Dance Masters

Interviews with Legends of Dance

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ROUTLEDGE

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Publisher's Note

The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original may be apparent.

"Dance ye all.
The whole on high hath part in our dancing.
Who dances not, knows not what comes to pass."

—Jesus Christ
The Acts of John, New Testament Apocrypha, Verse 95

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Preface

I have always been drawn to the dance. Movement provides me with the freedom to disengage from intellectual thought and to feel most alive. My spirit is always lifted when I surround myself with dance, whether I am discussing the art form, watching a performance, or taking a dance class—I have the same sensation of elation and excitement. Working as a dance critic has afforded me the privilege and joy to attend performances by the most exquisite dance companies in the world. There are unique moments in one's life when one's vision is expanded and one's consciousness is filled with insight, intuition, and a feeling that all is right with the world. During those rare moments, one is able to see beyond the usual. When I watch dance, I feel that I am experiencing such a heightened moment. Sitting in front of my computer after a performance, deciphering notes written in the dark, I have the chance to put everything I love onto a blank sheet of paper, paying attention to the visual and visceral images that delight or haunt me hours after a show.

I wanted to know more about the dance performances that I was watching and to explore the inner terrain of the artists who make and perform dance. What does it feel like to be lost inside of the dance? Perhaps by speaking with them I would be able to understand more deeply the power of dance as it was originally divined, as ritual, as worship, as true art—not an artificial exhibition of bodies moving into space.

I value artists who seem to be able to both embody and express elements of soul in their works. After an inspiring interview with Edward Villella, the artistic director for the Miami City Ballet, I decided to interview dance legends about their careers and philosophies, and also about subjects that are not usually articulated in dance, such as the creative process and the spiritual aspects of dance. I wanted to break the silence and taboo among many dancers about discussing

these subjects, and this book attempts to demystify some of the mysteries of dancemaking and performance.

In these pages, Danny Grossman explains what it was like to "live in the work" when he danced with the Paul Taylor Dance Company and speaks at length about his sometimes painful psychological explorations while making dances. Merce Cunningham muses about his unorthodox "chance" methods; Edward Villella reflects on his stellar career; Mark Morris offers his insights about dance and music; Michael Smuin discusses his relationship with Jerome Robbins; Catherine Turocy speaks about the veiled spirits that help her choreograph; and Alonzo King talks about the influence of Spirit on his works.

These conversations have been both a gift and a revelation. Spending time with these artists has not only been a joyful and educational experience; it has been a highlight of my career. It is my wish that this book will inspire, instruct, and engage all of those who love dance as much as I do. Most of all I hope that this book will contribute to the elevation of dance arts in the twenty-first century.

I believe that these dance legends are artistic shamans offering to us the highest elements of that art form. I am grateful for their generous spirits, their gifts of time and attention, and the kindness that each of them showed to me. They trusted me with their words, and I hope that they feel that this book serves them well. And I regret that this book does not contain more women's voices.

Janet Lynn Roseman

Acknowledgments

This book was a labor of love for me. It is my wish that this book will inspire and elevate the art form of dance as much as dance has inspired and elevated me in my own life. I am deeply grateful to all of the artists in this book who so generously gave me not only their time, but their focused attention, a gift that I will forever cherish. And a special note of gratitude to Edward Villella, an artist and gentleman of the highest order, for inspiring me to create this book.

I have many people to thank. They include my parents, who offered me their home by the sea to write this book in quiet and beauty and who have always believed in my vision. I was thrilled that I was able to share with my brother, Mark, my intoxication of the dance during our research and photographic outings. My colleague and friend, Cynthia Pepper, offered keen insights about the manuscript and lovingly shared her suggestions.

I wish to extend a heartfelt "thank you" to Suzanna Tamminen for all of her efforts. Gayatri Patnaik, Matthew Byrnie, and Amy Reading at Routledge have been superior examples of cooperation and synergy in the making of this book, and I am fortunate that the manuscript landed on their desks.

I appreciate the efforts of the following people who kindly answered questions and sent pictures and materials whenever I asked. They include Linda Ronstadt, David Vaughan, Donna Richard, Trevor Carlson, Anne Patterson, Vicki Vigorito, Norton Owen, Kyra Jablonsky, Pam Hagen, Kristen McDonnell, Jennifer Llacera, Nancy Umanoff, Lesley Berson, Jamie Beth Cohen, Eva Nichols, Lisa Belvin, Dan Levenstein, Paula Tracy-Smuin, Margarete Roeder, Amy Wilson, Ginger Clark, and Kirsten Tanaka.

