Part 1
Telling/Dancing Our Stories Ourselves: Stories of the 1950s

Chapter 2: Memories of Early Ballets

Setting the stage: Suzanne takes a short energy break in the lobby. While she is not on the stage, a massive PowerPoint presentation “Honour Song” consisting of the music, photographs, and clips from some of the major Simpson ballets, flash across the stage’s backdrop curtain, along the walls of the auditorium and at the same time, is repeated on the walls of the lobby. The PowerPoint surrounds the audience with the images and sounds.

In the lobby, Suzanne meets several former dancers who participated in “the Introductory Progressions to the dance.” As noticed earlier and illustrated below, some individuals are now spirit dancers who as free spirits, unbound by human constraints of gravity and the flesh, are able to change and amplify their dance movements and roles, in front of her eyes. The majority of the dancers, however, are quick, alive, and very much in the flesh. Some of the dancers, whom Suzanne recognizes and remembers, are identified in the PowerPoint presentation with animated clips from their respective performances. She recognizes many dancers but unfortunately, she cannot remember their names after more than 50 years. The dancers that she remembers include:

- Sydney Burke (unfortunately, passed away in July 2019);
- Hope Bent (passed away); Barbara Smellie McMillan (passed away);
- Yvonne daCosta (present, former NDTC dance mistress);
- Noelle Hill Chutkan (present, former key dancer with NDTC);
- Pansy Silvera Hassan (passed away, stellar member of NDTC. Known for her impressive role as the Queen in Nettleford’s Kumina);
- Angela Cunningham Heron (present). Her older sister, Judith Cunningham-Wedderburn (former lead dancer with NDTC, present);
- Helen Dujoin (present);
- Judy Rose (present);
- Denise Desnoes nee Hall (present);
- Michele Orane nee Mowatt (present);
- Christine Anderson and her younger sister, Paula (present);
- Lynda Simpson Mandzuik (present);
- Laura Simpson (present);
- Jill and Ann Hodges (present);
- Margaret Cumper (present);
- Pat Cumper (present);
- Dana Street and her younger sisters (all present);
- Charmaine Lynch and her younger sister (present);
- Norma Shim Quee (present);
- Aliane Grant (present, former lead dancer, NDTC);
• Elizabeth Jackson Taylor (present);
• Kay Barnard; Ruth Francis; Janine Maxwell; Elizabeth Donaldson (all present);
• Jennifer Knight (present);
• Jackie White (present);
• Monica Ingleton; Monica Williams; Monica Williamson (all present);
• Claudette Sutherland (present);
• Cecille Harriott DePass (present);
• The Stewart and Rae sets of twins (mostly present, but one of the Stewart twins has passed away);
• Bobby Lecky (present);
• Milton Dawes (present, played several lead roles in NDTC);
• Maurice Gray (present);
• Neil Sommers (present, played lead roles in NDTC).

(The title of the dance “Honour Song”, is borrowed from one of the traditional dances of the First Nations, in Western Canada).

Understandably, several of Fay Simpson’s dancers (identified above) played exceptional leadership roles with the emerging National Dance Theatre Company (NDTC) of Jamaica in the 1960s to 1970s (Rex Nettleford, 1985). Tonight, many former Simpson dancers are eager to perform. They explain that they have been perfecting their dance sequences in the small studio adjacent to the main Theatre. Since several dancers went on to join the NDTC, Suzanne knows that their dances are likely to be truly memorable.

Lit by her spotlight, Suzanne walks briskly through the audience, returns to centre-stage, and turns to the audience.

Suzanne begins: “This chapter highlights some of the early ballet performances to which Miss Burke refers in the Prologue. The chapter is divided into two collections of stories:

The first collection of stories are, in effect, snapshots of memories. We have a few stories from Fay’s friends and family. We learn that before Fay goes to Canada to study, she tries to teach her brother, Reg, to dance. In Toronto, Fay studies Kindergarten Education, Dance and Music. From time to time, she also travels to New York to study ballet in one of the well-established studios. From telephone conversations with Sydney Burke and Shelia Defreitas, Cecille understands that prior to going overseas to study, Fay and Shelia danced in a mainstream church hall in St. Andrew.

