

## Part 6 Endings and New Beginnings

### Chapter 11: Transitions 4

The curtains rise. Warm spotlights flood the stage.

Suzanne, accompanied by members of Simpson's dancers in Group 1, for example: Monica Ingleton, Michele Mowatt, Denise Desnoes, Cecille DePass, Jackie White, Jennifer Knight, as well as, Elaine Grant, Kay Barnard, Elizabeth Donaldson, Ruth Francis, Claire McFarlane, and Shelia Defretas are standing on the stage. They represent different, and sometimes overlapping periods of dancing with, and as importantly, assisting Mrs. Simpson with her ballet performances. Members of Group 1 form an open circle facing the audience. They look towards the audience, smiling happily with nostalgia, because they have remembered, recounted, retold and danced their stories tonight.

The first group of women are followed, a few seconds later, by the three very bright characters: Elizabeth, Thomasina, and Kathleen Cassandra who enter, from the wings, at the back of the stage. They move gracefully, to the very back of the stage, and stand just in front of the pale blue backdrop. The young characters stand in an open semicircle. They shadow the older women whom they know and/or have heard about tonight.

Pause. Lights flicker.

Lit by a range of spotlights, which dance with them quite playfully, the women in Suzanne's group (Group 1), joyfully move. Some move on the spot, some within a small radius of where each one stands. At the end of each performance, each one reaches out and symbolically links hands with the person, beside her. Accordingly, by the time the dancing ends, all the women appear to be linked symbolically in a continuous chain. In Caribbean terms, the women appear to be like the necklace of islands strung across the Caribbean Sea.

Suzanne is the first one to break the link. In doing so, she joins the hands of the two women with whom she has danced. Suzanne moves to the centre of the stage, at a point closest to the audience. The women remaining, now move to fully occupy the stage, and in doing so, close the gap that Suzanne has left. Their movements depict the ways in which each individual leaves Mrs. Simpson's school, and the remaining students then move into the spaces now vacant. In this manner, the Simpson Dance School continuously replenished and continued to rejuvenate itself for approximately 50 years.

Fay Simpson never wanted to have a large dance studio with sizeable numbers of students, so her studio was very much like a large, but interconnected, extended family. This impression was facilitated because several dance students had older or younger sisters, as well as their relatives, enrolled in the school at the same time. For example, the Street sisters, the Lynch sisters, the Anderson sisters, the Hodges sisters, the Gray sisters, the Rae twins and for a short time, the Harriott sisters attended the dance school together.

The women in Group 1 turn gradually and smoothly, like a ripple of waves dancing on the Long Bay beach, when the weather is calm and the sea sparkles. The women freeze with their backs to the audience, to wait their respective cues.

## Chapter 12: Tributes

**Suzanne begins:** “Tonight’s retrospective has taken us backwards in time, to the earliest days of Mrs. Simpson’s dancing career, even before she left Jamaica to study overseas, in Canada. When she returned to the island, from her small, one room school, at 11 Hope Road, Fay Simpson created magical worlds of beauty, fantasy and creativity with and for the dance students.

In the afternoons and evenings, the young girls, teenagers, and young adult women, through dance, learned about the widely ranging human conditions, attitudes and behaviours, as told by the classic ballet stories. This book includes the period from the mid to late 1950s, through to the 1960s, and again, in the early 1970s. As a result of her knowledge of dance, her abilities to interpret the music and the ballet stories, and as importantly, because of her imagination and creativity, Fay Simpson drew successfully, for example, on the brutal Jamaican history of slavery (in the *White Witch* ballet). She continued to expand her choreography even further, afield. Fay revisited with fresh eyes, the age-old biblical story, of the three Mary’s (Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the patient Mary, the woman who sat at his feet). Furthermore, through the Youth Series, Mrs. Simpson choreographed to classical and contemporary popular music, stories of some of the perennial experiences which troubled teenage girls then, and continue to trouble each generation, as we grow up to become young women.

Deliberately, by using dance as a way of exploring major life changes and events, the students were able to experience, in a safe environment, problems, dangers and possibilities which probably lay ahead in adulthood, either for themselves or their peers. For example, in the first Youth series, performed in spring 1967, there is a dance which Cecille says has remained in her mind forever. From this dance, Cecille has extracted and later applied some of the key underlying concepts, to teaching adults since the 1970s. The dance is the intricate machine dance, in which the dancers use their bodies, to mime what it means to be parts of a massive industrial factory.”

