Part 3
Telling/Dancing Our Stories Ourselves: Stories of the 1960s

Chapter 5: Transitions 2

"No less human is the capacity to break new frontiers of knowledge, of know-why and know-how, based on already accumulated knowledge rooted in historical experience and existential reality and aided at times by that 'hunch' which scientists and artists alike admit has often catapulted mankind into genuine discoveries about itself." (Nettleford, 1993, p. 31)

Although Rex Nettleford's (1993) book analyzes the historical and systemic dilemmas facing the Caribbean and the world, if his quote is taken at a more specific level of interpretation and analysis, I can apply it to ways in which Fay Simpson demonstrated her increasing knowledge of dance and choreography, which Pat Cumper discusses in the book's Preface. As importantly, Denise Desnoes states that Fay moved well beyond the traditional ways of teaching ballet in Jamaica. Increasingly, with each show, Fay Simpson choreographed and mounted performances not only of the classical works, but as importantly, she created original ballets and dances which were stamped vividly, made in Jamaica, by a recognized and highly respected, Jamaican woman, dance mistress.

For each of the senior students' or children's ballets, Fay Simpson created scenes in which all members of her dance school had parts/roles, whether large or small. Fay always choreographed dances for groups who moved as individuals, within their respective roles, or as a group moved with three or four dancers in-the-making. Accordingly, it was easier to have everyone play individual or small group roles in the performances. As importantly, Fay Simpson tailored the solo dances to demonstrate the students' strengths and not their limitations. In working with the larger groups of students, she never, even with the children's ballets, allowed the entire corps of dancers to run, shuffle, or skip en masse on the stage. For the most part, dances tended to be quite short. Some were, for only, a few minutes.

In Part 3, we present examples of some of the Simpson Ballet performances, of the 1960s, beginning with the ambitious White Witch Ballet. In another chapter, we offer a few vignettes from the Three Mary's Ballet. Snippets of the first Youth ballet are highlighted in a later chapter: "Dancing with Mr. Neville Black", as well as earlier, in Part 2, "Denise's Story".

Chapter 6: The White Witch Ballet

Suzanne enters wearing the same costume and her black toe shoes: "We begin with the White Witch ballet."

Several spotlights illuminate Elizabeth, Thomasina, and Kathleen Cassandra who have returned to the stage. They are very busy, during Suzanne's narrative. They continue to pack and unpack, taking out, trying on, and returning many of Denise's treasured costumes into her trunk. They also keep trying to capture the costumes from ballets many, many years ago, which keep appearing and disappearing, from the wings, apparently at will. From the mountains of costumes, they identify what they think should be: the White Witch's several costumes; costumes for the grand ball attended by members of the plantocracy; distinctive slave costumes, and costumes worn by the Overseer and other Lead Characters, in the ballet.

Kathleen Cassandra, scrambles to her feet, recovers quickly, as she remembers that she is holding up Denise's mid-calf length, pinkish rose, coloured tutu that Denise wore at the White Witch's grand ball. This is one of the costumes once worn by the young dancers who played the roles of plantation wives. (See Lady Nugent's Journal, 2002, for discussion of dresses worn in the early 19th century by the British women members, of the sugar plantocracy, at such events). Kathleen Cassandra flounces and shakes out the long skirts, in what she thinks is a snobbish manner. She assumes a stance of arrogance.

Thomasina has captured, finally, several of the White Witch's costumes which have grand jetéd and waltzed onto the stage, and to the delight of the audience, have been dancing around by themselves. The costumes, like their owner, depict power, flair and aplomb. Thomasina, too, throws her head back, and performs a mime of arrogance. With one hand, she swishes the skirt of the green hunting costume in disgust. Almost simultaneously, she throws, and rolls one shoulder back, in an exaggerated manner, and places one hand akimbo (just like Rita Moreno, in the parodic, dance 'America', in 'West Side Story'). Her accompanying leg movement, en pointe, are far too difficult to describe in words.

