

VDC Interview Transcript

Subject: Ohio Ballet

Informant: Jane Startzman, former dancer with Ohio Ballet, Director, Heinz Poll Summer Dance Festival

7.9.20

Total Time: 47 minutes

Home of Dr. Margaret Carlson
Beachwood, OH

Key:

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CF: Candace Feck

JS: Jane Startzman

JC: Jessica Cavender

MDB: Megan David Bushway

CF: Okay, I'm Candace Feck, and I'm talking with Jane Startzman, and it is July the ninth, 2020. We're at the home of Maggie Carlson in northeastern Ohio. It's great to meet you. I've read a lot about you.

JS: Well, thank you. You too.

CF: Of course, the focus here is Heinz Poll and the Ohio Ballet, and I understand that you joined the company in its second year, is that right?

JS: That's correct. In 1969, as an apprentice for a year, and then I was promoted to full company member.

CF: How long did you stay with the company?

JS: I danced with the company up until about 1986. Actually, it was 1988, because I transitioned into company manager/dancer around 1986. For about two years, I tried to do both jobs and then realized, "No, I think easing out of dance and going into the other is best." Then I was Heinz's executive assistant and my title was artistic administrator/company manager for another twelve years up until the year 2000.

We pause due to a sound disturbance outside the room.

JC: Let's pause for a moment.

CF: Okay. Oh, there was some noise, wasn't there?

JC: You want to repeat a couple of things?

CF: Would you like to just start over?

JC: If that's okay.

CF: So perhaps you could talk about your many roles with the company, and when they happened.

JS: Sure. I met Heinz in 1969 when I was a junior in high school, and I was an apprentice with the company for a year, and then a full company member in 1970. Worked as a dancer until about 1987, when I transitioned into company manager, executive assistant for Mr. Poll. I tried dancing and being an executive assistant at the same time, and two years was about enough for that. Then I transitioned out of dance and worked as Heinz's administrative assistant and artistic administrator for Ohio Ballet up through the year 2000, when he retired.

CF: How was it that you came to him as a junior in high school? Talk a bit about how that happened.

JS: Well, I had a wonderful friend at school here in Cleveland, Laurel School,¹ who was a dancer and she and I would go down to the Masonic temple downtown Cleveland, and we took dance classes from Ruth Pryor² in Cleveland. My friend said, "You really should try this summer intensive. This man, Heinz Poll, comes from New York and he's doing a month intensive at the University of Akron and you really should try it. I went last year, and it was amazing." So I did, and you had to audition, and I was very nervous. I remember him coming in and telling me that I *made* it and all I can remember is this very handsome German man with ice-blue eyes, and I thought, "Wow, now I'm scared."

But it was wonderful. So I started with the summer intensive and from there, I discovered that Heinz was working on creating a small company in residence there at the University of Akron,³ and I was invited to be an apprentice. I did that for a year, then became company member and just kind of stayed. There were eight of us; I was one of the original eight that was the first class. We were the pioneers at the University of Akron for the Akron Dance Department.⁴ That came about because our parents, when we graduated from school, said, "Well, you know you're going to college," and we

¹ An all-girls k – 12 private school in Northeast Ohio with a co-ed preschool program. *The VDC team has offered a residency based on this collection at Laurel School.*

² 1906 – 2001: a Chicago ballet dancer and instructor, and the first American ballerina to dance the role of the Swan Queen in *Swan Lake*, in 1930. She founded the Ballet Russe Academy in 1950, and the Ballet Theater Dance School in Cleveland, Ohio, which she ran for 25 years. Canadian dancer John Begg began teaching for Pryor in 1959. She also helped found ballet companies in Cleveland and Akron, Ohio. In 1972, Dennis Nahat and former Pryor student, Ernie (Ian) Horvath purchased her one-room studio in the sub-basement of the Masonic Temple in downtown Cleveland. The new school was named Cleveland Dance Center, soon to become the official School of the new Cleveland Ballet.

³ a public research university in Akron, Ohio, part of the University System of Ohio. The university sits within metropolitan Akron, with more than eighty buildings on 218 acres.

