

Tape 2

Four days. We went back ... Told my mother ^{and Mrs} who was a Schulte. My mother immediately called New Orleans with the news, and I guess we went out to celebrate.

The rehearsal started quite soon. They were in downtown Chicago, mostly at night, during the day some of the time, but it also went into the evenings. They were long. My mother went with me and the rehearsal hall was near a very beautiful hotel, The Palmer House. Mother used to go sit in the lobby with a book, or with her pad to sketch. She always liked to sketch people, and clothes, and so on. ~~You were never brother~~

As it happened in the Palmer House, they had a night club with a show. The headliners at that time were a dance duo, Veloz and Yolanda. They used to parade through the lobby as they went to do their stint. My mother would sometimes sketch her ^{coffee} coffee, or her clothes, or whatever. That went on for quite a while. The rehearsals were just scheduled for a little under a month. They were very hard. We worked very hard. I liked Mr. Evans very much. There was one number that I loved because it was much more ballet. ~~I forget the name of the song, but~~ it was a very beautiful song, popular at the time. ~~You were never brother~~

The show consisted of a comedian, a singer, brothers who happened to be from New Orleans who were acrobatics, ^{who} Dixon, and Pal. Pal ^{who} was a seal, a trained seal. He was adorable. I loved him. Also a Penguin. ~~Peak~~, the penguin. ~~Pete~~

The headliner of the show was a young dancer, a dancer who had danced with the San Carlo Opera Company, the one I had just auditioned for and not made it. Muriel Page ... her real name was Eva, not Ava, Eva Gardner. Muriel had danced for quite a while. She was a trained ballet dancer, but she had ambitions. She answered an ad run by the man who would become my boss, Michael Todd, of which I speak later.

Michael Todd had been the son of an impoverished rabbi who lived in Saint Paul, Minnesota. He and his brother came to Chicago. They sold shoes for a while. Then Mike got the bug for show business, and he acquired an act called Sally Rand, The Fan Dancer. She appeared in the Chicago World's Fair of 1933-1934, and made Michael Todd quite a bit of money, so he had bigger ideas. He wanted to produce a traveling show, a [inaudible 00:04:39]. ~~Newville Show~~

Sally Rand was not interested. She was more interested in burlesque, so he concocted the idea for an attraction ... The Flame Dancer, The Story of the Moth and the Flame. The idea was, a girl dressed like the moth to dance around a flame, being intrigued by the

flame and then suddenly her wings would catch and she would fight and die. The act went, course he used a dancer, ultimately it was Muriel.

The dancer would dance to the ~~fast~~ ^{music} music. Da-da da-da-da-da da-da-da-da. On point, she wore an asbestos leotard that covered her body all the way up to a hood with feelers from the hood. This was all asbestos. It would resist flame. In the back on something that was built in that held wings. The wings were inflammable. Muriel would dance around the flame and the flame would shoot out and she would avoid it. Suddenly, she turned her back and the flames caught the inflammable wings. At that point, she would pull a ^{hook like} parachute. The asbestos leotard, including the headpiece would fall off and her hair would come down. She'd look like she was nude. She had a bodysuit on. She was on point, toe shoes, dancing around. She would dance around the flame and ultimately fall. The flames had consumed her. This was the headliner of our show.

We rehearsed for about three weeks, maybe even longer ... very grueling rehearsals. I liked them ~~but~~, I enjoyed them. We had different kinds of numbers. The number that I talked about before was done in cellophane costumes, and of course we had our underwear underneath. The lights would play on us, and sometimes you'd see the cellophane, and sometimes you'd see our bodies through the cellophane.

We also did a number with Pete, dressed in penguin outfits. Pete the penguin would run around. I don't know how he was controlled, but he was, and we did this number.

The finale of the show was Anchors Away. We were sailors and we did [pap ~~work~~ ^{work} ~~phonetic~~ ^{00:08:27}]. It was in that number that I got into trouble with the captain of the ballet, whose name I recall, Gretchen Havermann. Gretchen would always yell at me, "Alyssa! Your arms are too long!" We were all standing straight in one line, 16 of us, and I did have very long arms, but what was I to do about it? I was frustrated. My fellow dancers, lovingly, I'd like to believe, called me The ~~Eight~~ ^{APE}. I didn't mind too much. I did as much as I could to alleviate, but I never really succeeded.

