Chapter 1: Introductory Progressions

“My body signifies many stories. My female body, which is to say my brain, my heart, my soul, my flesh, my physiognomy, and my spirit, all are marked by events of the past into which I was born… a long past, yet my body remembers.” (Yvonne Shorter Brown, 2010)

This Book of Memories pays tributes to Mrs. Fay Simpson. Through dance and music, for approximately 50 years (starting in the 1950s), Fay Simpson from her little school on Hope Road, near Half Way Tree, Kingston, Jamaica created for some of us an imaginary world of magic and beauty. As importantly, the book acknowledges the family, friends, employees and dance students who worked unstintingly with her. Under Mrs. Simpson’s careful, yet firm, supervision, we, dancers in-the-making performed in memorable classical, modern and Jamaican inspired ballets. The dances and music made our spirits soar. With her coaching and persuasive abilities, some of us learned and executed dance movements that we would never have dared. For some of us, the ballets and music have lived on in our minds and imagination. For others of us, the applications of dance have sparked unimaginable ripple effects in our lives. For still others of us, we learned to appreciate the values of the arts which enhanced our lives.

Book’s structure: By showcasing stories regarding the ballets which were performed in the Ward and Little Theatres (between the late 1950s to the early 1970s), this book captures some of our memories of dancing with Mrs. Simpson. The book consists of six parts.

In the Introduction, a fictitious dance performance sets the stage for the emerging book. I decided to create an imaginary story with characters and dance performances, because Mrs. Simpson encouraged us to tap into our individual and collective creative powers, in order to interpret the music and to make the characters we portrayed in the dances come alive. Although the characters are invented, each one has characteristics of some of the dancers who attended Mrs. Simpson’s school. Using dramatic license the personalities and characteristics of the dancers are heightened in a graphic manner.

The characters Suzanne (the narrator), Elizabeth, Thomasina, and Kathleen Cassandra (the present and former students), as well as the introductory and concluding ballet performances are entirely fictitious. However, the stories about learning dancing and discussions of the specific ballet performances are based, predominantly, on the memories of Cecille DePass and Denise Desnoes. I remember, too, that some of us would read Mrs. Simpson’s English ballet magazines avidly, but since I do not have access to her specific copies, I have included explanatory notes from other published sources, in order to provide larger contexts for our memories.
Parts of the Book

Part 1 summarizes a few of the ballet performances of the mid to late 1950s which took place at the Ward Theatre.

In Part 2, Denise Desnoes reminisces about her major role as Giselle presented at the Ward Theatre, in the early 1970s. Through a series of flashbacks, Denise contextualizes her career in dance by discussing her training in Jamaica with Mrs. Fay Simpson and Mr. Neville Black, and in England as a young adult, where she concentrated on studying classical ballet with a former member of the internationally known, Ballet Russe.

Part 3 summarizes the key ballets of the 1960s such as, the White Witch of Rose Hall which took place at the Little Theatre well before it was enclosed and air conditioned.

In Part 4, Cecille provides snapshots of memories of the Santa Claus parades in which some of the dance students participated as majorettes and clowns. In the parades, on a wide range of elaborately constructed massive floats, many of Fay Simpson’s students dressed in the appropriate costumes, depicted characters from Jamaican, classical and international children’s stories.

In Part 5, Cecille offers a few memories of taking modern dance classes from Mr. Neville Black. Her summary complements Denise’s reflections of dancing with Neville Black as a student and in the 1970s, as a colleague.


In the Epilogue, Michele (Mowatt) Orane remembers that she began dancing with Mrs. Simpson when she was only three years old. As an adult, Michele continued to be actively involved in different capacities including teaching with Fay’s dance school. Quite fittingly, Michele and Kay (another former Simpson lead dancer), drew the curtains of the stage at the dance school’s closure.