⁴ part of the School of Dance, Theatre, and Arts Administration, the dance program offers students traditional technical training combined with an academic program leading to a Bachelor of Fine Arts (B.F.A.) degree in Dance or Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) degree in Dance with a Business Cognate. A minor in dance is also available. The program was probably founded in the early 1970s.

said, "No, we're going to dance," and they said, "No, you're going to college." So a wonderful woman by the name of Ellen Herberich created a scholarship program for eight of us, the eight of us who had applied and were graduating, and we became the first class at the University of Akron.

CF: Let's see. So you must be the eight with whom he made *Elegiac Song*.⁵

CF: Can you talk about that a bit?

JS: Oh well, actually, I was not the person that he *set* it on, but I can talk to you about the process. When I came to the company, that piece was one of four that had already been created, and *Elegiac Song*..., it's interesting how that was created because there are eight women in it and one man, and it's that way for a reason: we didn't have very many men. Back then we had two. So there was one man in the cast and of the eight women, only two were on pointe because they were the strongest ladies at that time. The lead woman was on pointe and then another character who was her either alter ego or herself as a young person or her daughter was on pointe, and all the other girls were in soft shoes.

It was created as a vehicle mainly for the young woman that was the main character. She was the strongest of the ten people in the company at the time. It was a great vehicle for her. There were lots of movement where you use the hands, wide and open, and this girl had very long fingers and large hands and it was perfect. It was beautiful. I came to it as an understudy. I have very small hands, so I always wondered, "Well, how am I going to do that?" But anyway, it really gave me a vehicle to study movement and how to express movement individually, in my own way. That was one thing that I learned from Heinz that I think helped create my sense of myself as a dancer, because I certainly couldn't do that part the way this girl did. I didn't look anything like her, the way I express things was not the same, and I was very timid. This role is not timid, and it's very dramatic.

CF: He had been with the Chilean Ballet, too, for a number of years. Do you know if he brought work that he made there with him?

JS: Not that I know of, no. No, he danced mostly classical roles there. He did create, or that's where his *idea* for summer festival came from, going out into the villages up into the mountains, and they threw down plywood, of all things. Could you imagine dancers saying okay to that now? But they threw down plywood and they did *Don Q*⁶ and they did all these classical things, and the people in the villages were just amazed. They'd never seen anything like that. That was how he came to the idea of summer festival. He said, "Well, why shouldn't everyone be able to see this, including people that perhaps don't have access to concert dance, or financially can't bring their whole family or themselves? Or maybe they don't even *know* — they've never experienced dance. Well, let's put it in the park," which is essentially somebody's backyard. As far as the neighborhood, you can think it's in your backyard, "And give it to them as a gift of the arts in an informal atmosphere where people can come, and they can check it out. If they don't like it, it's fine — they can leave. Most everybody does

⁵ the first work Heinz Poll created (1968) in Northeast Ohio, rooted in the choreographer's memories of wartime Germany.

⁶ *Don Quixote* is a ballet in 3 acts, based on episodes taken from the famous novel *Don Quixote de la Mancha* by Miguel de Cervantes. It was originally choreographed by Marius Petipa to the music of Ludwig Minkus and first presented by the Ballet of the Imperial Bolshoi Theatre of Moscow, Russia in 1869.

[like it] at some level. You can bring a picnic, you can make it an experience, and then that's kind of your way into, "Well, gee, maybe I'll go to a concert the next time." Everybody thought he was crazy and they said, if you give something away for free, no one will see its value." Yes, I understand that point. Absolutely. But in this case he had a really good idea and the city of Akron bought into it and funded it and does to this day, so it was a good idea he had there.

CF: Where had you trained in dance prior to studying with Mr. Poll?

JS: My *first* experience with dance was with a woman named Viola Gensler. (Responding to a look of recognition on my face): Do you know Viola Gensler? How do you know her? Can I just stop?

CF: We know of her because Elaine Gibbs is one of your subjects and she's worked for ...