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Downhill, Richard Rutledge, Chantal Regnault, Gadi Dagon, Lois Greenfield, Nancy Brooker, Otto Berk, Marty Sohl, Andrew Oxenham, Phiz Mezey, Cylla von Tiedemann, Ed Buryn, and James Armstrong. Special thanks to the San Francisco Ballet for their assistance.

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Thanks to my guiding-light spirits who accompany me.

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Edward Villella

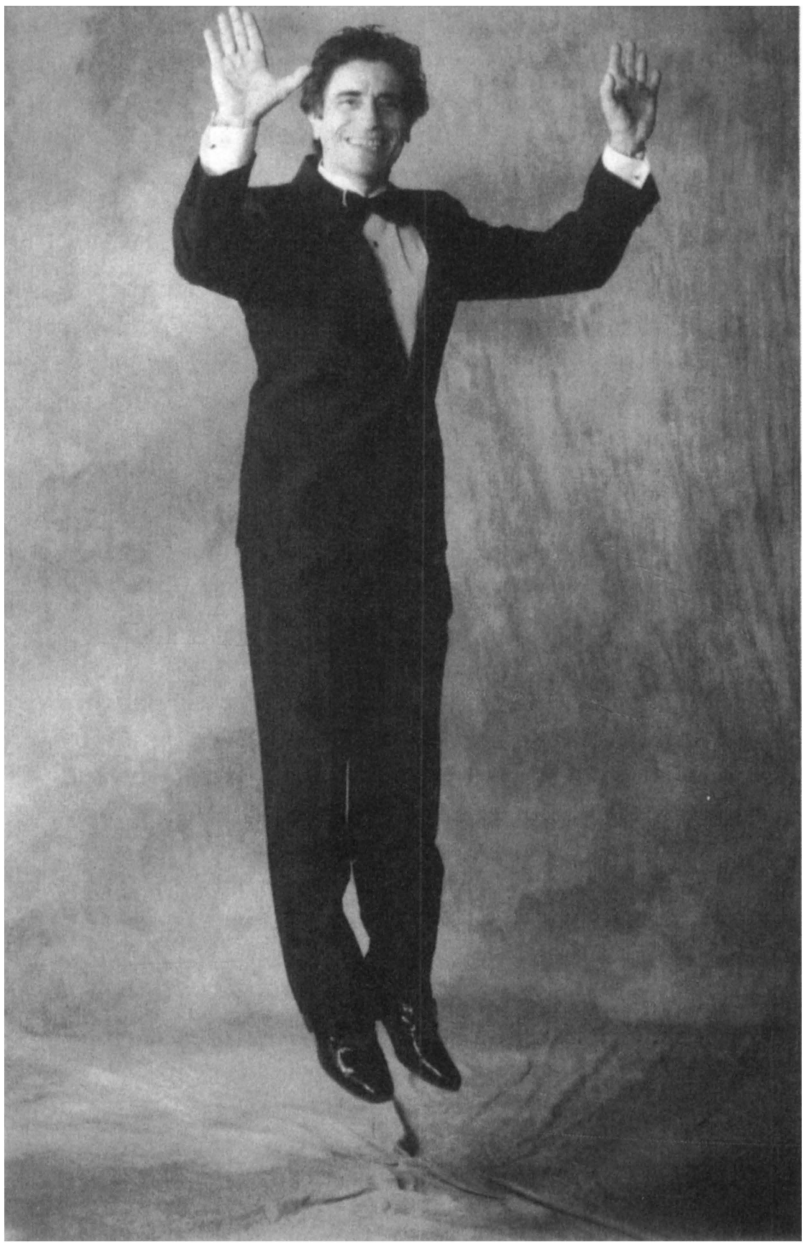
"The moment Villella bursts into view a kind of magnetic rapport snaps on between himself and the audience. As he flashes across the stage he creates the illusion that the music isn't fast enough, the ceiling isn't high enough, the stage isn't big enough to contain the dancing demon that somehow has invaded this small, five foot seven and a half mortal. Take, for example, *Tarantella*, a nine-minute ballet that Balanchine choreographed to showcase Villella's special virtuosity. With a snaggle-toothed grin stamped on his face, with a mischievous twinkle for his delectable partner, Patricia McBride, Villella soars bird-like in the air and hangs at the apogee a beat longer than gravity permits. Leaping, spinning, dashing, bouncing, he threatens to explode with vitality, ecstasy, life."

