

Song for an Unsung Hero: The Small Town Dance Teacher

by Nancy Whyte

I have danced all my life. For 50 years I have known the fascination and exaltation of pursuing the art of ballet. For 41 years I have been given the joy of transmitting my passion for dance and my knowledge of dance to others. For easily 53 years I have choreographed dances and built a dance movement vocabulary, which is my own.

I have had the pleasure and privilege of studying ballet and other forms of dance with many individuals, some of them famous, and some of them obscure. Only a handful of these people are what I call my "teacher-teachers," that is, masters who taught me not only dance and dance as an art, but taught me on every level; spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually, and forever became a part of me. They were a diverse group of people. Their commonality was that for all five of them – Nicolas Orloff, Lara Ladre, Ruthanna Boris, Kira Guzikova, and Eloez Walker – dance was life, and life was dance.

All the inspiring teachers in the world would have done me no good without my first teacher – the person who gave me the tools to pursue my life in dance – Eloez Walker.

I always danced. I believed that dancing was quite the finest thing one could do. In that "pre-historic" time in the early 1950s when few people had television, and living in a culturally isolated small mid-Willamette Valley town, I had no idea that ballet existed.

At the end of the first grade we were rehearsing our Mother's Day program. I was part of a merry-go-round, and carried a cardboard poster-painted camel while bobbing up and down in a circle with some other children. The teacher said, "And now the ballerina." A little girl in a red tutu began to dance. I was enthralled; possessed. Because my mother was a musician, I understood the concept of working and studying to attain a technique, but I had no idea one

could LEARN to dance. It was a wondrous moment.

After many requests and several months my mother called the only ballet teacher in town. We were lucky, given the poor training standards that existed in many places in this country at that time.

Eloez Walker had just married. A small studio had been constructed in the basement of her parents' home. I remember the smell of her perfume hanging in the air, her long, red fingernails, and the highly mannered way in which she smoked. She was SENSUAL – a word I wouldn't have known at that time, and utterly glamorous.

Eloez was completely conscientious – one of the hardest working, most principled and ethical people I have ever known. Her teaching style was severe, at times almost punitive. No error was tolerated. One learned to be totally responsible for one's actions. I cried a lot, I feared her, and I loved her and knew that she loved me.

When I was nine years old, my family learned we would have to move to a small, unincorporated rural town. For me, Eloez opened a branch of her school in that town, teaching two days a week. Without Eloez's generosity I would not have been able to continue my lessons. She gave me my life, and she died before I understood what she had done and could thank her.

As time went on, Eloez stretched and grew to meet my needs. I remember when I was around fourteen, Eloez showed me a step while referring to the definitive classical manual called *The Classic Ballet*, reading the descriptive text and learning the step herself as she taught it to me. With complete love and humility, to help me grow, she was willing to expose her own lacks.

When we are young, we see mostly what is not. For years I would resent the makeshift studios – usually on cement,

the lack of professional dress, the lack of classical repertoire, the emotional tyranny, and that, as the only "advanced" student, I was isolated in private lessons. I could not see what I know now: Eloez gave me everything I needed to go forward in my dance life. There was no physical damage to my body, the potentially unfortunate by-product of poor teaching, because Eloez was a careful and informed teacher; and no terrible flaws to overcome.

I know little about Eloez Walker's background. She grew up in Hawaii. She studied at the American School of Dance, Hollywood where I would later go. During WWII she did USO shows where she first met and worked with Ernest Flatt, the choreographer. "Ernie" visited Eloez and her husband every summer. She spoke of being in movies and ballet companies and thoroughly detested Judy Garland with whom she had performed.

What I know of Eloez is her complete devotion and belief in her art, her vision of dance as a creative and alive process, her ability to communicate, and how intensely alive and "in the moment" she was. She gave me everything I needed, and more.

Nancy Whyte is owner/director of Nancy Whyte School of Ballet and artistic director of the Mt. Baker Ballet. Eloez Walker's birthdate was December 16, 1915.



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