JS: Oh, okay. All right. I originally started when I was maybe six or seven with Viola Gensler and I loved it because Viola was all about stories and dances. She wasn't a classical ballet dancer. She came from vaudeville,⁷ and she had all these wonderful dances. I remember one was ... we called it the "basket dance," because we all got to have baskets and we all got to have flowers in our basket and the dance consisted of doing your dance steps that you learned in class and picking up flowers and collecting them. I just loved it, the whole dancing and story part. I didn't like the practicing in the beginning, but it wasn't until I got a little bit older and realized, "Well, you have to have technique and you have to practice because otherwise it doesn't look very good."

I then discovered Ruth Pryor downtown, and started taking from her and found this whole other world of classical ballet technique.

CF: Amazing. So when you started, you were an apprentice and the company just was forming and it was the Chamber Ballet⁸ and then it became the Ohio Ballet and you were really there almost throughout.

JS: Yeah.

CF: Talk about the beginning, the perhaps excitement or uncertainty or how it was coming together.

JS: Yes. Well, in the beginning we all were not of equal talent. Some of us were good on pointe. Some of us were beginners on pointe. We only had in the beginning three men, but that kind of limits you. We had to learn partnering. We had to learn everything in the beginning, and it's kind of funny because that includes how to put on your makeup. Heinz Poll had to teach us how to put on our makeup, even when you go to a reception, how to comport yourself when you go to a reception. What's the image of a dancer, how to act professional. He would always say, "Don't do that. That's too provincial," and then he would say, "Oh, but what do I know? You don't have anybody to teach you. You don't have any ..." what's the word? Role models. You don't have any mentors. So how

⁷ a theatrical genre of variety entertainment, popularized in the United States and Canada from the early 1880s until the early 1930s. A typical *vaudeville* performance was made up of a series of separate, unrelated acts grouped together on a common bill.

⁸ 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.

would you know? There's no New York City Ballet⁹ here. There really actually was no dance here other than dance instructors, and kids taking dance. There was no University of Akron Dance Department. There was no EJ Thomas.¹⁰ So, he was like our dad and our mentor. He literally taught us how to put on our makeup and I know we girls hated it because from where he came from in Europe, you put your hair in a bun, then you took a hairnet, now imagine this, and you had to put it over your *entire hair* from your hairline all the way. Well, of course we looked at that and said, "Uh-uh." Right? So we did that for a while, and then we found ways to try to fake him out a little bit, take it off and make it look like we'd covered our head as long as we sprayed everything down and there were no wisps, we didn't get yelled at. But we used grease paint, because that's what he knew and of course we graduated from grease paint to finding our own foundation and our own way, and he didn't care as long as we fixed it so it looked proper and right. We learned on our own from the guidelines that he started with. Receptions, he would tell us things like, "Wear a nice, simple black dress. Don't wear things that look pretty, pink, ruffly and make you look like children. Wear simple jewelry."

Even down to things like that, so that we learned how to present ourselves as a professional company. That's what he wanted. We were high school age back then, you have to remember, so all this was new territory to us. There were things like there was no prom. When someone would come to him and say, "Well, I need to have next weekend off, because I'm going to the prom." He'd say, "Oh no, no. You're not." That was another stepping stone, learning "Well, what comes first?" If we have a performance in two weeks...

There is further sound interference...

JC: Let's back-up to prom?

JS: Oh, yes. Yes.

Yes. Things like proms, dates. You just didn't dare go tell him these things, because he would say, "You're not going to be at rehearsal next weekend? Yes, you are, or you're not in the role." He had the nerve to take you out of the role, even if there were only ten of us, and it meant he had to redo the piece from eight people to six because you didn't show up. He would do that. I fully believe a lot of that was to also teach us the importance of what we were doing. He went through with it! So in the beginning we did, we had to learn everything. The classes that he would teach, he taught to make us stronger in all ways to try to even us all out. The pieces that he choreographed, same thing. For example, one of the first ones he did was Schubert waltzes, three couples, a lot of partnering and believe me, that ballet today for excellent professional dancers is hard. Back then, it was to teach us how to dance together, how to partner. The guys really went through something else, we would rehearse it once, we'd take a break, then we would do it again. We would do it three times in one day, and we didn't know any better, so we didn't know whether or not we were being, quote, unquote, abused or not. Right? So we'd just go, "Okay, the third time. I can't feel my legs, but all

⁹ Considered one of the foremost ballet companies in the world, NYCB was founded in 1948 by George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein, and is used here as a point of reference to the ballet company of record in the U.S.

