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GUEST SPEAKER: SANDRA NOLL HAMMOND

I first thought about calling this little talk, “Adventures of a Ballet Historian,” but that title has already been taken by a most important ballet historian and a valued friend and mentor, Ivor Guest. Better I should speak to you about “The Adventures of a Ballet Dancer, entering the world of academe and the realms of ballet history.”

I entered the academic sphere in 1970, when I moved to Tucson with my sociology-professor husband and our two young children. I discovered that at the University of Arizona, dance was in Women’s Physical Education, so I knocked on the door of the director, handed her my resumé and asked if she’d like to have some ballet classes added to her curriculum of modern dance and folk dance.

She hired me, as a part-time instructor, but also as the first spouse of a University of Arizona professor hired on that faculty. A court case had just been settled, throwing out the long-standing nepotism rule that forbade a husband and wife being on the university faculty.

I’d already been teaching and performing for a number of years, and I realize now that I repeated a constant refrain in the studio, words that followed me through the years. I would tell my students to use the space; fill out the

movement; listen to the music; feel the rhythm; get your eyes off the floor; look out there; focus! And, I'm sure you've said much the same.

These continued to be my refrains as a dancer in academe and as an adventurer into unknown realms of ballet history, at least unknown to me. I thought, if there seemed to be an important empty space, I should try to fill it. This led to some adventures, and I'll share some of those moments with you tonight.

The 1970s were good years to do some adventuring; they were exciting times for dance. In preparing this talk, I looked in my dance library at a 1976 issue of *Arts and Society*, a journal published by the University of Wisconsin. That issue was entitled "The Growth of Dance in America." There were 26 of us authors/contributors in that issue and, though certain concerns were expressed, the overall tone was optimistic. *Arts and Society* pointed out that attendance at dance concerts was up 1500% from ten years before; both *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines had featured a dancer on their covers in May 1975 (Nureyev?); new emphasis on the benefits of exercise was propelling adults into dance classes and into ballet classes in this era before fitness studios and gyms and Curves enterprises on every block; and then there was the 1972 federal ruling, Title 9, requiring equal educational opportunities for women and men to participate in courses, programs and athletics.

At Arizona, for our small Department of Women's Physical Education, right across the street from the enormous men's P.E. and Athletic complex, Title 9 opened many doors. There were lots of spaces to be filled. So, we started a dance

major program and I became its first director, or Coordinator, as it was called. I proposed hiring new faculty, which was done, including dear, beautiful George Zoritch, whom you honored here a few years ago. We added studio space; bought a grand piano; improved our physical therapy facilities.

But one thing money could not buy and legislation could not mandate: a college textbook for our hundreds of beginning ballet students. I thought they should have one; modern dance students had one. So, I worked up an outline and a brief preface for a book that I thought I'd call *Ballet Basics*, and I mailed the outline and preface to National Press Books in Palo Alto, the publisher of the little modern dance text.

Just a very few days later I received a contract and a letter from the publisher, saying he had been searching for ten years for someone to write a textbook for adult ballet beginners. I'd certainly found a space to fill, and now panic filled me. All I could think was, "What have I done?" I had never published anything except some articles in the campus newspaper at the University of Arkansas, where I began my undergraduate work. The night I received the book contract, we were hosting a dinner party. I reached up to a high shelf in our kitchen to get down the crystal dessert plates, and my shaking hands dropped them all on our Mexican tile floor.

But, the book got written (I wrote from five to seven each morning) and was published in 1974.

Fast forward 31 years: *Ballet Basics* is in its 5th edition and now published by McGraw-Hill. There is also a Korean edition. I have no idea what it says, but

I recognize the illustrations. [Just after this speech, I found out that there is to be a Finnish edition soon.]