So rehearsals went on. I was happy as a clam. The only thing looming up that presented a problem was that my mother was to travel with me. Our first date was at the Riverside Theater in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. For one week it was like a tryout. We would rehearse, do the show, then take notes, make changes, etc., etc. That was one week. The rest of the travel program were one night stands and split weeks. That meant two or three days in one town, then leave, two or three days in another one, then leave. The one night stands

were even worse. One night, pack up, leave, go into the theater in another town, do the same thing.

It was fine for me. I was travelling with the company, but what about my mother? She had to find bus schedules that would take her to these various towns, and maybe even make a reservation if we stayed overnight. Sometimes we traveled in the bus overnight. This was a problem that was nagging at me, but remember, I had a lucky number, nine. In fact, my mother [inaudible 00:11:15] said that I had the luck of the Irish. That I would put my hand in a pot of manure and come up with 60 cents, and she proved right.

At the end of our Milwaukee ^{Tony} we were in our last day of our Milwaukee sojourn. We were between shows and suddenly Gretchen came down into the dressing room and said, ~~MINETTE~~ Minette, Mr. Todd wants to see you." I quaked in my boots, and I thought, "Oh, maybe I'm being fired because my arms are too long." We were at the Riverside Theater, and he had made the third floor an office for himself. I went up and knocked on the door. He said, "Come in". I opened the door. I had seen very little of him. He had a slouched hat on, a cigar stuck in his mouth, and the most atrocious clothes ... a jacket of one kind, pants of another, an underslung jaw, but he was my boss.

He immediately said, "Minette, who's the lady I see you with?" I was sort of taken aback. There was an old joke and we laughed about it later. Henny Youngman had a joke, they said, "Who's the lady we see you with?" And he would say, "That's no lady, that's my wife." Back to Mr. Todd, I answered, I said, "She's my mother", and Todd said, "She traveling with you?" and I said, "Just for a little while. She'll be going back to New Orleans", which was a lie. He studied me a moment, and he said, "Does she sew?" I said, "Yes, sir. She sews very well." He said, "Okay, as long as she's with you, she can join our company, travel with us, and help the wardrobe. I'll pay her 5 dollars a week."

Problem solved. I practically got down on my knees thanking him. Then I turned to leave, and he said, "Minette", I turned around, he said, "Your name isn't Minette, is it?" I said, "No sir, it's Levee." From that day to the time he passed away, he called my mother Mother Levee. He always called me Minette, and he called her Mother Levee. She adored it. He adored her.

So, this tour started. We started in the Midwest. We hit Illinois. We had dates in the state of Illinois, Wisconsin, Indiana, Ohio, West Virginia, Virginia, Delaware, and in through New York City. We did not play New York. We passed through, just briefly, and went

into the New England States. While we were briefly in New York in the bus station, I got out of the bus, walked to the door outside, looked up at the Empire State Building, and said, "I'll be back", and then got back on the bus.

All this was with my mother, happy as a clam, she was in show business. Her job was to help the wardrobe. About a month after she joined, the man who was assistant to Muriel's Act, The Moth and the Flame, gave his notice. His job had been to keep the giant candle that was always on the stage when she danced and emitted these flames ... he had to keep it in good condition, connected in each theater, and see that the flames went in the proper direction at the proper time, because if they didn't, she ^{could} be hurt sometimes very badly. She did have singed hair and singed eyebrows, but nothing very serious. Also, his duty was to keep the inflammable wings supplied in the brace that was on the back of her costume. This is what he was doing when he gave his notice.

Mr. Todd then approached my mother. He said, "Mrs. Levee, Mother Levee, would you be willing to take over this job?" My mother thought a moment, and she said, "Let me observe him for a while and see." Which is what she did. At the end of about a week, she went to Mr. Todd and she said, "Yes, I'll take it over." That's what she did. The assistant left, she took over. She and Muriel got very close. Muriel felt she could talk to my mother much better than she could talk to her own mother. She had felt a coldness with her own mother that she did not feel with mine.

Also Muriel and I got more friendly. I would go to her dressing room, we'd sit on the floor, and play jacks. More importantly, we gave each other warm ups at the beginning of almost every show ... ball ^{work} and flow work. This was very important. Especially to me. I hadn't had a class in so long and I felt I was losing ground. With Muriel, she had to keep, literally, on her toes.

