

Christine Du Boulay Ellis
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Jenai Cutcher: What were your impressions of Chicago when you toured here?

Christine Du Boulay Ellis: Well, when we toured here, we were treated like royalty, you know. So it was a different point of view and we didn't have to go out and shop and all that sort of stuff and look for somewhere to live. When we first came, we were living with this good lady in a house on the south side of Chicago. And it was not a happy situation, so eventually, Richard and I found a little four floor walkup. But it was heaven for us, you know. Because she hardly paid us anything. Just a pittance. So it was hard. Really rough to start with. Anyhow, everything worked out alright.

Cutcher: When you and Richard started your own school, what were your goals and what was your teaching philosophy? What did you learn from Sadler's Wells that you then applied here?

Ellis: Well, [Nanette] de Valois had set up a syllabus that was using what she felt was the best of all the three main ones. You know, the French, Russian, and the Italian. And we approved of that. We thought that any one system can be confining. It's good to start with so you do not confuse students, but in the long run you need to have a broader outlook on things. So we kept to that syllabus and found it worked. And our goal was just to teach as best we could, and we had quite a few students that go on to professional work. I mean, we had quite a few grades. We had three children's grades and two intermediate grades and an advanced grade, and then two for adult beginners and so on. And there was only one studio, so working out a schedule was not the easiest.

Cutcher: Right. And did you and your husband do all the teaching?

Ellis: We shared the teaching. Yes, I did all the children work and he did the adults mostly. And he did all the office work.

Cutcher: Oh that's nice.

Ellis: So we never had an assistant or secretary. We did it all. And in the days before answering machines and the days before computers. He did all the bills, sent out all the statements, hand typed.

Cutcher: Did you just learn about how to do that as you went along?

Ellis: Pretty much, yes. Actually, the wife of the couple that helped us start the school, she did our bookkeeping for us at the end of the month. So she was a big help to get us set up, a bookkeeping system. That was good. But otherwise, we did it all ourselves.

Ellis: Later on, I would have somebody assist me with the children's classes and so on. Sometimes I'd let them teach the young ones or the adult beginners and things like that. But on the whole, we did it all ourselves. And then, as you probably know, we started a small ballet company. We had one young boy [Dom Orejudos] that was - wanted to choreograph, and so we said, 'Sure, why not?' So, he took the time to work on a few things and they were delightful, so we thought "Good," you know. And, I don't know, have you

heard about the Ballet Guild? Ann Barzel. So, we did quite a few performances for them and did some of those things that Dom had choreographed. Eventually, he did so well and there was another boy, too, that was talented. So somebody said, "Why don't you start a company?" And then somebody introduced us to an agent and he got us a few dates. And so that was the start of it. And then Channel 11 found out about us and we did a lot of performances for them. A lot. It was interesting, the other day, you know, they're having their 60th anniversary, Channel 11. And suddenly I saw two stills of our ballets and I thought, 'Oh, no! They must be in their archives somewhere.' I've got to find out about that.

Cutcher: Tell me more about Illinois Ballet and what it was like to run a company.

Ellis: Well, it was hard in a way because we only performed weekends because our company had about twelve dancers involved. And most of them were either in the school still or working, so we couldn't - it wasn't a full time job. And we had to rehearse after hours in the studio. Again, only one studio. So that made that hard. But we did a lot of ballets. And I made all the costumes. Dom was a wonderful designer, too - Dom Orejudos. And he designed a lot of the costumes. And in those days it was easy to find fabric shops and all those little things. There were quite a few of them in the Loop. Now you have to go way out to get anything and the fabrics are not the same. The colors are not the same. It's hard to get the subtleties. But it was fun.

Cutcher: What was a typical day like? You ran a school, you taught classes...

Ellis: Well, yes, we started with a morning class, and then we had to have a break because we couldn't do anything until the children got out of school. So then there was a children's class, to . And then, there was an intermediate class... They had to do a certain number of classes [a week]. And then on Saturdays, I used to teach variations from the classical repertoire. And once a year, we gave a program. The children did a demonstration class. That was all they did. Except the advanced children. I taught them a dance to do. Otherwise, it was just class work. It was the only time we let the parents come. We wouldn't let them watch.

Cutcher: What about ballet and its technique has changed and what has remained the same?

Ellis: I think now that it's required for dancers to have other forms of dance in their repertoires. So they have contemporary and modern and a little bit of this and a little bit of that. So they're very well-rounded. They do some things nowadays that I think, 'Oh, I could never have done that.' [Laughs] But I really admire them for their adaptability. The Joffrey dancers, especially, are really wonderful. There are other companies, contemporary companies, that are magnificent, and I really like the dancers, but I can't see them doing *Swan Lake*. Whereas, you know, the Joffrey could do what they're doing and *Swan Lake*.

Cutcher: Right. And how has the ballet scene evolved in Chicago since you arrived?