Cast of Characters

Fictitious actors/dancers and real Simpson dancers, in order of Appearance, are as follows:

In the Introduction and Part 1:

1. Ms. Suzanne Patricia Williams (a fictitious character). A former Fay Simpson student and dancer. In her early adulthood, Suzanne taught at Fay Simpson’s school and became a colleague and friend. Suzanne is now happily retired from her career as a senior educator and community volunteer. As importantly, she remains very active in a number of educational initiatives, business ventures and community organizations.

In this book, Suzanne, as the narrator, plays key roles such as, teaching, explaining and as importantly, providing the narratives which weave the book/play/dances into a comprehensive story.
2. **Miss Elizabeth Christina Small** (a fictitious character). A precocious, very wise, girl child who attends Fay Simpson’s kindergarten-preparatory and dance school.

3. **Miss Thomasina Miranda Brown** (a fictitious character). A facetious teenager, who attends one of the elitist, well-established, girls’ schools in Kingston and St. Andrew. Thomasina was a former student of Mrs. Simpson’s kindergarten and dance school.

4. **Miss Kathleen Cassandra Knightsberry**. A raucous, larger-than-life, young adult, in her early to mid-20s, who thinks that she knows it all. She is a very recent university graduate and a former student of Mrs. Simpson’s preparatory and dance schools.

**In Parts 2, 3 and 4:** The cast of characters expands, at strategic stages, in the narratives/dances to include memories of two former students specifically, Ms. Giselle, played by Denise Hall Desnoes and Cecille Harriott DePass. As mentioned earlier, Denise was a former, lead dancer for Fay Simpson. Cecille attended Mrs. Simpson’s kindergarten and dance schools.

Cameo performances by many Simpson dancers who include, but are by no means restricted to, the following:

Sydney Burke, Shelia Defreitas, Claire McFarlane, Lynda Simpson Mandzuik, Bobby Lecky, and Maurice Gray.

**Part 5:** Selected Cast from Parts 1-4, with appearances by Neville Black.

**Part 6:** Grand Finale. Entire Cast.

**In the Epilogue:** Michele Mowatt offers a concise summary of her dance experiences.

**Note:** Sporadic appearances, at strategic places during the night’s performance, by: A large cast (at least 20 or more) of the Simpson dancers, from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, or their stand-ins, or their Spirits. For this event, all dancers are visible and dressed in some of the costumes worn for the Simpson ballets. (See Parts 2-6 above).

**At the imaginary Little Theatre**, hidden from view are the following characters, in the control box overhead.

Sitting and at times, standing comfortably in the control room for lighting, sound/music, and all IT equipment are a few key characters:

- The two trained technicians, more like uptown DJs, are suitably dressed in well-fitting black Tee shirts and jeans, with their headphones. They stand behind the high tech, state of the art, computer and sound system/equipment. They play and monitor the music during the entire ballet performance, and trouble-shoot when needed.

- The Lighting Director and his Assistant, Michael. The Lighting Director, has a copy of the entire script, and has planned his lighting strategy. So too, unknown to him, has his young assistant.
“Dance me to the end of love”

(Leonard Cohen with Painting by Henry Matisse, 1995)

Setting the Stage

Event: The imaginary dance performance.
Place: The imaginary Little Theatre, Kingston, Jamaica.
Time: 8:00 pm.

Imagine that you are sitting with the audience in The Theatre. With great anticipation, the audience/readers settle into their seats. Everyone watches eagerly. This is the moment for which they have been waiting for years. The excitement is palpable. The air crackles with energy.

Suddenly, in the mind’s eye, a warm spotlight, beams from high overhead, and descends to illuminate Suzanne, the narrator. She is dressed simply (in a dark, flowing, long skirt, worn over her long, black tights, with a V-neck, long-sleeved, black leotard. She wears well-worn, black ballet shoes).

Suzanne is standing downstage with feet parallel, in a comfortable modern dance position. Her arms open slowly and gracefully. She assumes a welcoming stance. Her body tilts, at a comfortable angle, towards the audience. She smiles genuinely, her eyes sparkle, as she speaks.

