

VDC Interview Transcript

Subject: Ohio Ballet

Informant: Barbara Schubert, General Manager Ohio Ballet

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Home of Dr. Margaret Carlson

Beachwood, OH

Key:

CF: Candace Feck

BS: Barbara Schubert

JC: Jessica Cavender

MDB: Megan Davis Bushway

CF: I'm Candace Feck and we are here at the home of Maggie Carlson, and I'm talking with Barbara Schubert. It's great to meet you. I've been reading *about* you, and I've also been reading *you*, because I got to read some of the book¹ you edited.

BS: Oh, my. Oh, good, good.

CF: Can I get that book? Is it available?

BS: Yes.

CF: Okay.

BS: Akron University Press, I believe, still has some copies, both in hardcover and soft.

CF: Yeah, I got really into it and then — it was on Google — it cut me, kicked me out after 36 pages.

BS: Oh, that wasn't nice! I should have brought one. I bet I have an extra copy. I wish I had brought one.

CF: Oh, I'll get one. It wasn't clear that it is available.

BS: But, yeah — and I didn't write it.

CF: Right, you edited it. Yes, that's right.

¹ Poll, Heinz. *A Time to Dance: The Life of Heinz Poll*. University of Akron Press, 2008. Edited by Barbara Schubert.

BS: I edited, yeah, yeah.

CF: Well, I guess I know that you were the general manager and you clearly developed a friendship with Heinz Poll and edited his memoir. What I wonder is, how did that all happen? How did you make your way to him? When and how did that all develop?

BS: It is a strange story, because I was teaching high school at University School² here in Cleveland. Way before that, actually, when I *met* him, I was working on children's concerts with The Cleveland Orchestra,³ and we wanted a dance company. So we looked in Cleveland and there really wasn't anything that Matthias Bamert,⁴ who was going to direct the concert, could feel comfortable with. So I was reading Cleveland Magazine⁵ about 2:00 am one hot night (she laughs), and I saw this article about a company starting in Akron. So I called and talked to their manager and arranged to go and see them. And I was really excited after I went.

At that point, I had not met Heinz, but subsequently I went down to Akron and met him, and then Matthias and I went, and went to a rehearsal. And very quietly Matthias said, "This is what I want." And maybe five minutes later Heinz said, "Well, we won't do this because we're too young and we can't dance in front of an orchestra. That would take a much stronger company." And Matthias said "Do whatever it takes. I *want* to work with him." And I don't know, I think Heinz would say Matthias was the one who really charmed him in to it. But he finally said yes, and we did the Key Concert,⁶ and I really wanted to televise it; we had never done that. So we hired Roger Englander,⁷ who did New York Philharmonic⁸ things, and he is a Cleveland, so he came for a pittance — I

² Schubert taught English at the University School, Chagrin Falls, Ohio. 1983-1986. Established in 1890, University School (US) is an all-boys, private, junior kindergarten–12 school with two campus locations in the Greater Cleveland area of Ohio.

³ One of the five American orchestras informally referred to as the "Big Five," The Cleveland Orchestra was founded in 1918 by the pianist and impresario Adella Prentiss Hughes. The orchestra plays most of its concerts at Severance Hall.

⁴ The Swiss-born composer Bamert's conducting career began in North America as an apprentice to George Szell and later as Assistant Conductor to Leopold Stokowski, and Resident Conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra under Lorin Maazel.

⁵ a monthly magazine focused on Northeastern Ohio, founded in 1972.

⁶ In the 1950s, as The Cleveland Orchestra began to establish a worldwide reputation, Supervisor of Music Education Lillian Baldwin launched "The Cleveland Plan," a music education initiative designed to expand the lives and cultural experiences of area children by exposing them to Orchestra performances. Although the inaugural Key Concert wasn't presented until November 1970, the series was preceded by several "family concerts" that were performed in the summers of 1969 and 1970 at Blossom Music Center — providing a different perspective than the one offered by education concerts hosted at Severance Hall throughout the school year. During the 2019-20 season, The Cleveland Orchestra celebrated the 50th anniversary of its Key Concerts, which served as a precursor to the Family Concerts presented to today's audiences.

⁷ 1926-2021: Among many other accomplishments, the Cleveland born Englander was the Emmy Award-winning producer and director of the acclaimed Young People's Concerts, which featured Leonard Bernstein leading the New York Philharmonic. He directed all 53 hour-long episodes of the concerts, which were staged and broadcast intermittently over the years from 1958 through 1972.

⁸ The New York Philharmonic Orchestra is a symphony orchestra based in New York City. It is one of the leading American orchestras popularly referred to as the "Big Five." Founded in 1842, the orchestra is one of the oldest musical institutions in the United States and the oldest of the "Big Five" orchestras. Its record-setting 14,000th concert was given in December 2004.

think it about paid his airfare, probably. And the first thing he said to me when we were driving to Akron was, "Who is the producer?" (She laughs.) And I said, "Um, I am." I had no idea what I was getting in to. But we didn't have a producer, so I had to be. But it was a wonderful experience, and Heinz and I, as well as Tom Skelton⁹ and I became good friends.