Elizabeth leaps up, to catch Monica's beautiful, short, white costume and mask which have floated on to the stage, mid-air. This is the costume which Monica wore to the grand ball. Elizabeth assumes a quiet, powerful stance; very similar to that adopted earlier, when she was confronted by Thomasina and Kathleen Cassandra, in the introduction to tonight's performance.

Suzanne smiles, as she observes their mimes, and continues in conversational tones: "In Jamaica's popular history, and in Herbert de Lisser's (1970/1958/1929) book, the White Witch was a brutal slave mistress who grew up in Haiti. She buried three husbands, who died under strange circumstances. de Lisser's book was probably a key source for Fay Simpson's ballet. Mrs. Simpson's ballet, however, departed in significant ways from de Lisser's novel. A few examples: Firstly, the lavish ball for the plantocracy in the ballet, is a major point of departure. The novel states explicitly that: '[Anne Palmer] shunned by her class… [furthermore] had carried her love for power and domination to lengths of which they had never dared to dream' (de Lisser, 1970/1929, p. 240). Thus, members of the plantocracy would not have participated in

Anne Palmer's grand ball. Secondly, Palmer's white employees observing her excesses, including the murder of a young enslaved girl, speculated that she was 'unbalanced, or insanity may be in her heritage' (de Lisser, 1970/1929, p. 240). Simpson's ballet concentrated on Palmer's cruelty and love of power but did not hint at her insanity. In the book, Takoo, the leader of the slaves, most likely, played by Milton Dawes in the ballet, explained that the 'enslaved people were free… we taking to the mountains to fight until the damn slave-owners here acknowledge our freedom. It come from England an' they keeping it back' (de Lisser, 1970/1929, p. 240). Thirdly, there was a widespread slave revolt that was brutally suppressed. Fourthly, in the book, there was a drunk, white ex-parson, associated with the estate, who played an important role; however, Cecille does not remember either the slave revolt or the ex-parson, in the ballet. However, with time, she might be wrong. Angela Ramsay, in responding to the work, has suggested that the harsher cruelties, imposed on the enslaved people, was an inappropriate theme to be portrayed by the young dancers. (Email, from Angela Ramsay to Cecille DePass, December 6, 2019).

An aside: Interestingly, as discussed by Denise (in Part 2), the other ballet schools in Jamaica, at that time, were somewhat elitist and adhered predominantly to the syllabus, of the traditionally European method, of the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD). In marked contrast, Mrs. Simpson's repertoire comprised not only versions, of some, of the well-known classical ballets, highlighted earlier, but also, works that depicted Jamaican folktales; such as, Anancy and the Goat (1952) and The White Witch, biblical themes as in the Three Mary's (late 1960s), as well as, children's stories like, Dances from the Nutcracker Suite (1954) and the Sorcerer's Apprentice (1960s). For the Sorcerer's Apprentice ballet, Elizabeth Donaldson was the lead character, the young apprentice. The Sorcerer was never, visibly, on stage. An illusion of his presence was depicted aptly by the maestro of lighting, Mr. George Carter. With the use of lighting, the audience was invited to imagine that they could see the Sorcerer.

Fay Simpson also included Mrs. Foster Davis' Youth Orchestra, in at least one ballet performance. Cecille remembers that it was difficult to dance to music played by the youth orchestra because for each performance, all dancers were forced to work and dance with the young musicians, who were themselves learning how to play their instruments. The inclusion of the Youth Orchestra, however, illustrated Fay Simpson's desire to nurture and encourage young local talent, at every opportunity."

Suzanne shifts her tone:

"**Time:** mid-19th Century.

Place: A vast sugar plantation in Jamaica owned by Anne Palmer, the White Witch.

Scene: A very large ballroom in the White Witch's Great House.

Event: The grand fete for the sugar planters and their wives whose plantations are located near to the White Witch's …"

Suzanne pauses.