——**David Martin, 1969**

Edward Villella has performed in some of the finest ballets ever made, courtesy of the genius of choreographer George Balanchine, including leading roles in *Apollo, Agon, Prodigal Son, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Tarantella, Bugaku,* and *Jewels.* His rise in the world of dance is a mythic tale. He began studying ballet as a child when his mother forced him to take ballet class at the School of American Ballet with his sister. Mrs. Villella wanted to keep him off the streets of the neighborhood in Queens, New York, after the young boy was knocked unconscious playing sports with his friends. Ironically, the young athlete resisted taking classes and was more than a bit embarrassed to study, but he soon fell in love with ballet and discovered that he had a great talent for it. Jerome Robbins's *Afternoon of the Faun* was inspired by Villella's dancing when the choreographer watched the teenage dancer at the School of American Ballet's studios.

When he was at Rhodes Prep he crossed paths with fellow dancer Allegra Kent. After a few years of dance study at SAB, which fed the burning conviction that he would become a classical dancer, Villella was heartbroken when his parents forced him to quit dance to attend college. He attended the New York Maritime College, where he felt like he was in "prison," desperately harboring his dream to become a classical dancer. Although he excelled in his studies and athletic endeavors, Villella missed dancing. An integral part of the program at the college involved travel, and when he visited other countries he quickly searched for the best dance studios in the area to take classes. During his senior year, he secretively attended dance classes in New York, firmly committed to creating a life of dance for himself once he graduated college. That experience was not only necessary for him to retrain his body but was necessary in all respects: body, mind, and spirit.

After graduation in 1955, he returned to the New York City Ballet, where he had danced as a youngster and trained ferociously in an effort to regain the precious years of technical training that he had missed while in school. Working his body mercilessly and without pause, Villella called upon master teacher Stanley Williams to guide him. For any other serious dancer, those lost years would



Edward Villella in studio session. *Copyright Philip Bermingham.*

have made it virtually impossible to dance professionally. However, Villella wasn't like other dancers. He was always observing, connecting, listening, pushing, and encouraging his body to perform beyond its natural capacity. Even when he was plagued with physical pain, he was able to do the seemingly impossible on stage—soaring in the air, leaping and spinning with so much velocity that the stage could barely contain his physical energies.

During his career with the New York City Ballet, he popularized the art form and breathed new vitality and virility into the dance. In an artistic world where more often the *object d'affection* was the ballerina, Villella was a notable exception, and he was quite responsible for the elevation of the male dancer in the world of ballet. When he danced, he not only conveyed the dance, he revealed it with powerful craftsmanship and great intelligence.

Mr. Balanchine created many roles for him in many ballets, including *Tarantella*, the *Rubies* section of *Jewels, A Midsummer Night's Dream,* and, perhaps his most famous role, *The Prodigal Son.* Considered one of the leading dancers in the world, and, perhaps, the best male dancer of his time, Villella was an electrifying artist and a superb athlete who was able to command both body and stage, always striving for perfect line, elevation, control, rhythm, design, and expression. Decades after he left the stage, it is still not unusual to hear his fans recall what a stunning dancer he was.

It seemed as if Villella could take on any challenge, and it wasn't unusual for him to dance not only his own rigorous repertoire, but often perform the roles of other dancers in the company, sometimes dancing two or three roles a performance. He danced with other companies as guest artist, lectured on the art of ballet, choreographed works for television appearances on "The Bell Telephone Hour" and "The Kraft Music Hall," and created three of his own ballets: *Narkissos, Shenandoah,* and *Shostakovitch Ballet Suite.* In a riveting documentary called *Edward Villella: Man Who Dances,* audiences had the unique opportunity to view the world of dance through his eyes and experiences.

In 1975, he was severely injured while performing at the Ford White House and was unable to dance. He spent the next decade

lecturing on dance and working as artistic director for several ballet companies. Currently, he is the artistic and founding director for the Miami City Ballet, and has succeeded in putting this once-fledgling ballet company on the international map. Under his deft tutelage, the company has not only reigned in Florida, but their national and international reputation has earned them a significant place in the dance world. Fiercely committed to the Balanchine repertoire, Villella continues to train dancers not only in technical virtuosity but offers them a sterling education in the Balanchine aesthetic. The former resident choreographer Jimmy Gamonet de los Heros worked closely with Villella for many years and has provided the company with elegant works that aptly complement the Balanchine programs.