For the rest of this chapter, the second collection of stories presents us with more details. During the 1950s, the following ballets were performed, usually at the Ward Theatre:

• Gypsy Wedding; Anancy and the Goat (1952).
• Concerto; Dances from the Nutcracker Suite; Danse Macabre; Coppélia (shortened version, 1954).
Telling/Dancing Our Stories Ourselves: Stories of the 1950s

- Giselle (Version 1). (See some of Sydney Burke’s photographs of the first version of Giselle which depict the Wilis and the Prince, in Appendix 2); Lutte Eternelle; Sleeping Beauty (1956).
- Judgement of Paris; Gaite Parisienne; Sylvia (1958).
- Graduation Ball; Symphonic Variations; Coppélia (full version, 1960) (Simpson, 1960, p. 1). (Interestingly, Sydney Burke’s old ballet program not only identifies all of the ballets, it also flags Fay Simpson’s future directions. It states: ‘Our Hope for the Future: The White Witch of Rose Hall’ (Simpson, 1960, p. 1).

Fay Simpson’s policy maintained over the years was that each performance or “show” included at least one major ballet, instead of presenting throughout the night’s concert a number of divertissements (short dances). In Simpson’s words: ‘... this [is] the most effective means of training dancers, a means which presents a challenge and an opportunity to both dancer and choreographer’ (Simpson, 1960, p. 1). The pattern of presenting (i) a more abstract, shorter ballet, (ii) a children’s ballet, culminating (iii) with a major ballet by the senior students, are what Denise and Cecille remember vividly.”

‘Gaite Parisienne’

*Suzanne changes tone, minimally, to speak more authoritatively:* “This ballet was originally choreographed, by Leonide Massine, to the music of Jacques Offenbach. It was first presented by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, at the Theatre de Monte Carlo, in April 1938 (George Balanchine & Francis Mason, 1989, p. 183). Massine’s original story is quite risqué. It is about the nightlife, in the clubs of Paris, during the well-known era of the cancan dancers. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the cancan dancers performed what were considered to be salacious dances. The ballet is a story of romance, convivial dancing, and perpetual high spirits (Balanchine & Mason, 1989, p. 183).

Interestingly, **Fay Simpson’s version** was performed in the late 1950s. Balanchine and Mason’s description of the ballet finds several parallels when translated into the Jamaican nightlife/nightclub activities. Some of our parents, for example, in the 1940s and 1950s, dressed in their most fashionable clothes, attended dances at nightclubs, such as Rainbow and Glass Bucket.

In the original ballet, some of the characters and roles illustrate the high spirits, social and economic class distinctions, and courtship patterns of young adult men and women; once again, they may be translated loosely from Massine’s story into Caribbean contexts. Just think, for instance, of similar scenes in several plays (egs., the annual pantomimes, local plays, satires, and Father HoLung’s contemporary musical, morality plays).

The original ballet has a large cast. Perhaps with a fledging dance school in which the students ranged widely in ages and abilities, this ballet was quite appropriate. Some students, for example, were attending her kindergarten; others, were in primary and preparatory schools, and still others, were pre and mature teens in high schools. Mrs. Simpson also accepted young adult women who, either deliberately or unintentionally, became role models for some of the younger dance students.
I think that Mrs. Simpson needed a ballet with sufficient scope in order to showcase to the larger, predominantly, middle class public, the child/teen dancers and older students, performing at their very best. The ballet’s multiple roles also included a host of other characters/dancers, specifically, the waiters, the cleaning girls, the cocodettes, the cancan dancers and their companions.

