

## Part 5

### Telling/Dancing Our Stories Ourselves: Dancing with Mr. Neville Black

#### Chapter 10: Introductions to Jazz and Modern Dance, Take 5

“Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin...” (Leonard Cohen, 1995)

***Lit by her personal spotlight, Suzanne begins:*** “Neville Black, was one of the modern dancers who was trained in the USA and returned to the island, to choreograph and teach modern and jazz dance to teens and adults. He choreographed several dances for Mrs. Simpson’s ballet performances, and taught with her in the 1960s.

Imagine that you can hear and see him, as he cajoles the teen students to learn how to dance, in such very different ways, to learning ballet from Mrs. Simpson:

‘Ladies, Ladies, when you land so heavily you sound just like breadfruits dropping off the tree. Now, Remember to bend/plié deeply, when you jump so high, and land quietly, like mus, mus. Now, let’s try the sequence again.’<sup>1</sup>

Then with a warm smile he would say: ‘that’s much better, ladies. Much better. Very good.’”

***Cecille*** walks back onto the stage, and stands beside Suzanne. The spotlight expands and intensifies in colour. Both are extremely well lit. ***Cecille says in conversational tones:***

“As an aside, by 12 years of age, I was a dance teaching assistant. I was granted a scholarship to learn to dance from Mrs. Simpson, on the condition that I came on alternative days, and helped her to teach the little ones (in the first three levels of the beginner’s classes). This was my introduction to teaching.

In the early 1960s, Mr. Black joined the dance teaching staff at Mrs. Simpson’s. We began our stint of learning modern dance, from someone I thought was trained, at the legendary Martha Graham School of Dance. On reading one of Rex Nettleford’s books in December 2015, I realized, however, that I was quite wrong. Nettleford (1985, p. 41) states authoritatively, that Neville Black was trained in Chicago, and not in New York by Martha Graham. In Nettleford’s book, there is also a photograph (1985, p. 66) of Neville Black, sitting with the major NDTC dancers, at that time. Interestingly, two of Mrs. Simpson’s former lead dancers, Noelle Hill Chutkan and Milton Dawes are in the same photograph with the NDTC dancers.

Mr. Black brought to our classes entirely different perspectives and teaching-learning styles. Not only did Mr. Black teach us modern dance, but as importantly, we learned that there were important differences between classical ballet (as taught by Mrs. Simpson), and Mr. Black’s modern dance teaching styles. Mr. Black’s version, of modern dance/jazz, was learned by counting the steps in his exact, prescribed sequence. We learned to listen carefully to the

snapping of his fingers, and/or to the manner in which he beat the time with his right hand, on the front of his right thigh, or his left hand, on his left thigh.

In his explanation, of the evolution of modern dance in Jamaica, Rex Nettleford states that Neville Black, who choreographed ten of the early NDTC dances (1964-1968), brought his wit and the modern dance style that he had developed in Chicago. According to Nettleford, Black contributed to the National Dance Theatre Company, 'a technically strong, but free, and lyrical style' as a result of his training in the 'techniques of Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman and through the modern dance pioneer, Sybil Shearer in Chicago' (1985, p. 41).

Accordingly, for the first time, instead of listening carefully to the music and interpreting the music, by using minor variations to Mrs. Simpson's dance sequences, now, we learned that the music (instrumental or voice) was predominantly, the backdrop for the specific dance. The choreographer imagined and designed in his mind the exact sequence of steps and body movements which constituted the dance.

We, students, became the physical, tangible representations of Mr. Black's art. Moreover, we learned an appreciation of spaces around us as we moved to the steps. The floor and the air were considered to be very tangible spaces, in/on/through, which we moved. The dancer carried such an understanding within him/her, and acted accordingly. (See summary of the *White Witch* ballet for the dramatic manner in which Monica (the slave) exits the stage, after being severely beaten by Christine Anderson, the *White Witch*).

We learned, implicitly, how to distinguish between the prescribed sequences of steps and body movements, and the influences of the music itself on the dance (meaning, the different ways in which we interpreted the music, and in doing so, created the spirit of the dance). Each of us brought, to the dance, our individual capacities and capabilities, in terms of the ways, in which we executed the specific dance movements. (See Martha Graham in Morgan, 1981, Preface, for discussion).

In learning the difference, between the two teaching styles, Mr. Black choreographed an interesting series of dances for Mrs. Simpson's first Youth ballet. Performed in 1967, the first Youth ballet explored contemporary issues encountered by teens. Accordingly, in the Youth ballet series (Parts 1 and 2), the storylines shifted from the earlier classical, historical or biblical themes, to examine critical issues faced by adolescent teen girls.