When he was fifty years old, many years after departing his professional career, he returned to the stage to star in Jerome Robbins's enigmatic ballet, *Watermill.* It was a willful endeavor given that Villella's injuries from a lifetime of dance had almost crippled him. Robbins cajoled Villella into starring in the piece, and before Villella had agreed to dance, Robbins cleverly announced to the press that Villella had agreed, making it virtually impossible for him to extricate himself. His performance was a physical resurrection, considering that he was dancing with a body that was host to countless foot fractures and broken bones.

He has danced for presidents, was the first male dancer invited to dance with the Royal Danish Ballet, and earned an unprecedented twenty-two encores when dancing at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. He was the producer/director for the PBS specials "Dance in America" for one-and-a-half years, and won an Emmy Award in 1975 for his television production of the ballet *Harlequin.* In 1992 he published his autobiography (with writer Larry Kaplan), *Prodigal Son: Dancing for Balanchine in a World of Pain and Magic.* The book was so successful that it was reissued in 1998.

Villella has always made dance education a priority. He is eager to share his knowledge of dancemaking and performance, and continues to be one of ballet's most articulate spokesmen. For his accomplishments as an artist he has received a 1997 National

Medal of the Arts, the 1997 Kennedy Center Honors, the thirty-eighth annual Capezio Award, the National Society of Arts and Letters Award for Lifetime Achievement (and was only the fourth dance personality to receive the gold medal), the Frances Holleman Breathitt Award for Excellence, and the 1964 *Dance Magazine* Award. He was inducted into the State of Florida Artists Hall of Fame, and holds honorary degrees from Fordham University, Skidmore College, Union College, Nazareth College, and St. Thomas University.

Now in his sixth decade, Mr. Villella wears beauty deeply etched in the crevices of his face. He has an extraordinary gift for both verbal as well as physical communication, and builds his responses in conversation as carefully as he coaches his dancers in the ballet, paying full attention to form, content, and delivery. He spoke to me with authority, remarkable precision, and imagination, demonstrating in action the creative response. His knowledge about dance reflects a man who has mastered all means of expression, a man with full play of his talents. Edward Villella aims for and reaches a supreme quality in *art,* a term I use in all its force.

I was reading about your mother, Edward, and her influence in your life. She impressed me quite a bit. Can you tell me more about her?

She really was a person who was way ahead of her time, and she was terrifically frustrated, which I think added to her drive and her ambition for her children. She was an orphan and didn't have opportunity. But I was also part of that drive and that ambition to get beyond what her initial circumstances were. She discovered and developed her knowledge about nutrition and about health, and I think she was interested in things that were not necessarily the mainstream. I don't think she was fully comfortable with the mainstream.

I think she was a person who had great curiosity and wanted to have a great deal of knowledge. She discovered Adele Davis long before her nutritional work was known. We were brought up on blackstrap molasses and wheat germ.

Did you ever speak to your mother about your early days in training as a dancer? It seemed as if she easily recognized that medium as a vehicle for your life early on.

We have to look at this in historical context. In the 1940s, growing up in Queens, in an Italian-American family, children didn't have too much to say. The parents were the law. Those early years were not my choice. It was only later on that I was able to exercise my own choice, and those choices became controversial. By the time I had reached some ability, I was made to stop dancing. That was the last thing I wanted to do. There were complications and difficulties, and they were resolved simply by my wanting desperately to dance and to do as much as my parents wanted from me, which was to get a college education. I tried to do both and, needless to say, it was complicated, but somehow I survived it.

You really pushed yourself, and when you were dancing, you not only danced your own roles, but everyone else's. That toll on your body was harsh. I was watching the documentary *Man Who Dances*, and there is a poignant moment when you are in the dressing room and you are rubbing your legs and you said, "Speak to me legs, speak to me."

Well, we speak a physical language. We have our own alphabet and our own vocabulary, and we make it into poetic gesture. When you work as much as we were required to work—performing eight times a week, dancing three to four ballets a night (and I had all of the jumping roles)—you create at least inflammation, and inflammation slows you down. That slowing down can create cramps, and cramps can stop you, and in stopping you, your body stops speaking. That flexibility is the ability to speak, and when you've lost it, it's a desperate situation if you really want to dance. One will go to all kinds of measures to make that happen.

Do you think you had an inherent trust that your body would continue?

There were a number of things that were going on. First of all, I was terrifically frustrated, and I was willful, and I willed it to happen. I