And then much later he asked if I would come, and... He thought he was losing the company in the late '80s, and he asked if I would come and just volunteer, just come every day, fix it up. That's the way Heinz would [talk]: "Barbara, you just fix it." And I don't know what I *thought* I could do, honestly, this high school English teacher. But I talked to the headmaster of the school and I didn't take a leave of absence because I didn't think that was fair, because they were going to have to hire somebody. But I thought I would be back in a year. And then that grew to my being a general manager and then later, I don't know why—it was an odd title—but associate director. So I was there for a long time.

CF: Amazing. What year was it, do you think, when Matthias asked you and you came down and...

BS: ...1972. Yeah. I'm quite sure it was '72. So we probably saw the fall series in 1972, and then did a spring, I think that's right—a spring Key Concert.

CF: Do you recall the program?

BS: Handel's *Water Music*¹⁰ for sure, and Heinz did, oh just a wonderful...oh, what is the name of it? Oh, gosh. It was called *One Ring Circus*,¹¹ and I cannot remember the title of the music for that, but that was in the rep. But Heinz and Matthias together decided that they wanted to use a piece of Handel's *Water Music*, and Heinz choreographed the piece specifically for that. And then there was a third piece that I think was in the repertory. Of course I loved it. But it was fine. It's very odd to dance in front of an orchestra; you don't see that very often. But I think it worked, and certainly the children—it was for children ages five through nine—and the children were charmed.

CF: So, between that time in '72/'73, and when he called you and asked you to help in the '80s, you must have kept a relationship...

BS: Oh, we did. Yeah. We did.

CF: Can you talk about that a bit?

BS: And for a while I was on the board. I'm sure I was on the board when he—actually, it was at a fundraiser and we were dancing, after the dinner, and he started working on me. And I said, "Oh, I can't. I've signed a contract, I'm going to teach next year again, and I like it there," and so forth, and

⁹ (1927-1994): an acclaimed lighting designer for dance and theatre, Skelton 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*.

¹⁰ The *Water Music* is a collection of orchestral movements, often published as three suites, composed by George Frideric Handel. It premiered on 17 July 1717, in response to King George I's request for a concert on the River Thames.

¹¹ The work was choreographed by Poll in 1971.

then Tom Skelton got into the act and said "You really have to come." And I've always wondered who I thought I was, and what did I think I was going to do. I have *no idea!* But I came in every day and, although I was a volunteer that year, then toward the end of the year it became obvious that the general manager was looking [to leave]... she was missing too many Fridays not to be. And then the board, when she resigned, the board asked me if I would take over as general manager.

And I thought of it as an interim thing, that I would do that until they found the real one. But I did it, I don't know, I was there for three and a half or four years or five, whatever. And then I worked more on booking after that — and specifically, Ohio bookings. With the name Ohio Ballet I thought we should get everywhere in Ohio.

CF: Well, I wonder, I think I read — pardon me if I've got this wrong — if it wasn't you it might have been somebody else who made a deal with Mr. Poll that, let's see... He was always on a very slender budget and precarious, and the deal was that he wouldn't ask and you wouldn't tell. Is that what it was about, how much money there really was?

BS: That's pretty close. He would ask me how things were, and I thought he really wanted to know, but he didn't. "Ah, Heinz, I don't know if I can make payroll." Something like, and he couldn't start his day that way. And I said "You're absolutely right. I understand that. So I won't tell you how bad things are, no matter how bad they are, if you stay within the budget. So you know what you have to spend." And then one time he wanted to do a piece called *A Faerie-tale*,¹² and it required costumes, which were not in the budget. Just, we had a very small budget for costumes. And so I said, "Well, we have this deal, and you can't do it. But do it next year." I said, "I'll get to work and see if I can get a grant." And he said "No, I'll be on to something else by then. It's just in my head now."

And I went to Progressive Insurance.¹³ First I talked to Cleveland Foundation¹⁴ folks and I said "I know you can't do it because you have to do a quarterly kind of thing. Is there anyone in Cleveland who might do this, because it just seems like such an interesting thing to do. And I know he won't hang on to it for very long." And she said try Progressive. And in those days they did work with the arts. And they paid for that piece, and it stayed in the rep for a long time. It was a very popular piece.

CF: Great success there!

BS: The Minneapolis Children's Theater¹⁵ did the costumes for it, and they did a great job.

¹² Poll choreographed this piece in 1988.