Cecille dances and walks briskly, back on to the stage, and into Suzanne's spotlight which expands to accommodate them. Cecille explains: "In my memories of this ballet, the role of the White Witch was superbly played by the fiery, red-haired, green-eyed, Christine Anderson. Christine was petite, yet, in her dancing she captured the audience's attention and controlled the stage. By her very strong presence, she exuded the power to command and rule. In playing her role, I think that several aspects of Christine's emerging adult personality came to the forefront; a few examples include: her energy, fire, determination and physical and emotional strengths. All of which were required to play such a demanding role, successfully. In the studio, Christine's sense of humour was always quick to surface. Although, at the Little Theatre, her sense of humour was not explicitly demonstrated, in her stage persona, in this and subsequent ballets. At that time, Christine was in her late teens. She was still a student at Holy Childhood High School, which was located very near to Half Way Tree, and accordingly, within easy walking distance of Mrs. Simpson's school.

For the grand ball, members of the corps de ballet included Michele Mowatt, Barbara Smellie, Denise Hall, Hope Bent, Jackie White, Claudette Sutherland, and yours truly. In this scene, we played the roles of the planters' wives and their respective spouses who were attending the White Witch's lavish fete. We, wives, danced en pointe. Each wife wore a lovely, mid-calf length, pinkish, red tutu. It had a tightly fitted bodice of the same colour as the skirt. Most importantly, there were sequins scattered across parts of the bodice and skirt. The sequins glittered and shimmered as we danced. I can still see my costume in my mind's eye. It was the most fabulous costume that I have ever worn.

We, members of the corps, entered the stage/ballroom, in small groups from stage-left and right, and quickly positioned ourselves, in the places directed by Mrs. Simpson."

Suzanne steps away from centre-stage. ***Cecille*** glissades smoothly, to stand right in the middle of the spotlight, at centre-stage, occupying Suzanne's former place. Suzanne's spotlight follows her, as she moves several steps backwards. Her spotlight is marginally dimmed.

Cecille muses and speculates: "I think that we were grouped on stage in diamond clusters or in some types of geometric patterns. We were taught to never stand directly behind the person, in front of us, but to occupy a space either to the left or right of an individual.

In the lengthy morning practices, at the Little Theatre, I recall that a lot of time was spent in getting the spacing around each person just right. In retrospect, I think that an unintended learning, at least in my view, was never to stand in anyone's shadow. Instead, we learned to situate ourselves on our own ground, and to stand, move and dance as individuals who were at the same time a part of a larger community of young women.

Accompanied by the sonorous sounds, of taped music, we danced and acted (to the best of our individual abilities) the assigned roles of ladies and lords from different sugar plantations. (See Maria Nugent's Diary for vivid descriptions of typical behaviours, mannerisms, attitudes, and speech patterns of the island's plantocracy, in the early 19th century). The music, selected for the grand ball, is still engrained in my mind; it flowed in regal, triumphant, tones. We proceeded, in a stately manner onto the stage, heads held high looking down our noses, at everything, and everyone around us. We took our places, in the assigned spots, then as the music changed to a

waltz, we proceeded to move elegantly, through our paces, in the waltz choreographed by Mrs. Simpson for the colonial elite. We ended the waltz with flourishes of curtsies by the women and bows by our respective 'male' partners. We moved, to the sides of the stage, to perch on the assigned chairs. In exaggerated ways we, slowly, swung our legs to the side away from the audience and balanced on toes, en pointe. We held our poses and prepared to watch, avidly, the pas de deux by the White Witch and her partner, Robert, the Overseer."

Suzanne catches the conversational ball: "Suddenly, the music takes a dramatic turn. Ms. Anderson enters, in a flash of movement, and dances to the harsh, clashing, sounds of that specific piece of classical music. Christine, in her role, is drama personified. She has become the White Witch reincarnated. Christine is wearing a superbly tailored costume. It is a very short white tutu with sequins, scattered in a pattern, across the bodice and skirt."

Cecille right on cue: "Watching from the sidelines, opening and snapping our fans, we flashed, flourished, and pretended to flirt with our partners, who were teenage girls like ourselves but dressed as men. Keeping within our roles, we plantation wives, mimed with pleasure, shock and gossip.