In writing *Ballet Basics* I wanted to have a substantial chapter on ballet history, and that's when I discovered more big, open, empty spaces---lots of missing information and lots of mis-information. Authors did not agree on most things---not on dates, not on people's names. For example, the "father" of ballet, the one who codified our five positions of the feet, was he Pierre Beauchamps or Charles Beauchamps? The "authorities" didn't seem to agree. What was the real name of the dance academy signed into existence by Louis XIV in 1661? I found at least six different names, and as many different "first directors" of the Academy. Worse yet, there was virtually no discussion in any of the books about how or what dancers were actually dancing back then, no real information on the development of ballet technique---and that's what really interested me.

I realized that my own training as a dancer had big empty spaces: I knew nothing about dance technique prior to the early 20th century. Well, maybe some late 19th century technique, since my teachers had been trained by teachers who worked then; for example, Margaret Craske, who had studied with Cecchetti, and Dolores Mitrovich, also a Cecchetti student, but before that she was a pupil of Raphael Grassi, who had worked with Arthur Saint-Léon. But, I certainly knew nothing about ballet repertory prior to the mid-19th century, and precious little of later 19th-century ballets. So, I began to take workshops and classes wherever and whenever I could, studying 18th-century theatrical dance, referred to today as "baroque" dance. Thanks to a grant from the University of Arizona, I

accumulated a dance library, including lots of Xeroxes, lots of 18th century dance notation. Then I studied Renaissance dance, working my way back to the 15th century, the earliest period for which we have descriptions of actual dances. I loved reconstructing and performing all these period dances, thinking that the older I became, the older the dances I'll do. It seemed very neat! And, the best part: I began to see connections in the development of dance technique from one period to the next.

As I explored "early dance" I found another big empty space: the period between the "baroque" ballet of the eighteenth century and the "romantic" ballet of the nineteenth. No one seemed to know what was danced during that time or how, so I decided to try to find out.

Among my many Xeroxes was a book published in London in 1831 by a dancing master named E.A. Théleur. His book, *Letters on Dancing*, had three big pluses for me: it described dance technique of that "in-between" period in ballet history; it was in English; and it had two systems of dance notation. Perhaps I should add a 4th plus: Théleur's book is the earliest ballet technique text with illustrations of dancers on full pointe.

I spent the summer of 1979 at our beach house in northern California studying Théleur's book and his notations. I thought he made a lot of sense. He was very detailed in his descriptions of ballet technique and training, and what he said seemed to accord with, and clearly augment, things written by Carlo Blasis, who wrote at the very same time as Théleur and was an author that everyone seemed to revere.

Since I had never presented a paper at a scholarly conference---another big empty space in my academic resumé, I decided to submit an abstract on Théleur and his book for a conference of a newly formed organization, Dance History Scholars. My abstract was accepted; I wrote the paper, and I titled it “A Moving History: Early Nineteenth Century Ballet Technique.”

In February 1980, I went to the DHS Conference at Barnard College in New York City, and I went as a ballet dancer, not yet thinking of myself as a ballet historian. And, I wore a costume, based on illustrations in Blasis’s book, because I wanted to demonstrate how the material by Blasis was explained in greater detail by Théleur. I didn’t realize that one usually did not present a scholarly paper in costume! Selma Jeanne Cohen chaired my session, and she seemed a bit surprised by my appearance. But, I had a wonderful time, talking and demonstrating, and talking and dancing. And then I became aware that the large audience was extremely quiet, ominously quiet, and they still had their eyes open.

What I did not know, but soon found out in the question and answer period at the end of the session, was that the memoirs of the great nineteenth-century Danish choreographer, August Bournonville, had recently been published in an English translation, and in his book Bournonville lambasted his contemporary, Théleur. Most of my audience, therefore, assumed that Théleur was the fool Bournonville made him out to be. I didn’t know if I’d fallen into a big empty space or if, as I hoped, I’d begun to fill in that space.

In any case, I kept on trying to fill in the empty space between the baroque and the romantic periods, often waiting and listening a long time before the books and manuscripts began to “speak” to me, and I could begin to understand.

Fast forward 10 years, 1990: DHS had become SDHS, the Society of Dance History Scholars, and it was publishing an annual series called *Studies in Dance History*. I was now at the University of Hawaii, and I got a call from one of the editors: Would I write the introductory essay for the SDHS re-publication of Théleur’s *Letters on Dancing*? I said yes; and thank you.