¹³ The Progressive Corporation is an American insurance company, the third largest insurance carrier and the No. 1 commercial auto insurer in the United States. The company was co-founded in 1937 by Jack Green and Joseph M. Lewis, and is headquartered in Mayfield Village, Ohio.

¹⁴ Founded in 1914, The Cleveland Foundation is the world's first community foundation and one of the largest today, with assets of \$2.5 billion and annual grants of more than \$100 million.

¹⁵ Founded in 1961, Children's Theatre Company (CTC) began as The Moppet Players, a small company, which produced creative dramatics, dance and theatre for children. In 1965, The Moppet Players moved into Minneapolis Institute of Arts and in 1975 was incorporated as Children's Theatre Company. The Theatre's reputation was built on a history of adapting classic children's literature and storybooks, in addition to its notable accomplishments in the areas of scenic and costume design.

CF: Amazing. So, in 1972, were you already a dance lover?

BS: Yes. Yes, I was. But I think we just, we always used to talk about [having] “a visual.” These little guys from ages five to nine, they need some, they can't just go to an orchestra concert. And these programs lasted about an hour. But we always had a visual, and that's the way we talked about it. And we just had decided that dance would be fun to do, and there wasn't a lot of dance in Cleveland in those days.

CF: Can you talk about that? What the dance landscape was like here before Heinz Poll?

BS: Well, of course Cleveland Ballet¹⁶ had not started yet, but there was a precursor that was called Cleveland Ballet. We went to a rehearsal, and it wasn't going to work. It was pretty obvious that the artistic director and Matthias were not going to work well together. And other than that, they were mostly schools that had what they called pre-professional companies. And he wanted something stronger. And there was no doubt, when he went... I first saw, it was called the Chamber Ballet¹⁷ back then, I first saw them, and then he and I went together, and it was clear that it was a step-up. And Heinz was a *wonderful* choreographer. Really a wonderful choreographer. I have all of his works on tape, and he really was quite special. His best work is breathtaking, I think. And there was, even with this very young company — and Jane Startzman¹⁸ was a member of that company — and they were probably, I don't know, ages sixteen to twenty maybe, but they were strong dancers, and his work was really, really lovely. And he said he couldn't do it. He just kept saying, “We aren't going to be able to do this.” He then, later, about fifteen or twenty years later, danced at Severance Hall,¹⁹ again, and said “Well, we can't do this. There isn't any curtain.” And I said “That's okay. You'll work it out.”

But that was one of his things. “There's no curtain, and we're going to be in front of these orchestra members, and how can we do it?” And it was quite beautiful. And then it was taped for public television. And I think the contract was like two years or something. We were dealing with the orchestra and they have pretty serious contracts. So it was shown a lot back then. And I tried so hard to get a copy of it, but I never could. Yeah, I'd love to have a copy of that.

CF: Was it about sixty works that he made? You said you have them all...

BS: Oh, gosh, I should know the number and I don't, really. It must be at least that many. I have a t-shirt with all of them on the back.

CF: Wow! I would love to see that.

¹⁶ a professional dance company, founded in 1972 by Dennis Nahat and Ian Horvath as a dance school, the School of Cleveland Ballet. In 1984, Horvath resigned, leaving Nahat solely responsible for the company and school. That year the ballet moved to the State Theater in Playhouse Square. From 1986 to 2000, it continued as the Cleveland San Jose Ballet (California), performing in both cities.

¹⁷ Originally consisting of Mr. Poll's students at the University of Akron, where he taught ballet for many years, the company began in 1968 and was first called the Chamber Ballet. It turned professional in 1974, and was later called the Ohio Ballet.

¹⁸ One of the original members of the Chamber Ballet/The Ohio Ballet, Startzman is also an informant for this feature of the VDC.

¹⁹ A cultural icon of Cleveland, Severance Hall was founded in 1931 and is home to The Cleveland Orchestra.

Something I've wondered about is whether he ever went back to Germany?

BS: No. But I shouldn't say never. I think once, to my knowledge. It was pretty painful. I don't know how far into the book you've gotten, but he had a pretty rough life as a child, and as a young dancer. I know he did not go back for the death of his parents. He did visit once, that I know of. And there may have been other times that I didn't know about, but I can only remember once. And it was pretty hard. He was ten years younger than his next oldest sister, and then twelve years — there were two girls and then a ten-year gap. They were not particularly close. He was pretty close to a niece, he talked about his niece quite a bit. But Germany did not hold good memories for him.

CF: No. I wondered if he toured there, if he ever took his work there, you know.

BS: Well, he was working there as a young dancer, and then, I don't know if you got that far into the book, but he was told not to go back on the stage for the second half of a program because he would be arrested. So he went into hiding for a couple weeks. And he had had an offer from the National Ballet of Chile,²⁰ which he'd sort of tossed aside, and he knew *then* that he had to go somewhere, so he contacted them and that's where he went, and that's where he danced for the next, oh, I don't know, fifteen years maybe.