So the tour went on, but not without incidents. We went through a fire, a flood, and a bus accident. The fire was in Akron, Ohio. We were in a hotel. My mother woke up, smelled smoke, went to the window, stuck her head out of the window, and smoke came up in her face. She immediately woke me up. We dressed very quickly, and mother was very careful to take our money and put it in the First National. The First National was her

~~BRASSIER~~ BRASSIER (Bro)

We went outside, we woke up some of the neighbors. Including Dixon and Pal, the seal. We all went to the end of the hall and went down the outside fire escape. We found out in

the lobby that the fire was not too bad and under control. In an hour or so we could go back to our room. Without incident, but for weeks our clothes smelled of smoke.

The accident happened on New Year's Eve, 1936. 35 was going out, 36 was coming in, and we were driving in the snow and the ice in Ohio on New Year's Eve when the bus went out of control. Fortunately it was a mild accident. The bus tipped over. No one, except for some bruises, et cetera, was really hurt. We all had to get out of the bus with our baggage, and walk a considerable way to another place where we could get another bus that would take us over the bridge to West Virginia. When we got there it was too late to go in the hotel. We went in the theater, set up, and gave five shows that day. That's show business folks! The show must go on.

The tour with Todd lasted eight months. At the end of that time, we all were taken back to where we had started, Chicago. I was at loose ends. I got a few jobs in fairs. Then my friend [phonetic Alda 00:22:17], who is still in Chicago, suggested that I put together a night club act like she had done. It consisted of four or five numbers. Performing two of them for an early show, which was more in night clubs like a family show, and two of them in a later show where the audience was more sophisticated. So I did. I put together four or five, actually five numbers. My mother made all the costumes. The first two numbers for the early show was a waltz with a beautiful long tutu, in pink, on point, to lovely waltz music.

The second number for that show was a favorite of mine, a tango, done to the music Jealousy. The costume was gorgeous. It was white satin, formfitting, with fringe on the end, one shoulder, long sleeve on the right side, and a rhinestone strap on the left, and a big white satin hat like a sombrero with a red rose tucked under the brim above my left ear. I loved that number, and it was an audience favorite also.

In the second show, I did a little jazzier stuff. I did a French can-can. On point, in black toe shoes ... a red, white, and black costume, with a ruffled skirt that I held up and shook just like the can-can girls, and a pert little bonnet on my head with a feather. That also was an audience favorite.

The second number in that show was a rumba. I danced with maracas. I shook the maracas as I danced. The costume was in multi-colored pastels with a fitted band around the waist, and ruffles cut up the front so my legs showed through.

Two piece

There was a fifth number, a tap number. I wore a short ~~version~~, abbreviated version of a tuxedo. Black satin with silver lapels. This was not a favorite number of mine. I was not that good at tap, and I didn't really know how to choreograph, but I had it as an extra number.

I took this to the agents, and I was fairly lucky. For quite a while I was getting quite a few jobs. One was offered to me, a gig, in Birmingham, Alabama. My mother and I said, "Fine. On the way to Birmingham we will stop in New Orleans and say hello." [inaudible 00:26:14]

Now I had given our our phone number and addresses to Muriel and Todd both in Chicago and in New Orleans. When we arrived in New Orleans there was a message from Todd. He was in New York permanently now. He had moved from Chicago. He was about to do a show in New York, go into tryouts, a remake of a Beatrice Lillie show called At Home Abroad. If I wanted to, he would put me in the show. My dream was coming true of going back to New York, and that's what my mother and I did. Finally got back to the big time.

New York, New York, what a wonderful town and a little scary, too. We found a place to stay, very convenient. The Hotel Langwell. It was on 44th Street between Broadway or 7th Avenue and 6th Avenue, which later became Avenue of Americas. We got settled and I immediately went to work. We rehearsed and then started out of town for tryouts. Unfortunately, the show didn't fly so we were back in New York.

Todd was wonderful. He almost immediately got me some gigs in the New York Mountains, Appalachians, called the Borscht Circuit. If any of you had seen Dirty Dancing, that's where the Borscht Circuit was. Families from New York and the surrounding places came for weekends, and relaxation, and of course they always had on the weekends, they had floor shows. Todd got me into some of those floor shows.