We watch mesmerized, as the White Witch bewitches her partner/lover, the plantation's new, very young, Overseer, Robert, played by Maurice Gray. Together, they dance a romantic pas de deux."

Suzanne also right on cue: "The White Witch's male partner plays the minimal role, traditionally, allocated to men in ballet. Maurice Gray's role is to prop, catch, or turn Ms. Anderson, as she demonstrates her dancing prowess in her flashing, flamboyant, double and triple pirouettes and her flying grand jetés, on a diagonal line across the stage. For the climatic grand jeté, Christine literally flies, at least halfway, across the stage towards the audience. She dives into Maurice's arms. Each time, that Christine executes the flying grand jeté, the corps hold their breaths, and sigh with relief, when she lands safely. On one occasion Christine, in landing, crashes to the floor…"

Cecille interrupts: "We gasp with shock. No acting this time."

Suzanne continues: "Christine rises, instantaneously, in smooth flowing movements and regains her balance, as if the fall was quite intentional. With a swagger, she tosses her head, clutches her headdress, and continues her dance. To the unknowing audience, the fall and rapid recovery were part of Mrs. Simpson's brilliant choreography. Christine leaves the stage with one of her famous flying grand jetés."

Cecille: "The philosophy, of carrying on with grace, no matter what happens on stage, has become part of my personal lived philosophy. In public performances, in dancing, one learned that: if one's costume began to unravel or tear; if one's toe shoe ribbons snapped, or worse yet, if a shoe broke; if one's hair style, head dress or hair ornaments, were suddenly undone; if one dropped any of the props; or lost a shoe, one recovered in the best ways, and left the stage quickly, as if it was part of the choreography. One simply kept on dancing, right through the wings, into the dark recesses behind the wings."

Suzanne moves back to centre-stage. Spotlights expand. Suzanne explains: "Rapid transitions, in the physical and emotional environments in the White Witch ballet, are depicted with the appropriate lighting by the Lighting Director and his Apprentice, heightened by the appropriate classical music.

Monica, one of the lead slaves, appears quietly on the stage from the very back. For the grand ball, Monica is dressed as a beautiful, mysterious, masked lady. In her dance, Monica's steps echo Christine's flamboyant ones, in her earlier dance of triumph, but Monica's grand jetés, although as high, are far more subdued in execution. Monica proceeds to bewitch the White Witch's lover with her wistful, fluid, and more sustained movements.

Suddenly, the music and lights change to depict rage. The White Witch enters with high drama. She has changed, rapidly, into her plantation work clothes. She wears a very short, hunting costume. The White Witch is violently angry. She raises her whip and brutally lashes Monica, who slumps to the ground, as if dead. The corps, still sitting on the sidelines, gasp with horror.

Monica slowly exits the stage in agony. She crawls, in a series of painful, flat movements, along the floor of the stage and finally leaves through the wings."

Rapid Scene and lighting changes. Blackout conditions.

Cecille continues: "We, the corps, exit the stage now in darkness, continuing to mime shock and horror, until we are well away from the wings. We head, towards the dressing rooms, backstage. Everywhere, including the dressing rooms are in utter darkness, because the curtains for the main stage have not been closed. There is always absolute silence when we leave the stage, and even in the dressing rooms, no one is allowed to whisper. (Confirmed in a telephone conversation with Sydney Burke in early, December 2015)."

Cecille bows to Suzanne, who smiles, and resumes speaking: "In the very next scene, the thunder rolls and crashes, lightening sizzles, the atmosphere, on stage, is rife with malice and destruction. (All environmental cues are depicted by the lighting changes and music).

In the very low lighting, one can hardly see the lead slaves and the corps (all dressed once more, in their drably, coloured, slave costumes) moving quietly on to the stage. The lead slaves, portrayed by the three Monica's (Ingleton, Williams, and Williamson) and Milton Dawes, dance the dance in which they plot their revenge. They plan to kill the White Witch because of her cruel treatment, and whipping, of Monica and many other slaves. In their own dance, we, members of the corps, also dressed in drab slave costumes, indicate that we aid and abet the proposed killing.