CF: Amazing.

BS: So when he came to the United States, of course German was his major language, and then Spanish, and he learned English kind of on the fly as a forty-year old, listening to radio and TV. And so he needed a lot of help with the writing of the book, and he lived in a guest house right behind us, so he would drop off pages every morning, come in the back door and drop them on the kitchen table and say, [imitating his German accent] "Barbara, you fix." And I never thought of myself as an editor. I just thought, "I won't mess with the way he is speaking, because that's Heinz. I'll just try to smooth it out a little bit. Make it readable." And then when they called me from the University of Akron Press and said, "As the editor, would you write a little..." I really didn't think they should list me as the editor, but as you know they did.

CF: I wonder, reading all those pages, it sounds like it was very much an incremental thing...

BS: It was, yeah.

CF: Almost like Dickens published his novels, right?

BS: Right, right.

²⁰ A product of World War II, members of the then celebrated Jooss Ballet found themselves stranded in Chile in 1941 without hope of returning home to Germany. Ernst Uthoff, a Jooss dancer, was encouraged to establish a school, which led to the establishment, in 1945, of the present Chilean National Ballet. Based in Santiago, the company made its U.S. debut performance at the New York State Theatre in 1964, with a program in which Heinz Poll performed and the lighting was done by Tom Skelton.

CF: I'm sure you learned some things about him reading those pages that you didn't know?

BS: I did, and we talked about it a lot. I never, until I read his book, I did know why he was so anti-religion. Actually, not maybe just religion, but religious events and things. He really shied away. It was a big deal for him to go to a wedding of one of our staff members whom he dearly loved, because it was in a church. But when you read his book, you see that he had really traumatic memories around his experiences as a young child. His mother was pretty much a religious fanatic and his father just had no religion. And she ran the roost; that was pretty obvious. But I remember discovering that, and I didn't know very much about his time in Cuba, so that was very interesting. And then subsequently we went back together, he and my husband and I, and spent two weeks, much of it with his friends. And of course I don't speak a word of Spanish, so it was a lot of fun.

CF: Do you know... well, you probably know everything I would like to know because of the book, but his transition from New York to Akron, and Tom Skelton arriving here too, can you fill in some of those blanks for me?

BS: He and Heinz were partners, Tom and Heinz, and I think it is not an exaggeration to say that Ohio Ballet would not exist without Tom Skelton. Heinz spoke just a little English at that point. He was teaching dance in New York, and Kate Firestone²¹ watched a rehearsal I think, or probably a class, and wanted to bring him to Akron. And he said at the time that he had several other offers, and so he got Tom to give him a map of the United States, and he *literally*, he says, he took a string and the shortest string from New York was to Akron, so that's how he picked that as his job, because he said in those days dance was in New York, and you had to be in New York. But he also needed more to do and wanted more to do.

And he didn't, at least he said that he did not think about starting a company then. It happened, I think probably the opposite of the way most companies get built. It just grew out of these young people who needed to be seen. But yeah, he always said it was the shortest string that brought him to Akron.

CF: That's a great line!

BS: And of course, Tom was all over the world. I remember when I first told my husband that I was going to think about spending a lot of time there, I said "The one reason I'm a bit fearful about it is that I don't want to *not* be Heinz's friend. I really value his friendship. And I think we'll fight, and I think then we'll no longer be friends, and I don't know that it's worth that." But that never came up. Tom and I fought a lot, and I think Tom loved me as much as I loved him. But he and I went around and around a lot. But truly, he was just key to Ohio Ballet. He was a brilliant lighting designer, and he actually could have done *anything*. We had no development person when I was first there and when I was on the board, and so he and I decided we'd be the development team. And he

²¹ One of the women who were principle catalysts to the establishment of Heinz Poll and Ohio Ballet in Akron. 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 Firestone established a school, the Dance Institute (originally associated with but now independent of the Ohio Ballet).

was good. I remember saying he could have done anything. He was a very, very, bright man. He was so curious about everything that he would find out about it, and he just was very important in every way.

Design: he'd work with our marketing director and come up with some design ideas that none of the rest of us had thought of. One time he got off a plane and he'd probably come from Europe, so he'd been on a plane for maybe 20 hours, and he said he was going to do some job, and I said "Oh, but I did that." And we went through about four things like that, and he got really irritated. And I said, "Well, I'm being paid to do these things, Tom." And he said well he thought he was going to do them, and so I went over and I switched the lights off in the room, and I said, "Tom, that's all I know about lights. I can make it go on and I can make it go off. And that's what you are to us. You're a magician. You do these wonderful things. So let me do the things I can do." But he had been so used to doing everything in the beginning.

CF: Another great story!