Suzanne is actually standing, stage-right, outside the very heavy, dark, red stage curtains. She is nearest the orchestra pit and closest to the audience. The Narrator, in a calm, well-paced, expressive voice, amplified by a small, clip-on mike which hugs her cheek, speaks authoritatively. She uses her voice, with the dramatic expressions, learned formally, when she was a student in one of the well-established, high schools in Kingston.

**Suzanne begins:** “Imagine, stage-left, a bright spotlight, illuminates a figure dressed in her black sleeveless, ballet leotard, tights and flat ballet shoes.”

A spotlight dances in response to the Narrator’s voice, and eventually settles well downstage, stage-right, on an empty space.

“Stage-left,” says Suzanne calmly.

When Elizabeth, the figure in black, indeed, standing stage-left, moves as if she wishes to speak, the bright spotlight dashes madly over to illuminate her.

The audience laughs, appreciating the tricks being played by the Lighting Director. Like the grand magician, in one of the Simpson ballets of the 1960s, The Sorcerer’s Apprentice, he commands the spotlights to do as he wishes. The Lighting Director has a very good sense of humour. He understands well the significance of the forthcoming, play/dance performance.
Suzanne, lit by her individual, warm yellow spotlight, continues: “Imagine you can see and hear Miss Elizabeth Christina Small, who speaks softly with the precocious voice of a very bright, kindergarten student…”

The Lighting Director interrupts, he too wears an almost invisible clip-on mike: “Michael,” he says to his assistant, “here, we need a much warmer and softer spotlight, very much like a soft pink, sunrise at Long Bay, Portland,” he states firmly.

All lights fade, then they mix, and play rapidly, to mimic a typical, warm, early morning, tropical sunrise, which usually glows over Long Bay.¹ The bright, tropical spotlights, focus on Elizabeth who speaks quietly, yet distinctly, with a sense of urgency.

Elizabeth: “Calling: Kingston, Jamaica, 67844. Calling, Calling: Mrs. Simpson at Number 11 Hope Road. Come in Mrs. Simpson. Do we have a story for you. This is not an emergency. Repeat: This is not an Emergency. Mrs. Simpson, tonight, your honorary and real daughters, your former dance students will honour you for your 50 years of teaching.”

Spotlight fades quickly, Elizabeth remains illuminated by low lighting.

Suzanne’s spotlight illuminates her. She waits until another set of spotlights, with rapidly changing vibrant reds and rich purples, dance across and then down the stage, to concentrate on a second figure, Thomasina. Thomasina is dressed in her full school uniform. She is standing impatiently, tapping her right foot loudly, on the floor, with her arms folded across her chest.

Suzanne continues: “Imagine, you see and hear, the skeptical voice of Ms. Thomasina Miranda Brown, in 3rd form [3A to be exact]. She is wearing her crisply starched and ironed high school uniform in which the pleats stand sharply, at attention, even late in the day.”

Thomasina speaks: “Seh what? Elizabeth, you must be crazy. Who could teach, mother, father and nurture anybody for so long! Yet you, Miss Elizabeth Christina Small, dare to speak of hundreds, or perhaps, even thousands of her former students whom she has influenced. From the mid to late 1950s, until she closed her kindergarten-preparatory school in the early 2000s, you claim that she often created a nurturing, yet, challenging school milieu for so many students. Is Mrs. Simpson the Jamaican version of Mother Theresa? Get real, Elizabeth Small. Wake up right now! Stop dreaming!”

Spotlight fades, Thomasina is no longer visible.

Both characters (Elizabeth and Thomasina) are still, on stage. Warm, low lights infuse the stage, to emphasize the two figures in the shadows.