¹⁰ Edwin J Thomas Performing Arts Hall is a part of the University of Akron, built in 1973. It is a flexible space by design, varying from a one, two or three tier seating structure, holding as many as 2,955 patrons.

right." We would do this every day with these pieces. Three times. When we got into the theater, same thing. If we had a four-hour block of time, which is usual for rehearsal, we would go through the program. Then if there was *any* time left over, we went back over and we did something else. There was never any, "Okay, go rest. You did it and you did it again and you did it again." Because he said, "If you can do something three times and make it through the third time, you'll be able to do it once." He was right. Because once we got on stage and were petrified the nerves take your energy, right? Then you're really grateful that you did this piece three times because you knew darn well you're going to make it through once. A valuable lesson.

CF: Hard-earned!

JS: Yes, hard-earned, but I'm glad because as we grew and we started touring, that took us into the years of what everybody calls the dance boom, when there was money for the arts and there was money for dance. We toured a good four to five weeks in the fall and four to five weeks in the spring, and we were popular. I mean, we grew into a very accomplished small contemporary dance company, and that's how we did it, I'm convinced, we never let down and when we pulled into a city, if there was time to rehearse, we did it. That got us through, because we did some hard tours and many of them were one night stands. You get in the bus and you go to the next place, you dance, get back in the bus, you go to the next place. And once again, that took us to *another* level and then we were *really* rocking. We had a very, very good national reputation, I think; we did many works. Heinz was very good about also not just choreographing to our skills but helping us *grow* our skills. He brought in other master choreographers. We did some George Balanchine works.¹¹ He brought in Laura Dean.¹² He brought in Gerald Arpino¹³ and Robert Joffrey,¹⁴ who were his friends.

¹¹ 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.

¹² 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.

¹³ 1923 – 2008. an American dancer and choreographer, who co-founded the Joffrey Ballet and succeeded Robert Joffrey as its artistic director in 1988. In 1956, Arpino was a founding member of the Robert Joffrey Theatre Ballet with Robert Joffrey. He served as co-director of the company's school, the American Ballet Center, and was the leading dancer until an injury forced him to stop in 1963. By 1965 he had choreographed five works for the company, and became the Joffrey's co-director and resident choreographer. In the first twenty-five years of the company's existence, Arpino had created more than a third of all its commissioned ballets. After the death of Robert Joffrey in 1988, Arpino became the Artistic Director of the Joffrey Ballet and in 1995 moved the company to Chicago.

¹⁴ Joffrey, Robert: 1930 – 1988: an American dancer, teacher, producer, choreographer, and co-founder of the Joffrey Ballet, known for his highly imaginative modern ballets. In 1949, he made his debut with the French choreographer Roland Petit and his *Ballet de l'Opéra National de Paris*. From 1950 to 1955, he taught at the New York High School for the Performing Arts, where he staged his earliest ballets. He founded the Joffrey Ballet School in New York City in 1953, where it remains as a separate organization from The Joffrey Academy of Dance in Chicago, which is the official school of the Joffrey Ballet Company.

Paul Taylor.¹⁵ We got to do the *gamut*, and if that doesn't make you strong, *nothing else will*. You put your pointe shoes on and you do *Concerto Barocco*¹⁶ for the first piece, which is Balanchine, take the pointe shoes off, then you go into *Aureole*,¹⁷ Paul Taylor, barefoot, then you better put the pointe shoes back on because you have to finish with Ruthanna Boris's¹⁸ *Cakewalk*.¹⁹ Night after night after night. But, oh my goodness, we got to perform some of the best choreographers around at the time.

CF: I get the feeling that he was really a very commanding person.

JS: Yes!

CF: Maggie was saying she was terrified when she started, also I think as a junior in high school. Did you have to go through a little transition with that?