BS: It was a gift. It was a real gift — that I should never have had, really. It was such an odd thing. I remember saying to the president of the board, "But I'm really a high school English teacher. I can teach remedial reading. But I don't know." So he said, "Well, the thing that worried them were the finances." And I said, "Well, I will share an office with the finance person and learn." And I can add, so... I should tell you one thing that Heinz said to me once. I said, "Heinz, I am really a nervous wreck because I'm booking this company all over the United States, and sometimes further, South America. And I'm not a booking agent. And I can read the specifics that we need, but I..." He said, "Barbara, you have good judgment. It will all be okay." And then he turned around and walked out of my office.

And I thought, this guy has a lot of faith [in me]. I don't know, we'll do the best we can. But I think he knew that I loved that company so much that I just... whatever it took. Sometimes I worked pretty long hours. And it was a tough place. That company had to tour. It could not exist on the three weekends in Akron, and then later, three weekends in Cleveland. Yeah, and the board refused to let us go to Cleveland, so Tom Skelton and I left the board meeting, looked at each other, and said "We're going to go back in there and we're going to tell them that it's underwritten. And between the two of us, whatever we lose, we'll make it up, but we have got to go to Cleveland. We've got to dance in Cleveland." So we went back in, and we said "We have an underwriter. We will promise not to lose anything going to Cleveland." And so what could they say? They said okay. And it was very important that they had those dates, and that was a wonderful audience to have.

CF: Well, remind me to never get in a poker game with you!

BS: Oh, I probably wouldn't be very good, really. But Tom could do anything. I once said to him, "You would lie for Ohio Ballet," and he said "Of course." And I said "Well, I draw the line. I don't lie." So. Oh, gosh. He said "I would steal, too." He said "I actually stole some wood in order to build the very first outdoor flooring." I said, "Don't tell me. I don't want to know."

CF: That's wonderful.

BS: They were a fabulous team, the two of them.

CF: Yeah, I bet. I'm kind of curious, and you might be the best person to talk about this, because it seems to me that there's been this braided kind of relationship between Heinz and Ohio Ballet and University of Akron. And it was an unusual kind of partnership...

BS: It's very strange. Well, quite honestly, I don't know why the University of Akron put up with us. I don't think that Ohio Ballet did anything great for the University of Akron. We usually carried the tag that we were "in residence at the University of Akron." I honestly don't know whether that brought in dance students. Heinz had no use for academic dance, and he let that be known. And yet they were pretty nice to us. I said "Someday, they're just going to say, what are we doing with you? You're taking up all this space and you cost us money." One of these days we're..." So we actually looked for other places to move the company, and we never found an adequate space. And I don't know that we ever really had the money to do it. I don't think... it would have been tough.

But he just wanted to make dance. That was his thing. He just wanted to create dance. And "don't bother me with all this stuff." And after, when I came, half of his salary came from the University of Akron, and we paid the other half. And the University of Akron gave him incremental raises, and I never moved his salary. Because he didn't care. So by the end of the time that I was there, the University of Akron was probably paying three quarters of his salary because I never gave him a raise. And he gave a lot of it back. He just had no interest in, I mean we'd have to sort of rattle his cage to get him to buy a jacket and look halfway decent when he had to speak. The man never, he went to one board meeting. I begged him to go to board meetings.

Nobody in the dance world, when I would go to Dance/USA²² meetings, they couldn't believe that he wouldn't go. They said, "Well, they could take that company from him." And I would say that to him, "Heinz, you could lose this company. The board has the right to fire you." And he would say "No, no, no, no, I was here before they were, and it's all right." And then finally one day he said, "You just take care of it. I can't sit that long." And that was the truth. He couldn't sit through [them]. He said "They're so dumb, and they just talk and talk and talk and I can't do that." So I would make sure that I was at all the meetings, and they never threatened to take [away the company], but they tried to get him to do a *Nutcracker*,²³ which of course he wouldn't do.

And they would try to get him to do happy ballets, which would just cause him to do sad ballets, of course. But somehow it all worked out, I don't know. I *hope* that some of his pieces are done by other companies. Some are. And I hope they continue to be, because some of his works are just so beautiful.

CF: Well I understand that before he died, he gave many of his ballets to former members...

²² Established in 1982, Dance/USA is the national service organization for professional dance, serving a broad cross-section of the dance field.

²³ Originally choreographed by Marius Petipa with Lev Ivanov, The *Nutcracker* Ballet is adapted from E. T. A. Hoffmann's story "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King" by way of Alexandre Dumas' adapted story "The Nutcracker," to a score by Tchaikovsky. Following a rather unsuccessful premiere at the Mariinsky Theatre in Saint Petersburg in 1892, The Nutcracker ballet has enjoyed enormous popularity since the late 1960s and is now performed by countless ballet companies, primarily during the Christmas season, especially in North America. Major American ballet companies generate around 40% of their annual ticket revenues from performances of *The Nutcracker*. Schubert's reference to it here is by way of saying that Mr. Poll was uncompromising and would not yield to this accepted practice and way of generating income.