Such a large cast gave Mrs. Simpson the scope to group the students according to their emerging knowledge, skills, attitudes, and attributes regarding a formal education in dance. There were several factors at play: the students’ emerging sensitivity to the demands, rigors, and discipline of ballet; and equally important, the students’ sensitivity to the roles to be depicted, and their abilities to interpret and to portray/dance the roles so convincingly, that the audience understood exactly what was happening on stage.

Another important consideration was that, as a result of societal strictures, few boys, if any, were placed by their parents as students in ballet schools. Thus, often the taller, sturdier girl and teen students were instructed to adopt male roles.”

At this point, Cecille enters from the wings, nearest to Suzanne, and moves swiftly and at the same time, gracefully, to her side. In doing so, she shares Suzanne’s spotlight. Cecille has been listening intently to Suzanne’s story, and thinks it best to add some of her own lived experiences. *Speaking into her invisible clip-on mike, Cecille says:* “Truthfully, I do not remember the story line of Mrs. Simpson’s ‘Gaitie Parisienne’. I do not remember who the main/star ballet dancers were at that time. In spring 1958, I would have been nine years old. However, I do remember that Noelle Hill Chutkan, a senior student, wore a short green costume. Was she the glove seller? Or did Noelle wear the green costume in another ballet identified earlier?

I remember, very well, the flirtatious cancan dancers for many reasons. Pansy Silvera Hassan was, perhaps, one of them. Probably, I remember their performance because for many years my father, who came from a very strict religious family, stated repeatedly that he objected to me doing dancing. According to him, no self-respecting young girls would be seen on the stage, kicking up their legs and showing off their bloomers. I remember the cancan dancers too, because their dance was very similar to the cancan dances depicted in some movies of the Wild West.

It is even more likely that I remember this ballet, primarily, because I have in one of my photo albums, a large black and white photograph. (See Photograph). It shows four child dancers standing tall, with their legs extended from a first position stance, pointing their toes with all their might. In the picture, one sees from left to right, across the stage, firstly, Cecille Harriott; secondly, Dawn Alberga (I think); thirdly, Sonia Wright, and fourthly, Judy Rose. They are wearing bright pink, well fitting, and very short costumes with complicated, large, stiffly, reinforced bows tied at the back. For the headdress, each of us wore a tiny string of sparkling sequins across each forehead. I remember my costume vividly.”
“Gaite Parisienne”

Left to right: 1st Cecille Harriott, 2nd Dawn Alberga?, 3rd Sonia Wright and 4th Judy Rose.

Cecille pauses to think of a few more memories.

Suzanne catches the conversation ball, and continues the story: “In Jamaica of the 1950s, middle class girls, let alone children, were carefully groomed to become little ladies and gentlemen. The role of the very proper, young lady, indeed a beautiful puppet created by Dr. Coppélius, will be discussed in a later section of this chapter.

Please note, in the photograph with the four children, that the props on the stage consist of a few small square tables and little chairs. It was common practice that, for the recitals, the handmade child-size furniture was borrowed from Mrs. Simpson’s day school. By sharing physical resources like chairs and tables, it ensured that the costs for props reasonable.

All costumes and headdresses were cared for carefully and laundered, to be re-cycled over a number of years, in either ballet performances, school plays, or in the annual Santa Claus parades. (See for example, Stefan Maxwell’s story in a later chapter, discussing his memories of participating in at least one Santa Claus Parade. His Peter Pan costume was probably, the recycled green costume, mentioned earlier).
Mrs. Simpson’s policy and practice was that in this ballet, like many others, the children such as Cecille, perform early in the sequence of dances/stories in the ballet. When their dance is completed, the children are shepherded back to the changing rooms, by a few of Mrs. Simpson’s family and friends, who assisted her during theatre performances. The children are supervised by Mrs. Simpson’s women friends, former dance students and family. Mrs. Harrison and Mrs. Carpenter, for example, were often in charge of make-up.

