoire. I think that would have come from Tom's connection, because I don't know how that we had the money to bring in those Balanchine ballets, but we had quite a few. They were great to dance! And then Heinz's classical pieces were neo-classical.⁴³ That worked for us. And then we'd turn around and take off our shoes and dance barefoot.

CF: I think every dance person who doesn't stay with a single mentor — who does that? — takes something of that choreographer, that artist with them and now you're with Verb Ballet, you're still choreographing, you're directing. What do you feel about that? Do you feel like you're channeling Heinz at different times or...

⁴⁰ an American postmodern dancer, choreographer and composer who is known for her minimalist style of dance and 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.

⁴¹ Born in Denver, Colorado, Taylor-Corbett is a choreographer, director, lyricist, and composer. She works in theatre and film (most notably, creating the choreography for the 1984 dance classic *Footloose*, choreographs for dance companies, both ballet and modern, and is the principal guest choreographer for Carolina Ballet. Ohio Ballet performed her *Code of Silence* (1991).

⁴² (1904-1983): Co-founder of the New York City Ballet, Georges Balanchine performed with the *Ballets Russes* in Paris. emigrating to New York City in 1933, and after many attempts to begin a ballet company, as well as many other professional engagements, founded NYCB with Lincoln Kirstein in 1948. Considered the “Father” of American ballet, Balanchine emigrated from Russia and then to the U.S. through Europe, and co-founded what has become one of the foremost ballet companies in the world, the New York City Ballet, as well as the School of the American Ballet (SATB). Mr. 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 help to promulgate the distinctive Balanchine style.

⁴³ the style of 20th-century classical ballet exemplified by the works of George Balanchine, and adopted by many others. The term appears in the 1920s with Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*, in response to the excesses of romanticism and post-romantic modernism. It draws on the advanced technique of 19th-century Russian Imperial dance, but strips it of its detailed narrative and heavy theatrical setting while retaining many key techniques, such as pointe technique. This simplified external style allows for the dancers' movement to become the main artistic medium, which is the hallmark of neoclassical ballet.

RD: Yeah. I think the best thing that Heinz gave to me was a sense of musicality. The way he phrased music and his choreography with the dancers, it always made sense. He would listen to what's on top and then what's underneath the baseline, the treble line, and figure out which one he wanted to play with and go with that. And so I always have that sense of playfulness with the music. And I always think of Heinz a lot there. Also, with how he arranges choreography, maybe here you have two duets and then after two duets, you maybe can put a solo and then a bigger group piece. He was very skillful at that. So I always think of him with that.

And I think working with the Ohio Ballet prepared me to do my job at Verb because Verb is eclectic just like that: we have pointe today; we had pointe shoes on. Like this, tomorrow we're going to have them off and we're going to be learning a very contemporary piece. It's like you have to be flexible like that. Going to Case,⁴⁴ I majored in contemporary dancing. So I became this "bun head"⁴⁵ that sat on the floor and stretched.

CF: I love it. In closing, is there something maybe that I haven't asked that you'd like to say about Heinz, that you want people to know since this is going to be devoted to him, this segment of the website? Is there something, a story you would tell or just something that you'd want to share with people? Maybe about him as a friend, the weekends in New Jersey. I don't know.

RD: Yeah. Well, it's a funny story. I don't know. Anyway, it's about fish stew. So we would go visit him. And so he introduced me to Wegmans,⁴⁶ and he prided himself on being a very good cook. And so we decided to start a cookbook of his things. I think we only ended up with two or three items in the cookbook, but very detailed. We had to go to the store, buy this particular fish, this particular tomato, this particular spice. It was really just an allspice kind of thing. Juniper berries, he introduced me to Juniper berries. And he taught me how to... we all wrote this down, all these things to make a fish stew in a pressure cooker. And it was this great event, because he was teaching us, so he was always *teaching* us. So it wasn't like, "Okay, now you do this and you do this." But it was like, "And then you put it in the fish. And then you put it in the can of tomatoes like this."

And all the time with the Rob Roy⁴⁷ drinking, because we're at the house, there was fun that way. And then he would serve this great dinner that was outdoor on the patio. And he was the most generous host *ever*, so open and so different than what he was in the studio. He was vivacious and talkative and full of stories, *loved* to tell stories. And it's just how he was. He was just so open, and giving, and wanted you to know who he was, always, constantly. Whether it's making a stew or

⁴⁴ a private research university in Cleveland, Ohio, established in 1967, when Western Reserve University, founded in 1826 and named for its location in the Connecticut Western Reserve, and Case Institute of Technology, founded in 1880 through the endowment of Leonard Case, Jr., formally federated. Case Western Reserve joined the Association of American Universities in 1969. In 2008, the centennial of the building now known as Mather Dance Center celebrated the 100 years of Dance at Case. The department offers undergraduate and graduate degrees as well as a Dancer Wellness program.

⁴⁵ A humorous allusion to the austere style of hair adopted by ballerinas. Thus, the reference conjures ballet, and is usually applied to women.

⁴⁶ Wegmans Food Markets, Inc., is a privately held, American supermarket chain, headquartered in Gates, New York and founded in 1916 in Rochester. As of May 2021, Wegmans has 106 stores in the mid-Atlantic and Northeastern regions. It is noted for its "upscale" provisions.

⁴⁷ The Rob Roy cocktail is similar to the Manhattan, except the Rob Roy calls for scotch instead of American whiskey.

serving you the stew or talking to you, just the stories of his life. And then he would stand [next to] to you and say, "Now *you* tell me a story." And then it'd be like, "I can't beat that."

CF: I love it. Thank you so much.

RD: Sure.

CF: It's great to talk to you about him and to hear what he was like.

RD: It was good to...(he tears up...)

CF: Yeah. What an amazing man. I feel sorry that I didn't get to ever see Ohio Ballet or know him. I'm kind of knowing him through you.

RD: Yeah. He was great.

CF: Thank you. You got *me* crying!

RD: I didn't mean to...

CF: Well, what a presence he had! Yeah. Thank you so much.

RD: Sure.

CF: Good luck to you...

RD: Thank you.

CF: ... and everything that you're doing now for Verb Ballets.

RD: Maybe you could do one of these about Verb! That would be good.

CF: That might happen.

RD: Okay. Great.

CF: I was thinking that could happen. Save that up, all those things you know I'm going to ask you!

RD: (laughing) Great!