In the final scene, Monica Williamson kills the White Witch. Maurice Gray, the bereft lover, carries her body off the stage, holding her aloft in his hands."[1]

Cecille concludes: "If I am correct, the ballet ends with the slaves dancing, jubilantly, because the White Witch is dead."

Endnotes:

1. ***Cecille:*** When I participated in the White Witch, admittedly in small ways, as a lead dancer in the corps in the scenes in which I was, firstly, an enslaved person and later on a plantation wife, I knew the story of the White Witch well because I had read my mother's copy of de Lisser's book. In high school (3rd form), I studied Clinton Black's History of Jamaica. Later in 5th form, The Making of the West Indies by Roy Augier, Shirley Gordon, Douglas Hall and M. Reckford, as well as, Sources of West Indian History were the main texts used for the Cambridge O level History examination at my high school. Still later in 6th form with Mary Langford, our history teacher, we went on a memorable field trip to visit the historical sites, in Spanish Town, specifically, the slave museum and to Seville, in St. Ann to see the early stages of an archeological dig, which later unearthed some of the ruins of one of the first Spanish settlements in Jamaica. The day concluded with a picnic at Puerto Seco Beach. In retrospect, learning history from texts and for examination purposes, is significantly different to experiential forms of learning. In this case, the 6th form field trip and an earlier field trip, with Mrs. Gloria Cumper and her family to Port Royal, taught me history, at first hand.

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Telephone conversations, with Sydney Burke, in December 2015.

Chapter 7: The Three Mary's Ballet

Cecille enters and stands beside Suzanne. Cecille speaks in reflective tones:

"**Event:** The Three Mary's Ballet

Time: Spring 1965

Place: The Little Theatre

For this ballet, I have only a few memories since the White Witch Ballet was, for me, the most dramatic and memorable, of the Simpson ballets, in which I was involved as a member and often a lead of the corps de ballet. In the Three Mary's Ballet, Mrs. Simpson turned to the New Testament. The ballet told of imagined events which took place after Jesus' resurrection.

The ballet concentrated on the responses, of the three Mary's and the corps de ballet (the women followers), as they learned of Jesus' resurrection. One remembers that the Simpson ballet, was designed for, and performed, by senior teen and young adult women dancers, who for the most part, had not experienced the hardships and challenges associated with adulthood. The dancers therefore, relied on Mrs. Simpson's instructions and their imagination to depict their assigned roles.

The three lead roles were played by Christine Anderson as Mary Magdalene. (See the first photograph). Claudette Sutherland was Jesus' mother, Mary. (See the second photograph). Unfortunately, I do not remember the name of the senior dancer who played the role of the third Mary. It was, perhaps, Monica Williams, or Monica Williamson? (Unfortunately, in the third, photograph, Jackie White, corp de ballet, is standing in front of the third Mary. It is too difficult to tell). I do remember well, that the Monica's were superb dancers in, significantly, different ways.

I recall that I was a leader of a small group, of the women disciples, in the corps de ballet and that we were soberly dressed in very simple, dark green, mid-calf dresses. We also had head ties. (See photograph). I think that Lynda Simpson, Charmaine Lynch, Jackie White, Dana Street, and Barbara Smellie, played assigned roles, as the women disciples, in the corps de ballet.

I cannot remember the exact sequence of events in this ballet, but I remember that I was one of the women followers, who went to Jesus' tomb, and was shocked to find it empty. I remember this role because Mrs. Cumper, in her review of our respective performances, after watching a rehearsal at the Little Theatre, came on to the stage. She said in her distinctive, warm, voice: 'Cecille, you must portray, explicitly for the audience, your sheer fright. You look far too calm. You must look absolutely shocked and frightened, Jesus' tomb is empty'.