Suzanne freezes, as the spotlight shifts to Denise, Michele and Cecille, who begin to move in a jerky manner as if they are clockwork/machine like puppets.

**Suzanne resumes:** “The precision and the angularity of the body movements, all bring to mind major pieces of machinery. Cecille says that, in teaching university students, this activity, now called ‘moving sculptures or machines’, she was intrigued to find out that portraying complex machines is used by some drama teachers who have adopted participatory, popular theatre techniques. For Cecille, the dance has remained as a stark warning of the problems of becoming too mechanical, rigid, fixed and inflexible in one’s thinking and life.

The *White Witch* ballet...”

Suzanne freezes, as Christine Anderson, Maurice Gray, Monica Ingleton, Monica Williamson, and Monica Williams, Claudette Sutherland, Cecille, Denise, Michele Mowatt, and a few spirits, like Barbara Smellie, all appear under different spotlights, dressed in some of their *White Witch* costumes, as if by magic. They immediately assume the characters and stances, associated with their roles, and begin to dance some of the major sequences in that ballet.

**Suzanne** clears her throat with surprise, smiles, and resumes speaking, quite unabashed. She says quietly to herself, sotto voce, “This is truly a magical event.”

***She raises her voice and continues, in her authoritative tones:*** “The White Witch ballet enacts tensions between the plantocracy, and enslaved persons. This ballet demonstrates the brutal controls and punishments which were once considered, to be standard operating procedures, on a plantation. The use of corporal punishment, for example, in the White Witch ballet, extends the metaphor of power and control to the extreme. It demonstrates the illusion, as believed by the plantocracy and its representatives, that an individual or a group of people, can be enslaved in perpetuity. However, the ballet shows, as importantly, that the oppressed and enslaved people will, eventually, fight back. (For fuller analysis, see Lucille Mathurin Mair’s book about the ways in which enslaved women resisted oppression).”

### **Where to from 11 Hope Road?**

“For Michele Mowatt, life has continued to unfold in interesting ways. A few examples only, in the early 1970s, Michele became the first head of the experimental Jamaica House Basic school, during the Manley era. She was trained at the Froebel Educational Institute in London, England. In her very rich life, Michele has adopted several roles ranging from educator, dance mistress, philanthropist, entrepreneur and businesswoman, to becoming the interim head of St. Andrew’s Preparatory School. At least one of Michele’s daughters attended Mrs. Simpson’s dance school. Michele has also travelled the world, and has the most fascinating stories to tell.

On leaving Mrs. Simpson, as a teenager, Denise Desnoes’ path took her to London. There, she furthered her ballet training with Laura Wilson, who had been a former member of Sergei Diaghilev’s famous Russian Ballet Russe, between 1909-1929, and a technician of the Cecchetti Method. In London, Denise also participated in modern dance classes taught by visiting international teachers. After her return to Jamaica, Denise taught dance and performed for several years, until she migrated to Canada. As with many immigrants, including Cecille, the life of an immigrant has offered major challenges and possibilities. To quote Denise, ‘she has re-invented herself, several times.’”

All three, Denise, Michele and Cecille, come together, and move towards Suzanne, in order to create a loose, open circle, facing the audience. They link hands. In a sweeping movement of tribute, they stand erect, looking outwards to the back of the theatre, as if they can see Mrs. Simpson, standing there, smiling quietly and warmly with approval.

Like a ripple moving backwards into the stage, behind the four women, the remaining members of Group 1, all link hands. In a third ripple, the three young students, Elizabeth, Thomasina, and Kathleen Cassandra form a loose semicircle. The three students, at the very back of the stage, depict the continuity of life. Their spotlights flash with vibrant colours.

Everyone beams warmly, looking, firstly, in front. Then they turn their heads slowly, to the left and right, as if they can see and recognize individual faces of their family and friends in the audience.

Blackout.

Sounds of rapid exit from the stage.

Then from the wings, stage-left, one hears voices because the three students have forgotten, once again, to switch off their clip-on mikes.

**Elizabeth:** “I told you so. How can Mrs. Simpson’s influence be lost because she has passed away? In approximately 50 years, she has impacted many generations of people.”