JS: Oh, yes (she laughs). When I first started, I remember my transition from being an apprentice to a full company member. As an apprentice, our directive from Mr. Poll was to learn *everything*. You were expected to be in the studio all the time and learn every part. Well, as I say, we didn't know any better. So we said, "Yes, of course, certainly." It's kind of *impossible*, but we'd be *sponges*, drink in everything. One day one of the girls who had a beautiful solo in this piece, I was her understudy, and she was sick. Mr. Poll said, "All right, well, do you want to do the solo?" And I thought, "Yes, yes I do. I do!" I wasn't strong enough to do it justice by any means, but I had no idea what I was walking into. I don't know why, but I started the solo and for a solid hour, he screamed, yelled, "No, go back to the beginning. No, that's horrible!" I mean, I started crying and I wasn't allowed to stop. He said, "I don't care. Go back to the corner and do it again." For an hour! And of course all the other company members were around watching, so it's humiliating on top of it. I got through that hour and I went home, and cried all night and said, "Well, I have to quit. I mean, I'm *worthless*, first of all. I can't do anything." So I have to quit. I went in the next day for class, we all stand at the barre. He came in late because I was going to tell him before class, "I quit." I thought, "Oh, what am I going to do?"

So We started with our *pliés* and then into *port de bras* and I could *feel* him coming down the line. I went down for *port de bras* and I came up and he was right in front of my face and he looked me

¹⁵ 1930 - 2018: Paul Belville Taylor was a prominent American dancer and choreographer, one of the last living members of the so-called "third generation" of America's modern dance artists. He founded his eponymous Paul Taylor Dance Company in 1954 in New York City, and left a legacy of 147 choreographed works, as well as a legacy of other important American dancers and choreographers, including Twyla Tharp, David Parsons, Laura Dean, Dan Wagoner, Christopher Gillis and Senta Driver, among many others.

¹⁶ a neoclassical ballet made for students at the School of American Ballet by George Balanchine in 1941 to Johann Sebastian Bach's *Concerto in D minor for Two Violins*.

¹⁷ Having founded his company in 1954, Taylor premiered his 30th work, *Aureole* in 1962 to the baroque music of Handel, marking a significant departure from his previous avant-garde aesthetic. The work is considered Taylor's first major success, and it showcased what was to become his trademark style of athletic movement that features both classical ballet and modern techniques.

¹⁸ 1919 – 2007: Born in Brooklyn, Boris was the first American Ballerina to star with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo troupes of the 1940s. She was also among the first students at George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein's School of American Ballet when it opened in 1934. In 1951 she joined the New York City Ballet.

¹⁹ Boris choreographed *Cakewalk* (1951) for the NYCB, using costumes from a previous ballet, to music by Louis Moreau Gottschalk.

right in the eye and was *this* close and he said, "I *killed* you yesterday, didn't I?" It frightened me so badly that I just kept doing my *port de bras* and I kept on with my class, and I thought, "Well, now I *can't* quit because I'm too afraid to talk to him!" So I didn't quit, but that really kind of stuck with me. I guess that's another lesson. You either do it or you don't. I do remember at one point my father, when I graduated high school, came down and had a talk with Heinz and he said, "Does she have any talent?" Because he wanted to know if they need to take me aside and start me into something else or what? He said, "Yes," he said, "But it's up to *her*." She either needs to push forward, or she isn't going to." He said, "It's not up to me." I was very shy and timid, so my father came back and told me that, and I remember being all the *more* terrified. Somehow I think I stuck around in the beginning because I was terrified, and then after that, I thought, "Well, I got through *that* day, and then I got through another day, and today I actually did something better." It just went on like that until it got a little bit better.

I think for most of my life, as a dancer, I was a little terrified of him. I remember about a week before he died, and by then we had become friends and I wasn't dancing anymore and it was a *way* different relationship, and we were watching old videos, and we were watching a video of *Songs Without Words*, which I was in, and we happened to be watching my part at that moment. He turned to me and he said, "You were *so beautiful* in that!" And I about fell off my chair because never, *never* in my professional life had he *ever* said anything like that to me.

