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Lawrence Leritz [00:00:25] Hi I'm Lawrence Leritz. I grew up in a small town in Illinois. I was born in Alton. It's right across the river from St. Louis and grew up in a little town next to that called Wood River. I started-- I always loved to dance. My mother loved dancing. It was serendipity how I actually got involved with dance, because it was in high school and I started suffering from some really bad lower back pain. And the doctor took all these X-rays and said, "This and this is wrong in your back, and you could be crippled someday." And I'm thinking this doesn't sound right. So anyway I said-- My mother said, "Is there something we can do?" And he said well he might enroll him in some sort of light dancing like ballroom or something. So now I had always asked my mother to take dancing lessons and she said no. Because I'm the youngest in a family of four and my brother and sister are taking dancing lessons and they quit. So my mother so you'll just do the same thing. So I was like, "No I won't! No I won't!" So anyway and the doctors said you know take him to ballroom. It's like I'm going to get a chance to take classes. So I went to the local teacher and I thought ballroom was boring. It just wasn't for me. I saw these kids like tap dancing and it really turned me on because I had loved, loved Gene Kelly who I eventually met in Hollywood. But to me he looked just like a regular guy, you know, that could have been from my hometown who would tap dance. He looked like he was having a great time and it was joyful and it's like I'd love that. So I started tap dancing, and within a year the St. Louis Muni, which is the largest outdoor musical theater in the United States, had auditions for kids for the world premiere of the musical, "State Fair." And it was the first time they adapted it onstage. And Ozzie and Harriet Nelson played the mother and father and Richard Rodgers supervised it, James Hammerstein directed it. And they, because it was the premiere they rehearsed us for several weeks before which is a long rehearsal period for Summer Stock. And they kept saying, "Oh the choreographer is going to come in, in the last minute. He's doing a movie right now with Barbra Streisand." So this choreographer comes up to me and they made us put little name tags on and mine said Larry Leritz and I hadn't really grown very tall. [laughter] I'm still not very tall, but back then I was a kid. So here's this huge-- He looked like a giant to me, comes up to me and he looks down on my nametag and he said, "Larry Leritz, is that your real name?" And I looked at him, I said, "Yes, is Tommy Tune yours?" So he cracked up laughing. I don't know what's funny because I'm a kid, and I kind of like looked at me I said, "What's funny?" and he said, "Well our names are euphonious." I said, "What's that?" And he said, "Well, they're musical, they rhyme." So I had made a friend that day and it was a wonderful experience. The entire time I couldn't believe that they had chosen me. You know they chose-- There were like, at least 500 kids at the audition, and they chose maybe like 10 kids, and I'd only been dancing for a year. So I got involved with different community theater. A couple of them around town and then the next major thing that happened was I read about auditions for the regional southern Summer Stock companies. And I saved up my money to fly to North Carolina to audition. Now at this point I had only had tap dancing and a little bit of modern dance.

Jenai Cutcher [00:05:26] Who were your teachers for tap and modern?

Lawrence Leritz [00:05:26] My tap teacher was [00:05:27] **Jean Dunscombe**. [0.3s] And that was in East Dolton Illinois which is the little small town between the other two that I mentioned. And Michael Sims, who's a really well known teacher, in St. Louis. And he taught from such joy. He really made me want to dance. And this gets into his story because I went to this audition and they're saying OK we're gonna do the ballet combinations now. I'm thinking uh-oh, I don't know anything about ballet but I thought I bet if I stand at the end of the line I can do it. And I did. They're doing like grand jetes across