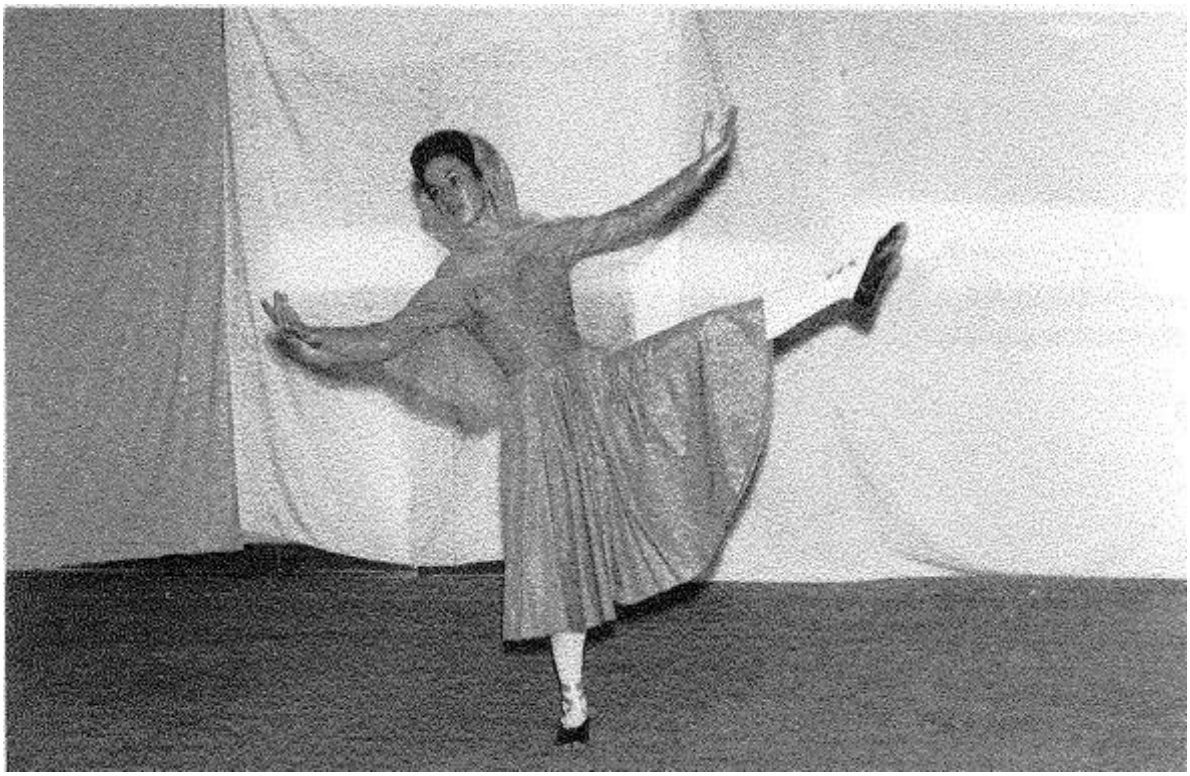
Little did Mrs. Cumper know just how frightened I really was. To be alone on the seemingly vast, empty and very dark stage of the Little Theatre, with a spotlight concentrating on me was, for me, a dreadful experience. It was very different to performing at the studio on Hope Road. Accordingly, in my version of demonstrating sheer fright, on the stage, I appeared to be frozen in

terms of my facial expressions and in my body. I think that, in one performance, I appeared to be very frightened and was commended by Mrs. Cumper who did not know that I either forgot my steps or tripped.

The ballet concluded with a note of hope. Unfortunately, I cannot remember any more of the Three Mary's Ballet, or anything of the children's ballet or the senior students' introductory number for the 1965 dance performances, at the Little Theatre."

(***Source:*** Cecille's memories and telephone meeting with Lynda, Denise and Cecille, July 26, 2015, 9-10 am, MST).

Sample Photos of the "Three Mary's Ballet" from Cecille DePass' Archives



Christine Anderson as the first Mary.

Claudette Sutherland as the second Mary, accompanied by some of the corps de ballet, Jesus' women followers. Cecille DePass, far right.

In front, Jackie White, leader, corps de ballet with the third Mary, Monica W., behind her.