It was just his way. He wasn't a mean person. His way of saying *that* when I was a dancer would have been, "*Much* better Janie, *much* better." "*Much* better," equaled "That was beautiful." So to hear that all that time later, I just thought, "Really? Wow." I mean, it would have been nice, I suppose, to hear it as a dancer, but he said, "If I'd have told you that then, it would have stopped your progress." Well, a lot of people think that's old school, and I get it. But who knows, maybe it would have.

CF: Did you have a sense in those early years what it was becoming? That it was actually going to be this long-term company? I mean, was it exciting?

JS: Yes, it *was* exciting. For me, I guess it was very much a live-by-the-moment thing. Now that I look back on it, of course we can always say that, hindsight. If I'd *really* been intelligent, I'd have gotten a degree in something else that I could use after I retired, and all that kind of thing. But when we started touring, it was exciting. When these *famous* choreographers come in and then set something that you were allowed to perform, we just kind of *rode* that, you know? Yeah, the whole thing was wonderful and it just seemed like, "Oh, well, it's all going to be all right. This is just never going to end." Of course things do, or they change. I know when he retired in ... what was it? 1999. I quit the year after that, or I retired from it, too. It's just a different ... you know, changing of the guard, things change and all of that. It's life.

CF: Let's see. Would you care to talk about any particular work of his that you especially loved or enjoyed?

JS: Okay. Of the Heinz Poll works, the ones that I enjoyed the most, and I *think* the ones that I was probably most successful at doing were the dramatic roles. There were two, *Songs Without Words* and *Elegiac Song*, that I particularly liked delving into. When I was done with the piece, I was at a different place. I had gone through something emotionally. It wasn't just steps. Although that can be very satisfying, when you do a ballet and you accomplish the steps well and you're done and you know you did a good job. That's a different thing. But for example, in *Songs Without Words*, to know that

you've done a movement where perhaps you hardly moved at all, and everybody was looking at you and you knew it. So finding that sort of artistic power, to me, was in both of those roles.

CF: Both of those dealt with the Holocaust, right? Or am I wrong about that?

JS: Could be. *Songs Without Words* was definitely about the Holocaust. *Elegiac Song* was about war in general, and women during time of war and loss. There were all kinds of things. It was a very *psychological* piece. It's a type of piece you either usually like a lot because you can get into that psychological part, or you can't stand it. Because it's dark and it's a deep kind of thing, but I loved it. It was cathartic to me, and *Songs Without Words*, the particular role I had, I identified with a lot too.

CF: Well, I want to make sure that we have time to talk about the festival because that's your baby now. Right?

JS: Yeah.

CF: You mentioned the origins of that and his Chilean experience, but talk about the festival.

JS: Well, the festival, Heinz's idea about that was going out into an outdoor environment, a park, an outdoor setting, bringing the highest quality dance *possible* to "the masses," so to speak. In Akron that was taking it into the neighborhoods, and the city agreed to fund it. Back then when we first started it, I don't think *anybody* else in the country was doing something like this. By that, I mean, we were setting up a full stage in one park for a Friday and Saturday night performance, taking it down, setting it up in another park the next weekend, and we did that three or four times throughout Akron, and it became so popular that there were summers when we were doing ten different parks. I mean, we went to Youngstown, Ashtabula, Hudson, lots of different places in the Northeast Ohio area.

It's very expensive to do that, you can imagine — setting up full stage with full lighting, with electricity, bringing it into a park where you don't have that. There's generators, all kinds of things. Porta-potties, tents. But very unusual. There are two parts, really, to the mission for the dance festival that we do now. Of course, Ohio Ballet does not exist anymore, but the city, Dave Lieberth,²⁰ who's co-founder with myself, along with Maggie Carlson and David Shimotakahara and several other people that had experienced summer festival and knew what it was with the Ohio Ballet, worked with Dave and the city in creating the Heinz Poll Summer Dance Festival. That's the iteration that we do now, and the difference is it's not Ohio Ballet each weekend. It's a different