BS: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yep. He gave some to me and I gave them back. I said, "Heinz, I can barely walk. I can't dance. They shouldn't, you've got to give them to people who can then teach them." And I think he probably knew that, he was just being nice. So, some of them are done. I think Tulsa Ballet²⁴ did some. I know Verb²⁵ has done some. A few other places, Columbus, I think —BalletMet²⁶ did some. He would not sell his pieces. He just wasn't interested in it. I tried so hard to get him to go to Dance/USA meetings, for example, and just meet some of the people, offer them a tape of the work. But that wasn't his thing. He wanted to be *in* his studio, teaching and making dances. And all the rest of it, I would try to tell him "An artistic director does these other things..." And he would say, "No, you do those things. I don't want to do those things."

CF: You were his Enabler-in-Chief!

BS: I think so. You're right. No one's ever called me that, but I think you're right.

CF: But I'm glad you were.

BS: Oh, sometimes I would go home and I'd say, "Oh, I just can't make him do what I'm trying to make him do." I wanted him to work with an Indian company, and he said no, no, no, no, he wasn't going to do that. And so Tom and I ganged up on him and we said, "At least visit with them. Get to know them. I think it would broaden the company, it would be an interesting thing." And oh my goodness, it took a couple years, but it actually happened. And we had a tour of India planned, not all of India, obviously, but about a six-week tour. And I cannot remember what happened, but the government withdrew their support, so we couldn't do it. The U.S. government. They did some touring in the United States. And it was a fun thing.

But I think his mind just worked all the time. He listened to music constantly. And if he went in to a drug store and there was a big bin of tapes — back in those days, they were tapes—he would just buy a lot of them and listen. And so then he'd fall in love with a piece, and the timing on the tape that he was used to, it would be a junky tape (poor quality). So we would try to get him not to buy those tapes, but to think about what he might want, because then we'd have to go and try to have the thing cleaned up if we were going to use a tape. Or reduce it to a piano and maybe three or four musicians.

But he constantly did that because he was listening. I bet he spent hours every day. He was very musical. And he would say that about a specific dancer: "Oh, he or she is so musical." And I remember once saying "Heinz, all dancers have to be musical." And he said "Not really. The dancers who are naturally musical are just such a joy to work with." And I can barely walk, let alone dance. I don't dance at all, so...

CF: Well, you said you were dancing after some board meeting when he approached you.

²⁴ Founded in 1956, Tulsa Ballet is a professional company located in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

²⁵ A reference to Verb Ballets, a ballet company located in Shaker Heights, OH and currently directed by Dr. Margaret Carlson and Richard Dickinson, two former dancers associated with Ohio Ballet, both of whom are informants for the Ohio Ballet exhibit of this collection.

²⁶ With origins in the 1970s, BalletMet is the professional ballet company of Columbus, Ohio, which is a separate exhibit of this collection.

BS: Well, we were dancing. He was a very good ballroom dancer as well. I suppose maybe all choreographers would be.

CF: I want to ask you a question about Heinz as an artist and as a company founder and director, and what contribution that made to the state, to the city, to this area. But then I kind of want to come back and ask you more of a question about him as a friend. So maybe we could take those in order. For example, suppose someone comes upon this transcript on the website, and they've never heard of him. What do they need to know? What did this man do for this city and state?

BS: Of course, I think he did a great deal. His work was so very beautiful. And for a city the size of Akron to have a company of that value was amazing. When I went to my very first Dance/USA meeting, it was 1986, and I know I went out and bought a couple of suits. I was terrified, because we were in with what Tom referred to as "the big guys." So I was the only woman. They were New York City Ballet,²⁷ Pacific Northwest,²⁸ there were maybe twenty, and all of the general managers were men. We were by far the smallest annual budget. Heinz used to say "Don't tell anybody what our budget is. It's too embarrassing." It really was astonishing, the work that he did on a shoestring. But these people were, the dance world, I would say, was so respectful of him and of his work.

And they would ask what brought him here, why isn't he in New York, why isn't he...? And I don't know if Heinz got offers to go other places. Well, I know he did some choreography for the National Ballet of Canada,²⁹ and I guess a couple other companies. But mostly he just wanted to be here and do his work, and then he got to know his audience. And I think that was important to him.

CF: I didn't, as I said, get to finish the book, but I want to. I believe Jennifer Dunning³⁰ did the foreword?

BS: Jennifer Dunning, I think.

CF: Yes, an indication itself that his work was well-respected.

BS: And I wrote something, I don't know what they called it, yeah...

