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by Nancy Whyte

There was a 50's style flash sign projecting out in front, and inside, the allure and glamour and the spirit of performances many years gone by. In 1969, when I first moved to Bellingham, the Mount Baker Theatre was one of two movie theatres in the city. If you were a theatre person and went to a movie there, you knew you were in a place that had known the wild dedication, the boundless love, the hopes and joys and discouragements of forgotten theatre people of the past. You began to think, "Maybe this could be used as a live performance theatre..."

In about 1974 two young men tried. Steve Lampe and Louis Kiefer took over the lease of the theatre and began a dream called "The Mt. Baker Performance Center." Their dream was to have a local theatre company, host various productions and appearances by name entertainers and companies, and to show movies. It was a thrilling vision, and a huge one.

One day in February 1975, I was invited to meet with these enterprising gentlemen. They wanted to have a ballet company attached to the theatre. The company would present its own season yearly, and also perform plays and musicals, as needed, in the Performance Center. I would have access to a theatre, production support, and the constant fun of new choreographic challenges and artistic growth. The fact that there was no salary was not a consideration. A dream, to have my own ballet company, was about to be realized. Would I be interested? Of course!

The first step was a citywide audition on the stage of the theatre. Twenty-five dancers came and we selected ten. Among them was Wendy Grunhurd (now Wendy Setter).

The dancers and I got immediately to work. Our first concert would be in April. We were to be joined by "Ballet Northwest" from Olympia who came to



"Beat Me Eight To The Bar," a jitterbug ballet, 1980. Kirk Midtskog, Julia Milburn, Mary Byrne.

support our fledgling efforts. To promote the concert, we performed before movie showings, Radio City Music Hall-style, we hoped. I distinctly remember dancing to a sold-out house before a showing of "Young Frankenstein"!

At that time the stage was partially painted boards and partially splintered raw boards (very hard wood) and most discomforting if you

had to dance barefoot! The lights were worked by levers, which emitted impressive arrays of sparks. The sound system was probably state-of-the-art 1950s. But still, to go out on that stage, then, as now, was magic.

In April 1975, the Mt. Baker Ballet's, (known at the time as Mt. Baker Performance Center Dance Company), first concert took place. It opened with a pas de deux danced by Bernard Johansen, director of "Ballet Northwest" and myself. As the curtain opened a little voice rang out, "That's my teacher!" We were a success. It seemed as though we were ready to fly.

Time was already running out for the Performance Center. Due to the lack of funding, the theatre was reverting to being a movie house.

By November 1975, the dream of a Performance Center was gone. The Center theatre company became "Stage 1," and rehearsed at my studio, later moving to Orcas Island. The dance company became the Mt. Baker Chamber Dancers and was completely under the auspices of my school. Louis Kiefer managed the theatre as a movie house until he left Bellingham.

Those years saw wonderful adventures for the Mt. Baker Chamber Dancers. I remember a magically enigmatic production of "Silver Apples of the Moon" in conjunction with the art

# ...The First Thirty-one Years of the Mt. Baker Ballet



Nancy Whyte, Point Roberts Arts & Crafts Festival 1979, "Russian Dance."

department at WWU; the sun gleaming through white fabric ballooning against the sky in some Isadora Duncan-inspired dances at Point Roberts as part of an arts festival; a performance with two pianists at the museum; and countless loft performances at the studio.

In 1981, I started the "Nancy Whyte

Junior Ballet," intended as a training ground for the Mt. Baker Chamber Dancers. It was time to plan the next step for artistic growth.

I attended my first Regional Dance America festival in 1984, and emerged feeling that this organization set the criteria for structured growth technically, choreographically, and organizationally which I needed in order for my company to continue to evolve and flourish. I combined the two companies under the name "The Mt. Baker Ballet," applied for non-profit status and in 1987, we were accepted into Regional Dance America. The company began to expand its horizons, performing at yearly festivals in

many different states. I remember the reverent hush at the conclusion of "Russian Dance" one year, before the house erupted into cheers and applause.

The Mt. Baker Ballet continues to grow and bring dance opportunities to young dancers in the Whatcom/Skagit region. Former members of the company have had performing careers with or entered training programs with world-class companies.

In 1985, the Mt. Baker Ballet gave their first "Nutcracker" performance, which is presented yearly at the Mount Baker Theatre, and is presented to community school children throughout December.

Dreams can undergo a metamorphosis. We can all see that the dream of two young men became a reality when we attend performances at the Mount Baker Theatre. To be sure, other people brought the dreams to fruition, and the reality is different from the original vision, but still, it is there. The Mt. Baker Ballet has continued to grow and evolve and has the honor of performing in the theatre where it all began.

*Nancy Whyte is owner/director of Nancy Whyte School of Ballet and artistic director of the Mt. Baker Ballet.*



Mt. Baker Ballet 1987: Back row, left to right: Lee Trimble, Angela Suchy, Barbara Shaudney, Dahliani Reynolds, Heather Little. Front row: Eve Lerner, Laurie Sprague, Ann Simons.

## TRAVEL

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