**Thomasina:** “After hearing the stories, and seeing the dances of ‘Tributes’, I accept what you said earlier, Elizabeth.”

**Kathleen Cassandra:** “I agree with Thomasina.”

**Suzanne states from the wings, on the opposite side of the stage, stage-right:** “In the early 1950s, when Fay Simpson returned to Jamaica, after studying in Canada and the USA, she planned to fulfil her dream to establish her dance studio. With strong encouragement from her father, he offered her the land on which to build her one-room school and later her own home. As Pat Cumper states, the same building was a dance studio in the afternoons and evenings, and a kindergarten and preparatory school during the days.

Fay Simpson established her two schools, at a time, when the island was moving rapidly towards its political independence. Through dance, Cecille believes, Mrs. Fay Simpson prepared her students for a future life. We learned explicitly and implicitly:

- To be disciplined and orderly, yet at the same time, to be able to stand erect with dignity and confidence, in one’s own light.
- To be creative and imaginative.
- To anticipate and be prepared to face a life of uncertainty, yet to face, and create a life of hope and possibility, even at times, when hope did not appear to be a valid option.”

Full blackout conditions for a few seconds.

Then house lights come up, accompanied by a medley of music and songs, such as:

- (i) Olive Lewin’s Jamaican Folksingers, singing, ‘Dis long time gal me neva see yu, come mek me hole yu han’.
- (ii) ‘Take 5’, played by Monty Alexander.
- (iii) A medley of lively mento and classical reggae music, all played by jazz pianist Monty Alexander.

The audience exits, humming and speaking about the night’s event. Even the die-hard, switched-on individuals have forgotten, for a relatively short time, to text, twitter, blog, Facebook and tweet their family and friends distributed around the globe.

## **Denise's Concluding Thoughts: The Memories Linger and Last**

### **At my home in Ontario**

It is Sunday morning. I am savouring my mug of coffee and catching up on the week's flyers. I am vaguely aware of the radio, in the background, when my decision about where to buy my yogurt this week is interrupted by a familiar piece of music.

As has happened many times before, I am transported to the school room/dance studio at 11 Hope Road and we, Mrs. Simpson's dancers, are at the barre. That solid round barre that could have been the honed down trunk of a tree. We are doing grand battement -- four devant, four a la seconde - close front - back - front - back, four derriere, four a la seconde - close back - front - back - finish front. Relevé, turn and repeat on the left. Our teacher makes her way to and fro lifting an elbow, lowering a shoulder, correcting a posture. I decide to make a note of the piece when it finishes. In the meantime, I go through the motions anatomically, reminding myself to turn out the working leg, pull up on the supporting leg, open my chest, and keep shoulders down. The piece finishes. It is Rossini's *La Gazza Ladra* Overture.

I recall, the many occasions when visiting Lynda that Mrs. Simpson would be in her room listening to music. I used to think she was 'making up her steps'. She may well have been. But she could also have been deciding on the pieces she would use for class. She always seemed to know exactly which track, on which record, in the pile, she would bring to class that she was going to play. She had such an intimate relationship with music. It 'spoke' to her and she responded with passion. She demonstrated to us how one could be deeply moved by music as we, somewhat unknowingly, were introduced to the music of Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev, Charles Camille Saint Saens, Adam Delibes, Rossini, Puccini, Respighi...and the list goes on. How often have we heard a piece of music that we might not know by name, but that is so familiar to us?

At home, music was always accessible to us. My younger sister and I would frequently wake our parents with 'Teddy Bear's Picnic', on a wind-up gramophone. I remember a record that introduced us to all the instruments that made up an orchestra and, frequently on a Sunday morning, our home would resound with the music of Brahms, Beethoven, Mozart, and others as well, as some of the operatic stars of the day. The Adagio of Beethoven's Fifth "Emperor" Concerto always brings to mind a memory of my Dad, holding up his hand as if to say 'hush'...and with such an admirable pleasure he would say 'just listen to this'...

Mrs. Simpson provided me an extension of that encouraged appreciation of music which has only deepened with time.

By 1971, with Mrs. Simpson's encouragement, I was conducting my own dance classes and exploring more dance experiences. This led me to a closer working relationship with Neville Black. I enjoyed many a conversation between the two, on the state of dance in Jamaica, and the need for more eclecticism. I admired the way they sometimes consulted on each other's work. Neville always respectfully hesitant with any criticism, and Fay Simpson just telling it as she saw it. But each with a deep admiration, for and support, of the other.