CF: You did, yes. So there was a story, so this is Heinz is well on, he's established in his position, and he brings fruit to this office, and I think it was Jennifer Dunning. Anyway, then I start reading the book, and of course his family was all involved with fruits and vegetables, and I know that he

²⁷ Considered one of the foremost ballet companies in the world, NYCB was founded in 1948 by George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein.

²⁸ Founded in 1972 and based in Seattle, Washington, PNB is said to have the highest per capita attendance in the United States, with 11,000 subscribers in 2004. The company consists of 49 dancers, and offers over 100 performances throughout the year.

²⁹ a large and important Canadian ballet company founded and based in 1951 in Toronto, Ontario.

³⁰ an important American writer and critic for The New York Times on the subjects of dance and ballet. Dunning studied ballet and modern dance and in 1977 became critic and reporter for the 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*.

liked to cook — at least I read that. So it felt like a thread through his life, the love of, I don't know, growing things, fruit and vegetables, cooking.

BS: Absolutely. Flowers, fruits, vegetables. Vegetables, mostly. He had a party every summer for everyone who had anything to do with Ohio Ballet. The guys who built the stage in the summer, he invited everyone. And a friend of ours had a café in town, which no longer exists, but she was an excellent cook, and I remember Heinz called her and said "How could I do chicken breasts for about 70?" Or some huge number. And she didn't balk at all. She gave him her thoughts about the subject. And so he did that every summer, he had at least one party for everybody. He did love to cook. He had a farm; he and Tom had a beautiful farm in New Jersey. And they had a garden there, and would just put out the extra, you know, how many tomatoes can two guys eat, and so they would give them to the neighbors or put them out on a table for the neighbors to take. It's a wonder he didn't hate fruits and vegetables because he was so terrified that he'd have to go back and sell, and take over his family business.

CF: I didn't quite understand that they were dividing their time between New Jersey and Akron.

BS: They were. Pretty much. He was in Akron much more than Tom, because Tom lit lots of the major dance companies as well as soloists in the United States and abroad. So he was back and forth a lot. When they would be in rehearsal, which would last maybe six to eight weeks before each season, of course Heinz would be there, and then Tom would come in. And he refused some pretty wonderful lighting jobs, because he'd know ahead of time, of course, when our six weekends were in Akron and Cleveland, and he was always there for those. So Heinz, I bet they spent about half of their time in Akron and half at the farm. And he did that after he retired, for a couple years. And then as his health failed, he... And he had made so many friends. It shocked me, because he could be difficult. He could be very difficult. And he was very critical of dance, his own as well as other people's.

But once he retired, he just had a lot of lunch dates with Wilma Salisbury,³¹ who was the critic of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, the dance critic. Kathryn Karipides,³² lots of dancers. And I was amazed. I was very, very fearful because he used to say "I'm going to die in this studio, I'm going to drop over dead on the floor, and I'm never going to retire." So when he did retire, I said "We've just bought this house. The guest house needs a lot of work. But if you're interested, look at it." And he said "Yes."

³¹ Dance and Music Critic, Architecture writer, restaurant reviewer for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* from 1968 – 2006. Since 2010. She has been working as dance essayist, writing program book essays about touring dance companies that appear on the DanceCleveland series.

³² First hired within the Flora Stone Mather College, Karipides initially started her career as a temporary professor in the women's physical education department. Karipides was promoted to an associate professor with tenure in 1963. In 1972, the dance program Karipides started as a part of the physical education curriculum became a part of the theatre arts department. In 1975, Karipides became a co-director for the new Graduate Dance Program and in 1980, she became a full professor. Throughout her career, Kathryn Karipides served in a variety of administrative roles within the dance department including Acting Chair and Interim Deputy Provost. Karipides retired from Case in 1998 as a Samuel B. and Virginia C. Knight Professor Emerita. Among many other accomplishments, she is also known for the choreography she created over the ten years she spent as choreographer and principal dancer for the Dance Theatre of Kathryn Karipides and Henry Kurth. *Karipides is an informant for the Cleveland Modern Dance Association/ DANCECleveland exhibit of this collection.*

And he called it his "little house." And he enjoyed going to dance performances, and just adored the Cleveland Orchestra. And then he'd go back for a month to the farm and then come back. I don't think he ever missed an orchestra performance. He just enjoyed it so much.

Then he went to Stratford³³ with us, and he loved theater but he could never do that [before retirement] because we had a busy summer of performances. And so I think he surprised us all by doing things that he said he'd always wanted to do, but he never moaned or he never showed that he was unhappy that he was missing those things. But he thoroughly enjoyed them when he retired.

CF: Well, Skelton died I think in '94, right? So Heinz would have gone five years more with the company without him. That must have been pretty tough.