The children dress themselves in their street clothes, line up in silence, in a straight line, just behind the heavy, closed door of the, now dark, dressing room. Eventually the children leave the dressing room walk quietly in silence, and in single file, along the corridor. They are in the far recesses of the theatre, behind the stage. They carefully avoid any sets and cumbersome stage equipment. They wait in silence until, during the intermission, they are escorted up the series of very narrow stairs, high up, very high up to the gods…”

*Cecille interjects softly, when Suzanne pauses to breathe:* “I wondered, curiously, why the uppermost floor of the Ward Theatre was called the gods, until I reached the top tier of the old Theatre, walked quietly behind the girl in front, and then sat on the wooden seat immediately adjacent to her (I could smell the chi-chi in the old wood). Because I was too small to sit back into the adult seat, I was perched on the edge. I watched intently, as the ballet continued to unfold.”

Suzanne steps forward, Cecille moves, gracefully, four to five steps back. Suzanne turns to the audience in order to introduce the next stories. Her spotlight moves with her. Suzanne, stops at the front of the stage.

*Suzanne:* “This part of the chapter begins with Bobby Lecky’s memories. It continues with a few more slivers of information regarding some of the ballets which, I think, influenced Fay Simpson’s choreography.

*Bobby Lecky’s story:* In a telephone conversation between Cecille and Bobby Lecky, in early summer 2015, he reminisced fondly of his leading male role, in at least one of the ballets. Bobby stated, laughingly, that his role was primarily one in which he supported, caught and turned the young women dancers. He remembered that they were very proficient in performing the demanding, complicated, dance sequences.”

*Cecille steps forward, joins Suzanne and explains:* “Although, I have no concrete memories of most of the 1950s ballets, I have memories for some reason, of the simple brochure with the ballet program, in which Errol (Bobby) Lecky is listed as a male lead dancer.

In another telephone conversation, this time with Maurice Gray, another former, male lead dancer, he remembers too, that male dancers had minimal roles. He remembers that Milton Dawes was another of the male dancers, in the early Simpson ballets, and said that Milton was dancing with Mrs. Simpson, when he, Maurice, joined the Simpson ballet company.

Maurice says that when he was a teenager in high school in Kingston, he remembers, quite fondly, his role in the White Witch ballet. Maurice also mentions, that when Mrs. Simpson invited him to dance in her school, that he had no hesitation in joining the group because Mrs. Simpson had such pretty teenage dancers in her school. (Telephone conversation between
Cecille DePass and Maurice Gray, late summer 2015. See, the later discussions of ‘the White Witch ballet’ and Denise Desnoes’ memories of the ballet). Bobby Lecky also confirmed that the teenage and young adult women dancers, in Mrs. Simpson’s school, were really beautiful.”

Suzanne resumes, with additional information, concerning ‘Les Sylphides’ and other ballets and music which probably influenced Mrs. Simpson’s choreography and ballets: “Balanchine and Mason indicate that, ‘no one knows exactly when the first ballet blanc, or white ballet was first performed. …this kind of ballet which involved a new conception of dance [was] based on an ethereal atmosphere, soft music, and diaphanous white costumes…” [In ‘Les Sylphides’, for example], ‘it is the music and the way in which the magical dancers dance, in the light of the moon, which are key elements’. In discussing one of the dances, they state that it is ‘bolder, open and free, but still restrained’, [that] ‘the ballerina bounds diagonally across the stage in grand jetés, over and over again’ (pp. 473-474).

I think that Yvonne daCosta, Noelle Hill Chutkan and Pansy Silvera Hassan, as well as several other dancers, who went on to take leadership roles within NDTC, must have played key roles in some early Simpson ballets.”

Cecille: “I remember this sequence of grand jetés, moving across the stage in a diagonal line; or of two or more dancers, moving from opposite sides of the stage, who cross the stage on two diagonal lines, and then move/alternate/or crisscross each other to form a large X on the stage. In several later ballets, for example, I can think of Christine Anderson in ‘the White Witch’. Jackie White, Claudette Sutherland, Monica Williamson, and Monica Williams, were noted for their ability to perform exquisite grand jetés. All could leap so high, and travel so far, through the air that they appeared to be suspended for a few seconds in mid-air.”