the floor and I just imitated, well I guess I did OK because I was offered three contracts. So this is about two and a half months before it started, so I thought I got to take ballet lessons. So I ended up-- a friend recommended Michael Sims to me and I went and took his beginner men's class and I went to his class and after class he came into the dressing room and he says, "Hi, I'm Michael." And he says, "How long have you been studying?" I said, "How long have I been studying what?" He says, "How long have you been studying ballet?" And I said, "This is my first class." And he said, "How come you're doing double pirouettes with everybody?" I said, "Oh I'm sorry." I thought I'd done something out of place. [laughter] He said, "Really? How would you like a scholarship?" So I studied those two months, I went and did Summer Stock. It was called the Jenny Wiley Summer Music Theater. We had the traditional musicals like Music Man and Carousel, and I came back and they're very encouraging. "Oh you're such a great dancer." And you know I'm a little kid from, my town the Midwest has 10,000 people. I have nothing to reference anything that's happening to me. So I came back and Michael said, "Be sure you come back and take class with me." He came back and I did and he offered me a full scholarship. So there I was taking class, like two classes a day and I went from standing in the back to being in the front of the class within a few months. My legs went straight up, I had perfect flat turnout. It was just natural. So he got me involved with a company called St. Louis Dance Theater. And I had no interest in being a ballet dancer at all. I wanted to do musical theater. Michael was crafty, getting me involved in St. Louis Dance Theatre. And then he teaches on a lot of these dance conventions and was friends with David Howard and told David Howard about me. And he said to send him pictures and he did and he said, "We'd love to have Lawrence come for the summer." So it's like, Hot Dog. I always knew where I lived was sort of boring [laughter] and I wanted something else, so after a while at least I'll get to New York and see what it's like and check out Broadway and all of that. And that summer was magical. My-- The first friend that I met in New York was this guy from Texas who had his locker next to me. His name was Buddy and we became best friends and Buddy grew up to be Patrick Swayze, the movie star. And I remember my first day at Harkness they like graded us to see what class to put us in. And I remember my arm was like doing this I was so nervous, and the one director Maria Vay said to David Howard "Who in the hell is that? Look at that turnout!" [laughter] and David Howard said, "That's that kid from St. Louis Michael Sims sent us." So anyway they put me in the top class. And I'd only had ballet for a year and I'm with all these kids from all over the country who'd been studying all our their lives. Talk about being intimidated. Plus you know a lot of major dance people took David Howard's advanced class, like Gelsey Kirkland was always in our class and-- So I stayed at Harkness for about a year and a half. And I danced in the ballet with the Harkness Ballet trainees. And then Harkness was starting going downhill at that point because Harkness Ballet performed in New York and it was the second company of the Harkness Ballet and the critics are still mad at Rebecca Harkness for ending the first company abruptly, so when she opened her company in her new theater across the street from Lincoln Center the critics are just laying for her and panned the season. So she closed the company, the second company. And then she started pulling money out of school and everything it was like, I think I want to do something else. So I spent a few months in the Joffrey school, which it didn't really click with me. However Robert Joffrey at the time took a liking to me and cast me in a ballet. No, it wasn't "Spectra." I'll think of it later. Anyway their doing two weeks at the city center with Rudolf Nureyev, and he personally coached me in a role and it was a great time. And while I was at Joffrey I auditioned for School of American Ballet. And I went into my audition. I think it was with Doubrovskaya. And it was myself, maybe one other boy and about 500 little girls and they picked two people: myself and one girl. So then I was at SAB for two years and that's where I really blossomed. I really found myself. Violette Verdy was sort of my chaperone there and really looked out for me, introduced me to a lot of people. And during that time,

an older man came in and watched her class one day, and picked myself and one other dancer to come to an audition. It's like, "I'm in school. What am I doing an audition for?" So Stanley Waring says, "Just go." So I went to these funky rehearsal studios they used to have up on 56th street. It was called "Broadway Arts" or something, or "Showcase," it was "Showcase." And I was auditioning for the farewell performance of Fonteyn and Nureyev on Broadway. And the man in class was Sir Frederick Ashton. And they chose me. They were doing Marguerite Armand. And then have all the young admirers in the ballet, I don't know if you know it. And there I was up on stage dancing with Margot Fonteyn. [laughter] And I'd known Nureyev because he took our class many times at SAB. And Baryshnikov would be in our class. So he's very nice to me. He was not nice to a lot of people, but he was nice to me. And then towards-- That was probably my first year at SAB. Then towards the end of my time at SAB Mr. Balanchine invited me-- I got a bug. Is that Ruth Page? [laughter] Mr. Balanchine invited me to come and take class. And was interested in me being an apprentice with the company. And at the end about two months of being there Violette said, "I got something really great for you." And I said, "What's that." She said, "John Neumeier, who has the Hamburg Ballet, is looking for a dancer and you'll make four or five times as much money." So Violette already talked to Mr. Balanchine. I didn't know this at the time. And so when I went to talk to him about it he was supportive about me going he said, "You know the truth is," He said, "A man at City Ballet, you mostly stand behind a girl and pick her up and put her down. Plus your short." Thank you Mr. Balanchine. And he says you should go there because he loves using men. He'll really launch your career. So I did that. And so I ended up in Hamburg, I danced there for a year. At the end of it, they had something called ballet days and for like a week or a week and a half, they performed every ballet that we did in the company pretty much, and they created a couple of new ballets. It was a big deal. Everybody came to see it. Bill Como from Dance magazine came where I first met him. And he had this nice little woman with him. He says, he said, "Lawrence do you know Ruth Page, from Chicago Ballet?" I said no, and she says, "Oh darling, I love you. You're just marvelous." She says, "You have to come and dance with my company." Now that's how Ruth Page talked. She was the best way I can describe her is Auntie Mame. She just had a carefree love for life, hilarious. So she gave me her phone number. Bill Como gave me his phone number he said, "Are you coming back to New York for the summer. And I said. "Yes." And he said, "I want to photograph you for Dance Magazine." So I came back. I was so glad to be back in New York. Germany was very isolated at the time and it's not like.