BS: It was. It was very hard. And you can't be prepared. We knew Tom lived just about as long as the doctors said he [would] — the far end of what they... I think they said six to nine months and he lived about nine months after he was diagnosed. And he did one major job. Tom came to me and said "You have to help me. I have agreed to light *Romeo and Juliet*,"³⁴ I think for Pacific Northwest, although it might have been San Francisco Ballet,³⁵ it was one or the other. And "What should I do?" And I said "Did you sign a contract?" Because I knew how he felt about contracts. They were sacred. And he said "Yes." And he said "If I break the contract they'll all say I have AIDS." And I said "You don't care what they say. You have to do what you feel is right. I can't tell you what to do." And he did light it. That was his last, other than then he came back and did Summer Festival.³⁶ And that summer, the very last performance he went to, I think Jennifer Dunning was there. There were people from all over the United States who knew that that was just very close, what was it,... about three or four days before he, yeah, three days before he died. And they came from all over to say goodbye to him.

It was a partnership like you just don't see. And I think maybe that's what drew me in, that they were so, I mean they could argue and oh I remember once, Heinz was, everything was wrong with the lights and oh he was just having a German fit. And Tom said, "Well maybe you'd like this better." And I said to him later, it was as if he'd picked up a paint brush and just painted this. And Heinz said, "Yes, that's exactly what I wanted." And that was it. And over and over they would do that. You would think, oh, maybe we'd better get a referee in here, but they understood each other, and that's what I always wished that he had with the general manager, that kind of rapport. I think we

³³ A reference to The Stratford Festival, founded in 1952, is a highly regarded theatre festival that runs from April to October in the city of Stratford, Ontario, Canada.

³⁴ *Romeo and Juliet*, Op. 64, is a ballet by Sergei Prokofiev based on William Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*. First composed in 1935, it was substantially revised for its Soviet premiere in early 1940. Prokofiev reused music from the ballet in three suites for orchestra and a solo piano work. After *The Nutcracker*, *Romeo and Juliet* is perhaps the most choreographed ballet of the last sixty years. It is not known which choreographer made the work Skelton was lighting at this time.

³⁵ founded in 1933 as the San Francisco Opera Ballet under the leadership of ballet master Adolph Bolm, SFB is one of the premiere ballet companies in the country. It is currently based in the War Memorial Opera House, San Francisco, under the direction of Helgi Tomasson.

³⁶ A reference to the Heinz Poll Summer Dance Festival, sponsored by the city of Akron, the Festival was established to honor Poll's legacy, and continues the tradition of free public performances by a changing roster of respected dance companies. It has been held annually in Akron since 2006.

had it. But it's very hard. But he and Tom were just very, very special. They could finish each other's sentences, they knew each other that well.

CF: I think Richard [Dickinson]³⁷ must be here. Is there anything you'd like to leave us with about him as a friend or as a person that maybe hasn't been said, or that I haven't had the chance to ask you?

BS: I don't know...I guess never a day goes by that I don't think about Heinz, and also Tom. But I spent so much time with Heinz, and I think as a friend, I wasn't a dancer; it'd be very different if I had been a company member, I'm sure. But I think he would just go to the wall for his friends. And that's probably what drove me to work as hard as I did. And it was a long commute and sometimes I wondered what in the world I was doing. But I think that was it. I loved what he did. I had such respect for his work. And I knew as a friend it was a very, very special friendship. And he had it with other folks, with other people, and that he wanted perfection. He really wanted perfection and he did whatever he could to get it or to come as close as he could.

CF: I know you have no regrets.

BS: No, I don't. I don't. One of my kids once said it was always fun to live and to grow up in that house because we never knew who was going to be there at breakfast. And I said "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, it could be Heinz Poll, it could be Matthias Bamert. I mean, every day it was something." And it was like that. It was special.

CF: Thank you so much.

BS: You've read the best part of the book, I think.

CF: Oh, I don't think so. I really want to continue. I'm going to get my hands on it.

BS: He didn't talk about his dancers very much, which I said I wanted him to, and I urged him to. And John, my husband, urged him to. And he just wouldn't do it. He said, "I'll leave someone out, and then I'll feel bad about it." So he said "I can't get in to it." And he was probably right.

CF: I can see that. I can see that.

BS: Yeah, he was probably right. His "children," he would call them.

CF: Thank you so much, Barbara. I wish we had more time. I love your stories!

³⁷ Currently Associate Artistic Director (with Dr. Margaret Carlson) of Verbs Ballets, Dickinson has had an extensive career, including principal and soloist roles at Ohio Ballet, Boston Ballet, Chicago Ballet, Honolulu City Ballet and various regional companies. Previously, he served as Artistic Associate for Hubbard Street Dance Chicago and Artistic Director of Ballet Western Reserve, Great Lakes Festival Ballet, and Chamber Dance Theatre. He has also directed Boston Ballet II and has a Master of Fine Arts degree in Contemporary Dance from Case Western Reserve University.