‘Symphonic Variations’

Suzanne: “In this ballet, Balanchine and Mason state that, ‘there is no story.’ [Further that] ‘a mood is created by the setting, costumes, music and the dancers’ responses to the music’ (p. 489). They comment, as importantly, that the music itself is divided between the dancers. Some perform to the orchestra, while at the same time, the soloist takes the part played by the pianist. In reading Balanchine and Mason’s summaries, one detects some of the strengths which Mrs. Simpson brought to her teaching and choreography.

Simpson’s version of the ballet states simply, that it depicts an interpretation of the music. The dancers are: Variation I, Hope Bent; Variation II, Jean-Anne Sutherland; Variation III, Erica Cooke, Corps de ballet, P. Silvera, C. Anderson, K. Silvera, J. Kirlew, B. King (Simpson, 1960, p. 4.).”

Cecille, smiling with nostalgia, agrees and expands by stating: “The Balanchine and Mason comment about dividing the music, into discrete roles/components, is what I remember well: being trained to listen carefully, to isolate specific themes and sub-themes in the music, and then to interpret the music of specific instruments. This, for me, was particularly apparent, in the late 1960s ballet performances. For one memorable ballet, we performed en pointe to one of Rachmaninov’s piano concertos. I remember, distinctly, that we wore very short, bright green
costumes which fitted our bodies really well. We wore pink, fishnet tights which used to cut into our feet, at least mine did.”

**Suzanne:** “The ability to use the music in which small groups, or individuals, danced to their own specific parts of the music, and to have several different sequences unfolding, at several levels (standing, sitting, kneeling, or lying, or moving on the floor), all attest to Mrs. Simpson’s ability to choreograph complex and complicated dances. As importantly, even for the early warm up exercises at the barre, centre or floor work at the studio, on Hope Road, Mrs. Simpson used wonderful, classical music which had been interpreted for ballets by the great choreographers. Accordingly, the students grew up listening and dancing to incredible classical music. Without knowing it, the dancers were exposed to and participated in a rich, living dance legacy.”

Lights fade, blackout conditions.

Spotlights focus on Suzanne and Cecille.

**In an excited voice, Suzanne is accompanied by the PowerPoint presentation which flashes back to life:**

‘Coppélia’

“According to Balanchine and Mason, whereas Giselle represents the great tragedy, Coppélia is the great comedy in classical ballet. Although Simpson’s Coppélia was performed in 1960, at the Ward Theatre, it is discussed in this part of the book because I think that the ballet represents one of the highlights of Fay Simpson’s choreography and teaching, at that time.

Originally choreographed by Arthur Saint-Leon, with Music by Leo Delibes, and regarded as ballet’s great comedy, Coppélia was presented first at the Théâtre Imperial de l’Opéra, in Paris, in May 1870 (Balanchine and Mason, p. 75).

In **Fay Simpson’s version,** the main roles/characters were:

- The puppeteer, Dr. Coppélius, Sydney Burke;
- Coppélia, the beautiful wax doll (Swanhilda’s double), Pansy Silvera Hassan;
- Swanhilda (the heroine), Pansy Silvera Hassan;
- The male lead, Franz (the hero), Milton Dawes.

**Storyline:** A puppet, a beautiful, lifeless, mechanical doll is contrasted with the lively, charming, heroine, Swanhilda. Because they look so alike, the hero, Franz, is unable to distinguish between them. Accordingly, by mistake, Franz falls in love with the puppet. The story includes comedy, drama, suspense, violence, vandalism, and of course, the happy ending of fairy tales. Simpson’s version is lengthy, complicated and complex with a large cast. A summary from Simpson’s ballet program follows (Simpson, 1960).