Suzanne speaks, in a calm yet excited voice: “Just imagine this…”

On cue, several spotlights move slowly, increasing in size and intensity to the back of the stage, and concentrate on the centre. The lights merge to form two diagonal bands of light which pinpoint a very large figure, dressed in the most expensive, yet flashy, floor length, designer gown costume. She is dripping in ‘bling’ (costume jewelry).
**Suzanne continues**: “Imagine that you can see and hear Miss Kathleen Cassandra Knightsberry. She has a demanding, angry, and aggressive voice. She sounds exactly like the voice of an ear-shattering sound system, blasting at one’s ear drums…”

Kathleen’s voice suddenly booms loudly, interrupting the Narrator. The Narrator, freezes in shock.

**Kathleen**: “You must give me demonstrable proof of your claims Mizz Elizabeth Small. Surely, you have learned to do so at Mrs. Simpson’s kindergarten and prep school. I know that I did.”

**Suzanne**: “Despite the intensity of the noise from Kathleen, Elizabeth stands erect and unflinching. Her shoulders are thrown back, and her back is arched. She begins to move as if she should retort to the verbal abuse. She is bathed now in a warm but a much hotter spotlight.

Next, Thomasina’s spotlight flickers across the stage to highlight her body language. Thomasina, stands proudly, glowing with indignation.”

All lights fade. Deep blackout conditions reign. Soft sounds are heard, as a large corps of dancers move onto the stage, from the wings on both sides and from the back of the stage.

**Suzanne resumes speaking sotto voce in the darkness**: “In response to the scathing challenges from Thomasina and Kathleen, additional spotlights illuminate, and follow, as at least 20 or more dancers move in rapidly from and along the sides and aisles of the theatre. They rapidly mount the steps and converge on the stage, joining the other dancers. The dancers move via mime, and most importantly, they move via spontaneous and embodied dance sequences learned from Mrs. Simpson.

For some, the dance sequences have remained engrained in their hearts, bodies, minds, spirits and souls. The dancers continue to move. They mime and dance to imaginary music. They perform snippets of memories of their dances. Swiftly, they congregate and perform a ballet which moves from traditional ballet to more modern ballet, on to modern and still further, to jazz dance sequences. They have created the ballet by themselves, especially, for Fay Simpson.

The entire corps de ballets, and lead dancers, AKA the large Corps called: ‘Demonstrable, Visible, Measurable, Proof Positive’ respond, incorporating their individual, unique strengths in their dance movements.”

After approximately, 5 minutes in which different spotlights highlight the dancers’ movements, Suzanne’s spotlight flashes across the audience, and hones in on her. She has moved, very quietly, into the audience. She is standing in an aisle, in the last row, on the ground floor at the back of the theatre. The Narrator’s spotlight, ‘rocks steady’. (The dancers exit the stage, as quietly as they had appeared. Almost like a mirage).

**Suzanne explains in conversational tones**: “Each dance of tributes tonight expands on, and re-interprets from more mature perspectives, some of the dances and movements from the ballets in which the dancers once performed.”
From the costumes, stage sets, props and signs posted, one sees that the ballets also explicitly and implicitly, depict different periods of the time, in which they were presented to the public, in the Ward and later the Little Theatres. By 1973, and continuing for many years, a few performances also took place at the Holy Childhood and St. Andrew High school theatres.

In many ways, the performance tonight is a retrospective in which we invite the members of the audience, to come with us, as we re-visit the past. We not only relive some of the dances, but as importantly, we attempt to identify what impact, if any, the dance experiences, from so long ago, have had on our lives. Admittedly a pretty tall order, when one remembers that we are speaking about events, which took place between the late 1950s until the late 1970s. Indeed, by accomplishing our objectives to re-visit and re-imagine the past, and in doing so, present the ballet which is emerging tonight, we see that Mrs. Simpson Dance School, has played a vital part in helping to shape the contemporary dance history of Jamaica.²

In life, as in dance, individuals and groups participate in a complex, yet, effectively functioning social system. Each dancer contributes to the smooth functioning of a larger whole. Dance tends to represent central aspects of the human condition. Dance depicts and explores lived experiences. As importantly, dance represents in dramatic ways, fables, myths, legends and histories of different cultures (e.g., See Fonteyn, 1979). As importantly, dance vividly portrays the entire gamut of our emotions, behaviours and attitudes. As humans we laugh, cry, live, love and die.