I also had a side job at the time. Michael Todd had a son, Mike Todd Junior. He was about 10 and a half. I babysat him in the afternoons. He'd go into the pool and I'd watch him. It was a lot of fun.

I came back to New York and was lucky again ... got into a show run by the famed Shubert Brothers. There were three of them. They were so well-known, they were angels in show business. They had a show on Jones ~~Island~~.

BEACH

while. I saw them in passing. I never spoke to them, but they were icons. An alley between 43rd Street and 44th is named for them, called "Shubert's Alley", and there's an organization run today, Shubert's Organization.

I was back in New York at liberty for a while. More importantly, I was taking classes, as many classes as I possibly could take. I felt I was out of shape and I wanted to shape up. In taking classes, they would always post tryouts, and auditions, and cattle calls. That meant a call for dancers. Anyone could go. They didn't have to belong. There was actress equity at that time. There wasn't AGMA so the unions were not that strong. I noticed there was an audition, a calling for ballet girls, as well as girls to participate in a line called the Gertrude Hoffman Girls which did high kicks like The Rockettes and acrobatic dancing, but of course I was interested in the ballet.

I went to this audition and it was truly a cattle call. Many, many, dancers. It was for the International Casino. The show was to be modeled after the shows in famous places in Paris, Bal Tabarin and Moulin Rouge. The choreographer was to be Marcel Bergé, who was very well known in Paris, and had at one time danced with [inaudible 00:32:13] I *PAVLOVA* went to this audition but unfortunately Mr. Bergé was held up on the boat coming from France. One of his assistants was auditioning. That assistant, instead of letting us all audition for both the ballet and the Gertrude Hoffman ... he lined us up and split us in height, and allowed only the small girls for the ballet, and the tall girls for the Gertrude Hoffman. Of course, I did okay, but I was eliminated. So, what's new? Rejection is part of the life of a dancer, or an actor, or anyone in the business. You can't let it defeat you. You try to learn from it.

The next day I was taking class. I said after class to one of my friends, "Would you like to go for a cup of coffee or maybe even a bite to eat?" She said, "I'm going to an audition." It was an open audition, and she said, "Why don't you come with me?" I said, "Where is it?" She told me. I said, "Oh. I was there yesterday and got bumped." She said, "What difference does it make? Come with me. Whatever happens, we'll have something to eat afterwards."

So, I went. This time Marcel Bergé was there and [inaudible 00:33:56] *gave auditioned* an entirely different way. He auditioned everybody in ballet and everyone in the Gertrude Hoffman dances and I was taken, my friend was not. [inaudible 00:34:15] Is it the number nine, or

the luck of the Irish that made me go back to that audition when ordinarily I would not have done it? That is fate.

It was an excellent job. It lasted almost for eight months, and there was an extra bonus. Being a nightclub, I would work till quite late, 1 or 2 o'clock in the morning, but the advantage for me was that it was at the corner of where I lived. When I was finished working, five minutes, and I was practically home in bed. All my friends were still riding the subway.

It was a beautiful show, an extravaganza. It had six ballet girls, twelve or more Gertrude Hoffman girls, and a bevy of showgirls. They walked around in beautiful costumes with a smile and wearing very little else. The sets were magnificent. There was a moving stairway that the showgirls used in all their glory. We did not dance on that. We had several numbers. One we were dressed as monkeys, on point. The other one, I remember there were several. The finale was to the music of Ravel. There was a wonderful dance team that did contortion work, but very beautiful and very balletic. It was to the music of Ravel.

The show was, as I said, ran for eight months. It was attended by a lot of stars from Broadway and from the movies. One night, Jimmy Durante came and saw the show. Afterwards he came on stage, went to the piano, and started giving an extra show with his Inka Dinka Doo. We were standing behind the curtains listening to him as he chattered and played. The best part was he would sotto voce, turn to us back stage and make remarks. Some of them should have been bleeped, but it was fun.