Fast forward 15 more years, summer 2005: Just twelve days ago I returned from the 3rd Bournonville Festival in Copenhagen (nine days of ballet heaven for a ballet historian). I was an invited guest of the Royal Danish Ballet. I will return to Copenhagen in August, again at their invitation, to be the opening speaker at their Bournonville Symposium. They gave me the topic: “The French Style and the Period,” that is, the period in which Bournonville studied in Paris, the 1820s. Will I have dancing in this presentation? Indeed! Not much by me, but by two principal dancers from the Danish company, Thomas Lund and Gudrun Bojesen.

So, these are a few of the adventures of a ballet dancer/ballet historian trying to use the space, fill out the movement, and focus.

But, I see another big space to fill, and, in my wishful vision, it would be that you, the ballet teachers in higher education, would bring ballet history into the dance major curriculum and bring it as *dancing*.

I decided to make this appeal to you after reading three things: your program for this conference; that issue of *Arts and Society* that I mentioned at the beginning; and an issue of another journal of the 1970s, the *York Dance Review*.

Your conference program lists a paper on how to “fuse” ballet history into the technique class. I say, right on!! My experience has been that this works wonderfully. Ballet history also can be “fused” into pedagogy courses; into composition courses; and into repertory---and this can include pre-Giselle material---wonderful exercises; challenging enchaînements with so many delightful steps that would be so sad to lose; and many lovely dances to learn from and to perform.

In that 1976 issue of *Arts and Society* on the Growth of Dance in America, a major concern expressed by the authors was the state of dance literacy and the need for better writing and scholarship and training of young scholars to work in the areas of dance history and criticism. How are we doing on that account?

In the *York Dance Review* issue of 1973, tonight’s man of honor, Grant Strate, the then Director of the new dance program at York, was asked “where will our students go after graduation?” Grant was pleased to report that some would get into companies right away; he said there were places for those going into dance therapy and into teaching. But, he said, in the areas of dance history and criticism the market was not yet there. How is it today? I don’t know about in Canada today, but here in the U.S. I don’t see ballet history growing in dance departments, and I don’t see ballet history being investigated, explored, brought to life by young, ballet-trained scholars.

Some very fine work in pre-20th century ballet history is being done in the U.S., but, with some notable exceptions, it is being done largely by academics in other fields, such as musicology or art history. I get frequent calls asking “what do you, as a dancer, make of this?” I think that ballet dancers, ballet choreographers, and ballet teachers should not be leaving their history up to others to find and interpret. Those “others” can often miss things, or mis-interpret things, or just not be interested enough in what has intrigued all of us all these years---ballet technique and performance. Those wonderful steps and poses. And, those “others” cannot bring them to life, to performance.

You in colleges and universities have the privileges and resources that independent dance scholars laboring on the fringes do not, and you and your students already have a vital, basic, research tool---the profound kinetic understanding of so many of those steps and poses---that immense ballet vocabulary, that long legacy of training. We all share the same ballet DNA, that is, the connectedness of our shared ballet training, that reaches so far back into other ballet eras. There are many documents from those eras yet to be explored, waiting for a dancer’s eyes and understanding. There are so many spaces still to be filled in, in our ballet history. There is so much already out there to bring to life, to performance. We are the ones to cherish, understand, and interpret our history. To keep it alive.

In that issue of *Arts and Society*, Marcia Siegel, a wonderful writer who later became a highly respected dance critic, titled her article, “Waiting for the Past to Begin.” Her opening sentence: “Dancers are a people without a past.”

Let's finally prove her wrong. Siegel's final sentence was, "I don't see how we can know where we are if we don't know where we've been." Let's continue to show her the way, that we do know where we've been. It's a fun and adventurous journey; and, if you take that journey, you'll meet many wonderful people, some of them hundreds of years old. And, you'll be invited to some very nice places. Thank you for inviting me here tonight.