Tonight, we present a multi-layered, dramatic, kaleidoscopic series of living dance montages. The dance montages change quite rapidly. Since Mrs. Simpson taught dance for so many years, she taught literally hundreds of youth, primarily girls/teens and young women, many of whom went on to become accomplished, highly educated, and trained contributors to societies in Jamaica, England, USA, Canada, and I am sure, elsewhere.

As we know very few boys, and young men, were enrolled in ballet schools. Even fewer performed, publicly, on a stage. However, in the Simpson ballets, one or two young men had cameo and sometimes major roles in, for example, Gaitie Parisienne, Les Sylphides, the White Witch and Giselle.”

Suzanne pauses, spotlights, flash back onto the stage. A massive PowerPoint projection, flashes across the blue, backdrop curtain at the back of the stage. The spirits of some of the dancers who have performed in Simpson’s past ballets, come to life. In the 180 degree landscape projection, the Spirits appear to enter from all of the wings. They are accompanied by some of the dancers, from the original group (20 or so dancers), seen earlier. The living dancers walk briskly, legs stretched straight, and toes pointed firmly with considerable strength. Or they bourrée rapidly onto the stage. In diagonal lines, they do quick walking turns across the stage. Or the dancers do a series of grand jetés, and other travelling steps, which take them rapidly to their assigned places on the stage.

Lit by her own spotlight, Suzanne resumes: “The dancers move rapidly. Some literally fly across the stage in order to make dramatic entrances and/or exits. Very quickly they assume frozen positions, until they hear the first bars of their remembered dance music begin to play. Then they come to life. For instance, initially, some begin to sway graciously. They move their
limbs like the branches of Poinciana trees, being blown by a gentle ‘doctor bird’ or ‘Christmas breeze’. Others move rapidly with a sense of purpose.

At another level of using the space, as if it is quite tangible, still other dancers, move through sequences of very complicated floor work patterns. They then shift levels graciously, from their floor patterns, to kneeling movements, then gradually to standing and moving. (See Denise’s story for explicit explanation).

Immediately, one notes that the dancers are dressed in a wide range of costumes and colours. They wear costumes appropriate to the themes and historical periods being depicted in the different ballet stories. Or they are dressed in muted colours for the more abstract dances choreographed by Mrs. Simpson and Mr. Black.

One notices, too, that some dancers play many roles, requiring rapid exits from the stage, and even more rapid changes (in the changing rooms backstage): of costumes, make-up, and types of ballet shoes. (See samples of pictures in several chapters).

Quite understandably, the dancers are accompanied by the remembered, recorded classical, jazz, and popular music. For each dance scene depicted, the music, initially, wafts gently into the air and expands in order to fill the milieu of the Ward or Little theatres.

In the 1950s and again in 1972, Mrs. Simpson rented rehearsal and performance space, at the grand, old, historical Ward Theatre with its plush velvet seats. In the 1960s, she rented space in the new Little Theatre with its sturdy, slatted wooden seats. At a time, well before the Theatre was covered and air-conditioned.

For the ballet performances, Dr. Carpenter, Mr. Simpson, and later his son, Bobby, were in charge of the complicated process of taping the music, selected by Mrs. Simpson from her very large collection of LPs.