In terms of tones and moods depicted in *Youth*, Part 1, for example, Neville Black played an important role. For his contribution to the ballet, I remember vividly, that in-toe shoes, we (Denise Hall, Michele Mowatt, Claudette Sutherland, and I) minced with high prancing steps, followed by quick staccato, and bourrée steps -- right across the stage. We entered from stage-left or right, in a single line, very much like Gilbert and Sullivan's 'three little maids from school are we', in the *Mikado*. Perhaps, in a high parody, and in a very satirical manner, we were imitating with our body language, facial expressions, and our hands/arms/legs, stylized representations of simpering and prissy aristocratic women courtiers in, for instance, a royal European court, which some of us learned in high school history and literature classes.

It was amazing watching Mr. Black demonstrate how to mince across the stage, in an exaggerated manner, and to mime how to be shocked, at whatever we pretended to be observing. This was one of my favourite dances in the Youth ballet, Part 1, because I loved the parody.

I remember that the music was from one of Bach's concertos. This dance appealed to our teenage sensibilities. We loved it as we imitated and, perhaps, mocked some of our very proper high school teachers who taught us. At least, in my role, I certainly did.

For the same ballet, Jackie White and Mr. Black performed a highly stylized, abstract, romantic duet in which there was very little, if any, movements involving close proximity to the other. In my mind, the romantic duet was more like the stories of chivalry which we learned at school.

Mrs. Simpson did not perform with her students on stage, however, Mr. Black loved the lime-light and loved being under the glare of the spotlights. Even though he was probably quite mature in years, as young teens, we thought that he was ancient, because we knew that he was a good friend of Mrs. Simpson. However, when he danced, Mr. Black was transformed to becoming the far younger man, who had learned modern and jazz dance, in Chicago. When he taught us, Neville Black was, probably, the first Jamaican black man, from the parish of Portland, to be trained in dance in the USA. At least, in my young teenage mind, he was.

Several years later, one evening, in the early 1970s, Mrs. Simpson and I went to watch Mr. Black teach at a warehouse building, near Port Antonio, in Portland. He invited me to join his class which I did. Mr. Black's dance techniques, sequences and patterns were a welcome change. During my two-year stint of graduate studies in Wellington, New Zealand, I had attended a ballet school (situated upstairs, in an old run-down, building in the downtown core). As well, I participated in an introductory, modern, dance class at the Victoria University of Wellington. There, the young Physical Education teacher was delighted to have someone with a formal dance background. Very shortly, she allowed me to have my own small class of a few, British, New Zealand, women and men students. We performed a dance that I choreographed for one of the university's concerts. I digress back to Mr. Black's class in Port Antonio.

Unfortunately, by 1974, the energy, stamina and training that I had gradually developed while dancing, from the 1950s to 1960s, no longer existed in me. At the ripe old age of 25, I was wiped out in less than 30 minutes; so, I waved at Mr. Black, and withdrew, to sit beside Mrs. Simpson. We were the audience for his class. I watched, avidly, as he put his young teen dancers through their paces, at a very smart clip.

In the early to mid-1970s, Mr. Black choreographed a series of jazz and modern dances, which he showcased, at the Little Theatre. I can still remember another satirical dance, in which one of his women dancers, stuffed up to look very pregnant, danced to the memorable song, 'I could have danced all night' sung by Eliza Doolittle, in the movie 'My Fair Lady'. However, in Neville Black's dance version, the song became 'I should have danced all night'. In this choreography, Mr. Black demonstrated that he had a delightfully wicked sense of humour.<sup>2</sup>

For a short time, Mr. Black taught an evening class for adult women, at one of the dance studios, off Hope Road. I joined this class for a few years. In the early to mid-1990s, Neville Black's

sense of humour took a different turn. As a self-taught artist, he began to create and draw cartoons and caricatures featuring Jamaican characters. (See samples of artwork).

After so many years have passed, I cannot remember any more interesting snippets and stories from Mr. Black's dance classes. I remember visiting Mrs. Simpson, in the early 2000s, and her telling me that he had passed away, very suddenly and quietly, in the Nuttall Hospital, Cross Roads."

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#### **Endnotes:**

1. See Denise's chapter for fuller discussion regarding Neville Black's formal dance training and teaching style. Denise also discusses the differences between teaching styles within classical ballet, as well as, the US versions of modern dance.
2. For another very small example, of Mr. Black's sense of humour, see the two caricatures of everyday life that he painted. These are samples of his original artwork, produced in the early 1990s, as only the inimitable Neville Black could draw/choreograph the Jamaican characters whose body movements, literally, spring off the page.

#### **References**

- Morgan, B. (1980). *Martha Graham: Sixteen Dances in Photographs*. New York Morgan and Morgan.
- Cohen, L. (1995). *Dance me to the end of love*. In *Dance me to the end of love*. Poem by Leonard Cohen. Painting by Henri Matisse. Compiled by Welcome Enterprises, Inc.: New York.
- Nettleford, R. (1985). *Dance Jamaica: Cultural Definition and Artistic Discovery*, the National Dance Theatre Company of Jamaica, 1962-1983. New York: Grove Press Inc.

**Samples of Neville Black's Artwork (early 1990s) from Cecille DePass' Archives**