**Fay Simpson’s Coppélia performance:** The curtain rises. Sitting on the balcony of Dr. Coppélius’ house is the puppet, Coppélia, seemingly immersed in reading a book. Dr. Coppélius, an old man, bent with age, hobbles out of the door of his house onto the stage.
Sydney Burke, completely disguised in a costume of unshapely old clothes as Dr. Coppélius, wears a grey wig and is covered with very heavy stage make-up. (In reality, Miss Burke was a very sophisticated, elegantly dressed lady). Rubbing his hands with pleasure, Dr. Coppélius points to Coppélia, his perfect lifelike creation. Coppélius re-enters his house to continue to weave his magic spells with the other dolls/puppets that he has created. Lynda Simpson Mandzuik, for example, remembers clearly making her debut as one of Coppélius’ dolls.

Franz (Milton Dawes), the hero, enters. Seeing Coppélia, thinking that she is Swanhilda, he dances to her, declaring his love. Unknown to him, Swanhilda is watching from the shadows. In anger, Swanhilda goes in search of Coppélia. She finds the puppet and destroys her. In another room, Dr. Coppélius meets Franz who is searching for Coppélia. When Franz explains that he wants to marry his daughter, Coppélia, Dr. Coppélius drugs him.

Lights fade, blackout. Spotlight focuses on Swanhilda.

Hearing Dr. Coppélius approaching, Swanhilda hides the broken doll, Coppélia, behind a curtain and assumes her place. Pretending to be the puppet, Swanhilda dances at Coppélius’ commands. She moves from the initial jerky, stiff movements of a puppet to the increasingly fluid, sustained movements of a person. Coppélius realizing that he has been tricked, tries to capture Swanhilda. Franz awakes and rescues her. Swanhilda and Franz escape. The story continues to unfold with several twists and turns, eventually Swanhilda and Franz marry. The ballet ends with a grand finale (Simpson, 1960, pp. 5, 6, 8, 10).

With excellent character-acting skills and abilities, Sydney Burke plays a very convincing role as the aged, Dr. Coppélius. Miss Burke, in reminiscing about the ballet, remembers with a chuckle that the Daily Gleaner’s dance critic was impressed with the ‘chappie who played the role of Dr. Coppélius’. The heroine, Pansy Silvera Hassan, won the hearts of everyone watching. Cecille says that she suspects that many of Mrs. Simpson’s dancers-in-the-making, yearned to be able to dance, one day, as well as Pansy did in Coppélia.”
Pansy Silvera Hassan as “Coppélia” (Simpson, 1960)
Endnotes:

1. The music used for ‘Les Sylphides’ was written long ago, by Frederic Chopin. The first arrangement of the ballet was by choreographer Mikhail Fokine, for Diaghilev’s Ballet Russes performances in Paris, in 1908. Anna Pavlova and Vaslav Nijinsky were among the lead dancers. In the first production of this ballet, there is no narrative, no characters or personalities (Balanchine and Mason, 1989; Clarke and Vaughan, 1977).

2. In Balanchine and Mason’s explanation of this ballet: Music for ‘Symphonic Variations’ was written by Cesar Franck, and the choreography was by Frederick Ashton. The original prima ballerina was Margot Fonteyn who performed with other outstanding members of the Sadler’s Wells Ballet, at the Royal Opera House, in Covent Gardens, London, shortly after the Second World War in 1946. A few years later, in 1949, the ballet was presented with the original English cast by Sadler’s Wells, at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York.

References and Sources


Telephone meeting with Denise, Lynda, and Cecille, summer 2015.

Numerous telephone meetings, email letters and correspondence during 2015 with, for example: Shelia Defreitas, Denise (Hall) Desnoes, Maurice Gray, Elise Guy, Bobby Lecky, Claire McFarlane, Pamela Mordecai, Michele Mowatt, Lynda Simpson Mandzuiik, Stefan Maxwell, Peter Thomas.