Gordon Simpson (Gord) designed, created and constructed, with a skilled work crew, all the stage sets, backdrops, and props required. In retrospect, however, Mr. Simpson’s starring role was that of another type of puppet master. He designed and constructed, with his team, all of the floats for the Santa Claus parades. For the annual parades, he was the creator and star performer. Dressed in a baggy, clown costume, and heavy clown make-up, he was unrecognizable, until he opened his mouth, and one heard his unmistakable Canadian accent. Expertly moving on his roller skates, Mr. Simpson, as the parade marshal and CEO of the parade, zipped backwards and forwards, besides, along and among the floats of the Annual Santa Claus Parade. In this sense, it was his grand parade. He conducted it, orchestrated its movements, and demanded that the parade moved at his beck and call.

In a telephone conversation, in winter 2015 with Cecille, Miss Sydney Burke stated that Gord’s floats were perhaps just as creative and well designed, and constructed, as many of the floats in the present, annual Caribana parade held each August in Toronto.”
Thomasina taps her foot very loudly, her spotlight dances to her, as she interrupts Suzanne:

“Come on. Come on. Move along. Move far more quickly, you are blocking the way. We are already late.”

Without knowing it, Thomasina assumes the exact tones of exasperation, often used by Mr. Simpson when he directed the annual Santa Claus parade in Kingston.

Suzanne continues, as if she was not interrupted: “Mr. Simpson marshaled, corralled and moved the stately, massive, cumbersome floats; the towering effigies/3D caricatures of political figures, monarchs and celebrities; the smartly dressed, very large, band of drum majorettes; the large marching bands of cadets and the Alpha Boys band; indeed, the entire parade moved a considerable distance, in Jamaican terms, from Race Course, wending its way through the streets of Kingston, around the Parade, and along King Street, to end at Victoria Pier.

By the mid to late 1960s, Lynda, Laura, and Bobby Simpson, as well as Judy Madden, dressed too in clown costumes, exaggerated clown faces, and shod in roller skates, were his able parade marshal assistants. At times, they balanced on very tall stilts. They moved along, with the parade, anticipating places where the floats, or majorettes, or drum bands, were moving either too quickly, or too slowly.

Cecille and Denise say that they can still hear the music and remember, quite vividly, their participation in several Santa Claus parades.”

Suzanne continues: “Mr. Reg Carter, who did all the lighting for the Little Theatre Movement (LTM) and the National Dance Theatre (NDTC) performances, created the dramatic lighting for Mrs. Simpson’s ballets. During rehearsals at the two theatres, many a Saturday morning at the Little Theatre, in particular, was spent working with Gordon, and later Bobby Simpson, Dr. Carpenter, and Mr. Carter, in order to get everything absolutely right.”

Suzanne continues with a very happy smile: “Now what of the dressmakers, like Mrs. Rankin, who in producing the costumes, displayed some of their considerable expertise in high fashion couture? They worked with Mrs. Simpson who in her role, as the dream-maker, par excellence, ensured that every costume with its accessories, was designed, created and custom-made to fit the bodies of a wide range of girls (children, teens) and young adult women.

One remembers that all costumes, for Mrs. Simpson’s ballets and for the Santa Claus parades, were made by the expert, nimble hands of dressmakers like Mrs. Rankin and a team of expert dressmakers. Mrs. Rankin, and the crew of dressmakers, handmade literally hundreds and hundreds of costumes over the years. They did so without the high-tech sewing machines which Cecille understands are driven by computer programs, from the threading of the needle, to making buttonholes. How Mrs. Rankin and her crew would have loved access to such machines.”
Endnotes:


2. For her distinguished lifetime services to education (kindergarten, preparatory and dance), Fay Simpson received many honours from the Government of Jamaica. E.g.: (i) Order of Distinction, Officer Class, in recognition of her faithful service to Education, 2000; (ii) Council of the Institute of Jamaica, Centenary Medal, 1879-1979, for Cultural Development in Jamaica, in the fields of Drama and Dance; (iii) Council of the Institute of Jamaica, Silver Musgrave Medal, 1985, for Outstanding Merit in the field of Dance Education in Jamaica; (iv) Caymanas Track Award, April 20005, for Outstanding Contribution to the Creative Arts (Dance).

References