Ellis: Well, when I arrived, it was Ruth Page, really, although she hadn't started a company, but she was doing performances. And then she, as I say, she did the dances for the operas, but that isn't a full-time job. Various operas, not all of them. And then she started her Chicago Opera Ballet, I think she called it. And she had good dancers. But they didn't perform very often in Chicago, strangely enough. Nearly always on the road or somewhere. But very few performances in Chicago. And then she did a couple of seasons at their new headquarters, or at least it was new then. And at that time, she asked Freddie

Franklin to come in and help as ballet master and director and so on. So Freddie stayed with us because we were just a few blocks up the road from her studio. So that was lovely. We had a great time. And we did a couple of things for her. Ray Powell had given us his ballet, *One in Five*. That was in our repertoire and Ruth wanted that, too, so we did that. And also, Sir Frederick Ashton's *Façade*. We did that for her. And, of course, Richard produced that for Robert Joffrey for the Joffrey company. That was exciting.

Cutcher: It sounds like all the companies and schools, you all sort of worked together when you were able to. Is that right?

Ellis: Not really, no. We weren't very popular when we first arrived. [Laughs]

Cutcher: No?

Ellis: No. No. In fact, some of the teachers wouldn't let their students come to our classes, which I think was a pity, in a way. Not just because of us, but I think that's not a good attitude. I think dancers should be allowed to study or find out for themselves and maybe get something good from one and something good from another and work it out themselves. But to deny them studying where they like, especially when they're a little older, I can understand with the young ones, but not when they're older. So there was a little contention in that respect. Some of them snuck away anyhow. [Laughs] Yeah. And we didn't meet Edna McRae until much later. We'd always been told, you know, that she was a wonderful lady. But for some reason or another, we never met her. And then P.W. Manchester, you know of her? She and Anatole Chujoy wrote the encyclopedia, The Dance Encyclopedia. She was English and we'd known her from England, and then she came over here and worked with Chujoy. And she used to visit Chicago and she'd come and stay with us, which was nice. Anyhow, on one of the visits, she said, "Have you met Edna yet?" And we said, 'No, we haven't.' She said, "You've got to meet Edna, you really must." And so, somehow we did meet up and we got on fine. She was about to retire and wanted to put on a little program so she asked me to help. So that was nice, so we did collaborate. And, of course, she was very close to Robert Joffrey. So that was nice.

Cutcher: Your company was successful and very well received, right? Illinois Ballet?

Ellis: Yes. But as I say, it was only a weekend company and it got to the point that, if we did become a professional company, which people were saying, "Why don't you?" it would, number one, probably involve unions. And as I say, Richard and I did everything. That meant that we would have to have a staff. And also, we found that a lot of the students were a little resentful of the fact that a few were in the company and the rest were, they felt, ignored. And so we thought our main object is to teach ballet and not to have a company. It would take up too much of our time. So we gave it up.

Cutcher: And did you ever get tired of teaching?

Ellis: No. The more I taught, the more I loved it. [Laughs] I was sorry to give it up. But we felt that it was time.

Cutcher: I read in your memoir, you talked about your teachers at Sadler's Wells and how they taught class in their street clothes?

Ellis: Yes.

Cutcher: Did you do the same thing?

Ellis: No, not so much. No I used to teach originally in a skirt, you know, and a top. I wore ballet shoes, not hard. Sometimes I wore heels. But, it's amazing I used to do that. All the old teachers, I've seen photos of them teaching in regular clothes. And then I think I mentioned [Stanislas] Idzikowski and his little dapper little suits. He was so cute. I loved him. He was wonderful. But really hard outdoor shoes. And he made the boys wear their outdoor shoes teaching them beats. To do entrechats with outdoor shoes, they really had to bash their feet up.

Cutcher: So, how did they convey the movement and how did you learn?

Ellis: Well, they described things so well, you know. Because their arms, they could still use the port de bras and all the épaulement, which is essential, which is getting lost, unfortunately. All the nuances, they're going in many ways which saddens me. There's too much emphasis on technique and how many pirouettes you can do and how high you can get your leg, you know.

Cutcher: And what are the nuances that you miss?

Ellis: Oh, just the tilt of a head or the use of the shoulders. Little, subtle movements that we were taught. It was all part of our training. Now, I watch some classes and they hardly use their heads, you know.

Cutcher: You talked about Sadler's Wells standing out because of the acting quality.

Ellis: Yes. Well, that was Robert Helpmann. Of course, we were so lucky to have him because he was an actor as well as a dancer. And he was a wonderful role model, as you say. [Laughs] Really very good. And they still are wonderful actors.

Cutcher: And did you and your husband try to find ways to teach that to your students once you came here?