²⁰ Dave Lieberth spent 35 years in the private sector as a reporter and news director in Akron, and was in the practice of law for 25 years. For 10 years, he was Deputy Mayor and Chief of Staff until December, 2012. Lieberth co-founded the Heinz Poll Summer Dance Festival with Jane Startzman and managed the program for the city of Akron from 2006 – 2020. Not only was he the stage announcer for Ohio Ballet's final performance at Goodyear Metropolitan Park in 2008, but in 1968, as a 21-year old student at the University of Akron, he was a technician overseeing the audio playback of music for the very first performance of Heinz Poll's company. His daughter, Kate Lytton had a professional ballet career and began her love for dance at the Ohio Ballet's Summer Festival performances when she was very young.

company each weekend. So, I feel that's *better* because we can showcase different companies each weekend in different parks. So getting back to the two-fold goal, it is to reach into as many neighborhoods as we can to offer this to people so that those that have never *seen* dance get a chance to see it, try it out, see if they like it, or they don't. Our dance aficionados love it, because they get to see it in an informal outdoor atmosphere, and it's free to the public. That's the other mission. That's a very strong one, and was with Heinz — that this should not cost the public any money. No ticket price. That's a very difficult thing to maintain, because *somebody* has to pay for it. The city pays for it, we have foundation support, we have individual support, but that's a fragile existence in the fragile world of the arts, certainly, but a noble one. In that regard, I think we still are unique in the United States, the way we do it and the way we're supported.

CF: Amazing. How many people do you typically reach in the summer with that festival?

JS: Sure. We were presenting for four weeks, a full month, up until last year. Within a month, we typically would get about 10,000 people over ... eight performances. Last year was our first year we had to cut to three because budget cuts and so forth. Over three weeks, last year, we did *very* well. We had about 7,000, 7,500 people. It's still holding strong in terms of how many people we attract over a weekend. The other thing, too, is that it *is* dependent on weather because if you have inclement weather, if it looks like it's going to rain, people will still come and bring their umbrellas. If it's cold, they'll bring their coats, which is amazing. That's great, because it means they like it. But it can cut into your attendance numbers. Of course, if we're rained out, we don't have a rain site, and we don't have time to go set-up someplace else to provide a performance. So it's a big loss if we're rained out. It hasn't happened very often, and I hate to even utter the words...

CF: Is it always companies from this area that you're presenting or do you invite companies from other localities?

JS: Not always. That's another thing that we'd like ... If you want to say that that's part of a mission as well, that's fine. We definitely want to support our best local companies and we do. When we can, if we have money or if it's serendipity — in other words, if there's a national company that's close by, that's performing in Chicago or they've gotten a particular grant that provides assistance. We would have the guest company from outside Northeast Ohio, and outside of the state. We support our local companies, and we also support bringing in companies. We brought in Martha Graham,²¹ we've brought in Ballet Hispanico,²² Doug Varone,²³ PHILADANCO!²⁴ We want to try to do that

²¹ (1894-1991) An American modern dancer and choreographer whose name is nearly synonymous with the early modern dance movement, and who promoted her belief that movement is the vehicle for giving outer form to inner feeling. Her style and training system, eponymously named “the Graham technique,” reshaped American dance and is still taught worldwide. Graham directed and choreographed for her eponymous company, performed and taught for over seventy years. Her company continues to perform, following her death.

²² an American dance company based in Manhattan, New York, founded by the Puerto Rican/Mexican-American dancer and choreographer Tina Ramirez in 1970. BH presents dances reflecting the experience of Hispanic and Latino Americans.

²³ an American choreographer and director working in dance, theater, opera, film and fashion. He is an educator and advocate for dance. Varone became a member of the José Limón Dance Company in 1978, and the following year joined the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company, remaining with that company until 1986 when he left to pursue his own choreographic interests. Since then, he has created works for more than a dozen different dance companies internationally, in addition to his own.

when we can and where we can, even if we continue with only three weeks. We'd love to get that back up and get into more neighborhoods. But of course, we'll have to see. It takes money because we're *not* going to charge a ticket price.

CF: I love it. Imagine seeing Martha Graham's company for nothing in the park!

JS: Yeah, yeah, true.