Another night, Joan Crawford sailed into the casino in a magnificent white full length fox coat, or it may have been a cape. As she sat down, she carelessly pushed it over the arm of her chair and of course it was dragging on the floor. Even as we danced, we watched [inaudible 00:38:00] being stepped on by the waiters, and inwardly wincing.

as it

There was another bonus to this job which I didn't recognize until much later. I still wanted to take my classes, but since I worked until almost 2 o'clock in the morning ... the first classes were always 9 o'clock in the morning, and the other classes, ballet, were usually about 6. There were very few in the afternoon. I talked with my other friends that took dance. One of them, I remember her name's Theresa. She lived in Brooklyn. She said, "You know, I used to take ballet from the Metropolitan Opera Ballet School with a wonderful teacher by the name of Margaret Curtis. I bet Ms. Curtis, if we got a group of

us, maybe the six of us, and we went ... maybe Ms. Curtis would give us some lessons." So that's what we did.

at a convenient time for us

Ms Harding

We went down to the Metropolitan Opera, which was down on 39th and 40th Street. It was a square block. We went in the 40th Street entrance and Theresa asked for [inaudible 00:39:34] who was the secretary of the ballet. We spoke to Ms. Harding, told her our story, and she said, "Yes, I'm sure Ms. Curtis would be glad to give you afternoon lessons." So there we were. We went almost every afternoon. Of course in hindsight, this was another [inaudible 00:40:08] to the Irish, and the number nine.

MS Harding

luck of

Remember the name Kathleen Harding. It will figure in my life very prominently in the near future. We took our classes. They diminished a little bit in size, but I, and Theresa, and some of the others continued. Of course, that was a bonus because later on we would be considered to be taken in special auditions for the new choreographer for the Metropolitan Opera Ballet. The present choreographer was George Balanchine who was beginning to be known from his work on Broadway in one of the shows on Broadway where he did a showstopping number called Slaughter on Tenth Avenue, because he was backed by Lincoln Kirstein. But this job at the Metropolitan was not ideal for either the opera, or for Balanchine. Balanchine was a creator and he couldn't create trying to do the little ballets that slipped into the opera in the first act, or the third act, or so on. By the time his contract of three years was over, he quit his contract, would not sign again, and the Met was not about to offer him another one.

They had brought in ... finally decided on a man who had danced with the Ballet Russe, Boris Romanoff. He was coming in in September or earlier to audition for a new Metropolitan Opera ballet. Since Ms. Curtis and Ms. Harding knew me and the others, we were put on a preferred list to audition. Of course they had to have an open call. It was demanded by the unions, but we were put on a preferred list and didn't have to come to these, which was much smaller, and didn't have to come to the cattle calls.

Meanwhile, I was lucky enough to get a short stint with the Ballet Russe. I auditioned for the famed Léonide Massine. For anyone had seen on television, Red Shoes, he was the shoemaker. He was a wonderful dancer. He could make an entrance and get applause, which he did very often. Of course, at the ballet at the time Freddie Franklin and Alexandra Danilova were the star attractions among others, Igor Youskevitch and André Eglevsky.

I went to Canada with them on a short stint. I think I could probably have remained with them, but I didn't want to travel because my mother wanted to remain in New York, and it would have been difficult for her to have to [inaudible 00:44:31]... I remained.

One interesting incident while I was traveling with the Ballet Russe to Canada ... I was sitting dawnning toe shoes and one of the dancers by the name of Jerry Rabinowitz sat down and started talking to me. Jerry was sort of a misfit. He was much more interested in choreography, and of course [inaudible 00:45:14] ^{as we call him} he did become a choreographer, and his name became Jerome Robbins. At that time, he sat and talked to me about his dreams, which of course [inaudible 00:45:28]... *were at odds with the Ballet Russe at that time*

He talked about one particular idea. He said it was about three sailors in a bar picking up three girls. Later on it became Fancy Free. He said he was trying to get a ballet company to produce this. I jokingly said, "Jerry, if you ever get it produced. I want to be there to see it." ... *and I was in the early 40's*

The ballet, Fancy Free was produced in the early 40's at the Metropolitan Opera by the Ballet Russe. The program was [inaudible 00:46:47] ^{La Sylphide} and finishing with Scheherazade. In between was Fancy Free. The audience was restless. The curtain went up on a bar with three girls seated at the bar and the three sailors make their entrance. One was Jerry Robbins dancing. The other one I think was Mark [inaudible 00:47:17] but I'm not sure. One of the girls was Muriel Brantley who ... of course by that time I was at the Met ... who had danced with me at the Met, and then left the Met and joined American Ballet Company. So I-