

DanceView Magazine

A REMEMBRANCE OF RUDOLF by JANIS BRENNER

It's winter outside. The winter of 1978. The dance studio windows facing 19th Street are clouded over from the outside cold and the inside heat where all of our sweaty bodies have just finished taking class. The regular dance students have drifted off to the dressing rooms to change back into their clothes. The Murray Louis Dance Company however, is waiting. I get the impression just from the body language that each of us is waiting in his or her own state of either high anxiety, excited anticipation, conflicted resentment or just plain dread. Rudolf Nureyev is about to walk in, in his own good time of course, and we will have our first day of rehearsals with him in preparation for our Broadway season at the new Minskoff Theater.

Anne McLeod is the one with the dread. The new work Murray is choreographing will feature her in a seductive duet with Nureyev. I'm saying to myself, "My God, she gets to be partnered by Nureyev!" She's saying to herself, "My God, please don't let him yell or hit me!" She says she's heard stories within the ballet world of huge temper tantrums where Rudolph has actually smacked his Russian, Kirov Ballet comrade, Natalia Makarova. And she has smacked him back.

The other senior company members are in the "conflicted resentment" category. There is an unspoken feeling that Murray has "sold his soul", sold out to the ballet world by working with its ultimate representative. He's diluting our own unique, modern dance aesthetic, they feel. While Murray continues to warn us against falling into that ballet "technique" mind-set and scolds us if he hears that any of us have sneaked off to ballet class, he is, at the same time, completely bedazzled by those awesome ballet tricks, the star power and prestige of that world and the honor of having been asked by Nureyev himself to work with *us*, to learn *our* way of moving...or rather Murray's way.

At age 23 and in the company only six months, I am its newest member and its youngest, and I am too overwhelmed to pay much attention to anyone's concerns or opinions. In two minutes, or whenever he shows up, I will be in the same room, occupying the same space as the legend himself.

I am remembering myself as the eight-year-old girl from suburban Long Island who's finally gotten enrolled in Andre Eglevsky's serious ballet school. This is after three years of creative dance where I recall running across the stage with the other little girls wearing long, blue and green-colored scarves sewn to our white leotards. I'm leaping and waving my arms up and down to the tune of "Ebb Tide".

Now I'm revisiting the moment, at age eleven, when Mr. Eglevsky takes me and my mother aside to tell me that he will not let me go into pointe shoes with all the other girls because my ankles are too weak and I will cripple myself. I plead with him, promise I will work harder, practice longer. He refuses to reconsider. I left the school that day thinking my life was over. Washed up at eleven. Tossed aside. Never to dance *Swan Lake* with Prince Siegfried. I didn't recover for two years until I was rescued by the discovery that Modern Dance did exist on Long Island.

So here I am waiting for the real Prince to arrive. I'm trying my best to contain my beating heart and stay calm, professional. Now I see Ruth Scherer, our secretary and surrogate mother, running down the hall toward us. "Murray! He's here! He's changing his clothes! He's on his way in!" she whispers so excitedly, like a young mother telling her daughter her date is waiting downstairs to take her to the prom.

Now I watch this solitary, disheveled figure enter the room, followed by his body guard/masseur, Luigi. We are each introduced separately by Murray. Rudolf is low-keyed, soft-spoken, rather polite as he is taken through the steps with Robert Small coaching and Anne patiently guiding him. What he looks like is...well, no one would believe that this is the man who changed the face of dance on our planet.

Rudolf is small really. And so pale--pasty white. His skin has a transparency, as if he's never been outdoors or even looked at the sun, and it occurs to me that perhaps he hasn't. He's dressed in many layers of warm-up garments. The outer pair of faded, wool-knit pants has more holes in it than it does fabric and as he moves gingerly through the choreography, the pants fall lower and lower until they are hanging around his knees. A woolen cap covers his head. A long, wool scarf around his neck, tattered ballet slippers that he then sheds to reveal layers of gauze-tape around both feet, as though

the wrappings are providing a cushion between his calcified bones and the unforgiving wood floor. And he limps slightly. My God, even his eyes are dull, colorless.

And Rudolf curses like a truck driver. At first, this is another shock, but after a while it becomes almost endearing, adding more color to this swirling mixture of nobleman and peasant. At one point, frustrated with a movement sequence, he spews out, "Aach! Fucker Mother!" My jaw drops. But Murray doesn't miss a beat. He calmly corrects him, "No, Rudolf. It's *Mother Fucker. Mother Fucker.*" "Ah, yes. Mother Fucker", he repeats.

I try not to stare too intently at all this, but I'm incredulous. How is this very mortal shell of a man going to turn himself into the Nureyev god? How is he going to dance these pieces in a few weeks when it appears that he has trouble merely walking? Is he absorbing the choreography by some process of osmosis, because he's certainly only outlining it, indicating it in rehearsals. How can he come in here and shatter my illusions like this?

In the next couple of weeks we see him very infrequently. He's like a cat that appears in a room whenever it wants to. But he's gotten completely under my skin. I think about little else, imagining what his life must be like, what he eats, where he goes, who it is that he really trusts, how many people want a piece of him.

It is opening night at the Minskoff, April 11, 1978. We have had company warm-up on stage, put on the make-up and received a little, inspirational pep talk from Murray who is calm and fatherly on the outside and, I imagine, trying not to swallow his heart on the inside. We are waiting, once again, for "Rudi" to just send a signal that the show can begin. Without his consent nothing happens, no one moves. If he wants to keep the audience waiting, for whatever reason, or no reason, he will, because he can. We are under no illusions that this sold-out, standing-room-only house has come to see us. He is Gladys Knight and we are The Pips.

This is the ritual: Rudi shuffles out of his dressing room, in his slippers, Luigi in tow. There's a special chair for him in the downstage, stage right wing, right near the stage manager's podium. He comes limping out in a full-length, dark blue bathrobe; his cup of tea in hand, his scarf around his neck. He

sits down in his chair. Big, strong, macho Luigi gives his neck a last minute rub; the trainer prepping his number one boxer for the big fight. Our stage manager calls for “places!”, and the most miraculous transformation begins. I watch the butterfly emerge from its cocoon. The tea is set aside, the scarf removed. The hand mirror is held, allowing him to brush his beautifully clean, full, sensual brown hair. Then the robe comes off, the slippers, the leg warmers, the last sweater. He is standing, now taking a few final twists and stretches, wearing nothing but a very revealing sea-green and white bathing suit costume--bare legs, bare arms.

The curtain goes up. And the man who was limping one minute ago gushes onto the stage--nostrils flaring, those restless lips and now smoldering eyes devouring the space. Either the stage lights are playing tricks with my eyes or there is an actual aura, a halo of amber light surrounding his entire body. With perfectly sculpted leg, buttock and arm muscles, he looks like a moving Michelangelo sculpture, chiseled out of marble the color of glowing ivory. He is leaping, whipping through turns, holding balances, and I know he feels no pain. I think I have never seen anything this alive before. If I remain this mesmerized I'll be transported to the place where he is. I wonder if he understands where he has taken me. Of course, he must. He is taking fifteen-hundred others there as well. It is the place where he feels most at home, most alive. I am both a witness and a fellow traveler and I will dance these performances as a gift back to him.

In later years, Rudolf stated many times how he didn't care that people thought his dancing had deteriorated. Even his throng of devotees and obsessed fans felt he should get off the stage. He had become a tragic figure, a ghost of his former superhuman self. But Rudolf lived fully only on a stage and he said he wanted to die there as well. When he did die almost five years ago now, I believe he took that halo of amber light with him. I've not witnessed the mystery of transformation so clearly since then.

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