Ellis: As much as we could. Of course, we didn't have the same outlet for them, you know. It's not as though they were performing a lot. But we did. I used to teach mime - pantomime - for a while. Classical ballet pantomime, so that was a help. But then again, the studio space was a problem.. That, and I used to have theory classes where I teach them theory. But that, too, had to go. And then another time I studied Benesh notation and I taught that for a while, but not enough of them were interested in that side of it. My choreographers were the keen ones. They tried to notate their ballets, which was fun.

Cutcher: And you had several locations throughout the life of your school.

Ellis: Yes. We always said we had the seven year itch. [Laughs] It seemed to work out that way. I think I mentioned the one where we had a fire in the studio? That was horrendous, really terrifying.

Cutcher: It was arson right, or attempted?

Ellis: Yes. I think they were trying to blow up the building, probably for some tax purpose or another. But we were rehearsing on Sundays, mostly. And this one Sunday, we called up the janitor and said, 'We won't be in.' And so we stayed in bed and had a little extra sleep, except the phone rang and, "Do you know that you've got gasoline in your studio?" And I said, 'What?' Half awake, you know. And, "Yes. Think you'd better come down." So we flew down to the studio, got out of the elevator, and here were these great gallon

drums of gasoline tilted, with the tops off. We went into the studio and there was newspaper all over the floor saturated in gasoline, and a phone book that was all torn up and a big thing of matches and they'd evidently started a fire. But when the fire and the police and everybody came, they said they obviously were not professionals because they should have done it in a small space, which would have been combustible. But the studio was too big, fortunately. We had a slightly charred floor, other than the awful smell. Dreadful. We had to open all the windows and it was a bitterly cold day. [Laughs] But so, we made headlines that day.

Cutcher: I bet. [Laughs] Of all the reasons to make headlines. So, from World War II to England to touring the world and all of the experiences that you've had, I'm really curious to know from you, what do you think makes Chicago dance distinct? Is there something about dance here that is different? You've seen so much.

Ellis: Well, I think the city has something to do with it. It is such a wonderful city. It's not such a fast pace as New York. And I think that makes for a more comfortable situation. And it's perfectly located in the middle of the country, it's not on either coast. And so it makes it easier for many more people to visit, become interested in ballet. And now, too, with the Joffrey, they're touring a lot. Because in the old days, there were lots of tours. Ballet Russes used to tour endlessly and brought ballet to the masses. Now, really the only ways the masses can see it is on a television and it's not the same as seeing a live performance, by any means. But, I think Chicago audiences are very tasteful. They know what they want. I mean, they've got the best in the Lyric Opera. They've got the best in the Chicago Symphony. They've got the best in the Art Institute. It's all here, you know, and within reaching distance. You don't have to go too far, it's all there.

Cutcher: What performances, what kinds of things did you go to see over the course of living here?

Ellis: Well, when we were here, actually, it's not an excuse but teaching, we taught until eight. Classes didn't finish until , which limited our seeing anything. And the weekends were so precious, we only had Sundays and that was often a rehearsal, so we didn't see that much. But I think we saw the Joffrey every time they came here. We saw their very first performance in Chicago. Because we, as you know, we had met Robert Joffrey prior to that. He told us about starting a ballet company. And so, when they came to Chicago, of course we went. In a snowstorm.

Cutcher: What was it like to work with your husband? You were partners in every way and that's just such a rare thing.

Ellis: I know. It was really extraordinary. / for some years. No, it worked out perfectly. No problems. It was really a great relationship, very special.

Cutcher: It sounds like you made a great team.

Ellis: Yeah. I think so. Yes.

Cutcher: I'm sure people ask you all the time, but what were your favorite roles to dance?

Ellis: Favorite roles? Anything in Coppélia. I loved Coppélia. And Sleeping Beauty. I loved doing Sleeping Beauty, too. All the classics. And then anything of Ashton's. A big fan of

Ashton's. I loved him. He was so wonderful....Yeah. Big fan. I just hope that they'll always preserve his ballets.

Cutcher: How do you feel about the preservation of ballets?

Ellis: Well, I think some of them, it's important that we keep them, really. Unfortunately, ballet's not like music where it's a universal language. Ballet notation is not that good. People do use it, you know. And I know when they're working on a new ballet, I go to a lot of rehearsals and classes that they use video. But again, it's not quite the same as the real thing. And nowadays, there aren't the number of people to hand things down to and they get changed. So and so can't do such and such a step, so let's change it and then it gets changed forever. You know, so, there are a lot of problems in that.

Cutcher: So much of it lives in the body.

Ellis: Yes. Right. It's wonderful if you've got somebody to come and help. Joffrey just did *Prodigal Son*, Balanchine's *Prodigal Son*, which I think is one of his best ballets. At least his best story ballets. He can't tell a story. But that was wonderful. And Eddie Villella came in to coach them. So, that's, you know, couldn't be better.

Cutcher: That makes all the difference I bet.

Cutcher: Well, it really has been a pleasure to talk to you, Mrs. Ellis.

Ellis: I enjoyed it. I hope we meet again.