As teachers there were similarities. Both were disciplinarians but with different approaches. Mrs. Simpson would gently, but firmly, scold a misdemeanour whereas Neville would, as we used to say, 'get miserable', especially if one was late for class or frequently absent. Then he would calm down with a cigarette.

Neville often conducted a whole exercise by counting or sounds such as ya ta, ya ta, ya ta ya. He frequently choreographed in counts before introducing us to the music. At times, he would arrive seemingly unprepared but had the ability to choreograph on the spot. I recall occasions when we would not get it quite right and he would say, 'I like that better, do it that way'. A very different style to that of Mrs. Simpson. I believe he had a penchant for Bach as he frequently used his music. However, my memory of triplets across the floor to the Prokofiev Cinderella Waltz still brings a smile to my face.

In 1981, four dancers, including myself, founded Movements Dance Company of Jamaica. Neville was one of our guest teachers/choreographers and worked with us for many years. He would introduce us to works of Albinoni and Mahler among others.

Mrs. Simpson was one of the first to attend our initial rehearsals, to encourage our endeavours, and true to her generous spirit, offer words of wisdom. She praised what she deemed worthy and constructively criticized when she felt necessary.

In the years that followed, I continued to enjoy a close relationship with my teacher. As teacher and student, we had had our ups and downs. There had been times when I felt that it was her way or the highway. But, as is the case with those who are closest to us, we overcome those difficulties and in the process achieve a better understanding and appreciation of one another.

In 1990, I migrated to Canada but would enjoy visits with Mrs. Simpson every time she came to visit her daughter, Lynda, who had moved to Canada many years before.

On my trips back home, I would find myself at 11 Hope Road to visit my teacher. We always seemed to pick up where we had last left off. We would talk about family and friends and of course.....THE DANCE.

### **References**

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- Mair, Lucille Mathurin. (2006). *A historical study of women in Jamaica: 1655-1844*. H. McD. Beckles & V. Shepherd (Eds.). Kingston, University of the West Indies Press.

### **Epilogue by Michele Mowatt**

My mother said I always walked on my tippy toes; so when word came that Fay Simpson was opening a ballet school, she thought that would be the perfect outlet for her three year old whose heels never touched the ground.

Off we went to the shoemaker to have my little feet measured for ballet shoes, and my dancing life was launched.

I loved ballet and Mrs. Simpson's classes so much (with her sister, Mrs. Thomas, on the piano), that I only stopped when my after high school schedule couldn't accommodate my ballet classes.

A few years later, in the early 1970s, when I returned home from college in England, Mrs. Simpson persuaded me to dance the part of the Gatekeeper, Hilarion, for her production of the well-known ballet Giselle.

I wasn't completely rusty as I'd done some strange dance classes in college which were akin to modern dance. I didn't think that experience could launch me back into ballet, but Mrs. Simpson dismissed my refusals and convinced me that she could bring me up to speed...and she succeeded.

I also had to learn fencing for the duel that was part of the ballet and Ronnie Nasralla was corralled to give lessons. If challenged today I can still remember how to defend myself with a sword.

Before this, we even had a go at Indian dancing, when Mrs. Simpson got a parent to give us lessons. This was particularly challenging with the delicate finger and hand movements trying to coordinate with feet often not moving in tandem.

I think she wanted to challenge us by having us experience other forms of dance, as Neville Black appeared, as well to teach us the fine points of jazz. What an education!

Although technique was extremely important to Mrs. Simpson, what we, dancers, had to be good at was expression and joy. We couldn't just point our toes beautifully or lift our legs gracefully, we also had to let those watching understand and enjoy what we were doing.

She was even more exacting when it came to projecting and interpreting dance characters.

I probably spent more time with Mrs. Simpson than any of her other ballet students, as after many years of doing ballet, Neville Black appeared again to teach us young adults modern dance. This group of ex-ballerinas became the Fenoir Dancers.

Later on, I started teaching ballet to her class of six to eight year olds. I've lost count of how many years I walked or drove through those gates, at 11 Hope Road, to her studio.

Fay Simpson enrolled and taught dark-skinned, Down syndrome, and mentally challenged children, in her ballet and prep schools, long before anyone else did.

She was way ahead of her time.