CF: So one of the reasons we have this site is, like your mission, to introduce people to the important dance events and developments of the state that the average person knows nothing about. So I'm wondering if you consider somebody like that lucking on to this Heinz Poll segment, what do you want them to know about his importance to the state of Ohio or to the city of Akron?

JS: Oh, what would I like people to know about Heinz and his importance? Well, first and foremost, as I said, when he came here originally, he came to teach a couple of master classes. He was invited by a consortium of five different dance schools and he came to teach some master classes and then he decided, "You know? I think I want to make my company here." Because he lived in New York City, he said, "I can get here. I can drive here in a day. It's close to Chautauqua. Geographically speaking, this is kind of a nice destination place to create a company. I like it." Also, there wasn't anything here. As I said, there was no EJ Thomas Hall. There was no University of Akron School of Dance. There just wasn't *anything*. So he started all of that, summer festival — we talked about he brought professional dance into the parks to people for free of charge. And he toured a company that really became and was called back then the "Jewel of Akron." We were one of Akron's greatest exports. Everywhere we went, our program said, "In residency at the University of Akron." We did some international touring, as well: Italy, Central America, South America. So we really got dance out there, and good dance! People got to see dances by master choreographers of the time and new work, which is always important, exploring new work. That's another thing we like to do at the festival too, and our companies are wonderful about that. World premieres, Akron premieres of new work. Some of them aren't ready to give me titles for the program a month ahead because they're still creating. I think that's so exciting. Even if you put in the program "Untitled," it's okay. This is something brand new and you are seeing this for the first time, and some of you that are seeing it for the first time have never even seen dance before. How cool is that?

CF: Well, an amazing achievement on his part. Some people would be deterred from coming to a place where there is nothing, but he seemed to really like the challenge.

JS: He did, and he also had a *wonderful* partner in Thomas Skelton, who was a world renowned lighting designer, and the two of them together were a team. There was just no telling them "No, you can't." They complemented each other well, because, for example, where Heinz was not good in the board room, if he went in the board room and felt resistance, he would just start blowing up and nobody would pay any attention. Whereas Tom Skelton could go into the board room and say, "Well now, you *know*, this is how it's done," and everybody would look at him because he ... world

²⁴ founded in 1970 by Joan Myers Brown. Originally created out of a need to provide performance opportunities for Black dancers, who were then systematically denied entrance in many local dance schools and had even fewer professional performance outlets, PHILADANCO! has since grown into a professional dance company that is recognized across the nation and around the world.

renowned! If he's telling you this is what it is, it's not that they didn't believe Heinz, but certainly were going to listen to Tom. So the two of them as co-founders and as a team were wonderful, and they brought us right along too.

CF: Well, as a last question, I wonder if you could speak to something about Heinz the person, not just the man who developed all this: Heinz, the person that you'd like people to know.

JS: Well, I talked about being afraid of him, and many of us were afraid of him, and the more I got to know Heinz, and it's particularly after I retired from dancing and got to work with him on kind of the other side of things, I found out that all of that was a cover for someone with really a very *big* heart, a very *sensitive* soul, and oftentimes the reason he barked so loud and screamed or came across so strongly was because he didn't *like* confrontation. He hated it. Actually, the dancers that were with him the longest, I think, kind of *learned* that, because in his later years, he got very quiet. For example, in the later years, when he was *sitting* in the dance studio, when he got quiet is when you worried. When he was yelling, he was paying attention to you and he was trying to make it better.

But when he was just being very quiet and more or less not saying anything, that's when you worried. So he sort of let his true self come out in later years. But as I got to know him, really beyond that, and he even said, "I don't like the confrontation. I don't want to go have that meeting." But because he didn't, it would aggravate him so much that when he had to be face-to-face with someone, it just all came out unfiltered. I thought that was really interesting. But he loved animals, loved cats, loved *all* animals. At one point, he said when he died, he was going to will everything to an animal sanctuary. Animals had it *way* over people, anywhere. (She laughs). But yes, a very kind soul, but yet a very determined person.

CF: Thank you so much. You really painted us a picture of him.

JS: Yeah? Well, good.