Jenai Cutcher [00:16:40] Im going to interrupt you just for a second.

Lawrence Leritz [00:16:40] OK do I need to repeat anything?

Jenai Cutcher [00:16:53] No, you're good. Yeah that might be better, thank you.

Lawrence Leritz [00:16:53] So I came back to New York and Bill Como set me up to be photographed with Ken Duncan the great dance photographer. And-- Some pictures for Dance Magazine which appeared in the magazine. And so I guess the first two days I was back, I talked to Ruth. And Ruth offered me a contract to come and dance in her Nutcracker. So I talked John Neumeier in Hamburg and explained the situation and he said, "I think you should do it." He said, "You have something that's really special." He said, "I think you should find yourself." Which was very generous of him, I think.

Jenai Cutcher [00:17:47] Did he ever talk about Chicago or recognize the Chicago connection there?

Lawrence Leritz [00:17:47] He's from Milwaukee.

Jenai Cutcher [00:17:52] He danced with Sybil Shearer in Chicago. Did he ever..?

Lawrence Leritz [00:17:52] Yes he mentioned it a couple of times. He was very intense. [laughter] Very intense. So I went and danced with Chicago Ballet and we danced two performances a day for six weeks. It was so exhausting. And this is my first year in The Nutcracker. [laughter] A little magazine from Chicago.

Jenai Cutcher [00:18:32] What is that magazine?

Lawrence Leritz [00:18:33] Salamagundi. It was a free magazine, they delivered it to every apartment in Chicago.

Jenai Cutcher [00:18:40] Is that you?

Lawrence Leritz [00:18:40] Yeah.

Jenai Cutcher [00:18:40] Wow!

Lawrence Leritz [00:18:42] As a harlequin in The Nutcracker. So I get to Chicago, it's love at first sight. So she invited me over to her apartment. Like the second night I was there. She says, "Would you come and have dinner with me darling?" I said, "I'd love to." Well, Ruth Page had this incredible 14 room apartment overlooking Lake Shore Drive, and true to Ruth's character, every room was done in a different design. She had the best designers design each room. One was the African room, that was living room, the big grand piano. The ballet room which had a full ballet room with bar and mirrors. It was called the Nureyev room. [laughter] She was hilarious. So I went over for dinner and she had this huge dining room table in the dining room and it sat like 16 people and she sat at one and I sat at the other. Ruth was already like 80 years old by this time. So we're screaming at each other you know from one end to the other. I said, "Ruth why don't you come sit next to me?" She said, "Darling that's a marvelous idea." [laughter] So we laughed our way through dinner. And she says, "You know, after dinner, I hope you don't mind, but I invited my next door neighbor." She says, "I have to share my floor with another person, but at least she's a nice lady. She said, "In fact she owns the theater your dancing in, her name is Mrs. McCormick." So we went into the living room. My famous-- There's a famous picture of Ruth Page laying in the chaise lounge in one of her dance routines. And she had one in her living room and she was laying on it. She says, "Darling what do you want to drink? I'll have the maid bring it in." Well you know I never drank alcohol in those days. So I was probably drinking a soda. And I'm knocking on the door. And here was this-- Ruth answered the door, or I guess the maid did. And here was this burly kind of tough Midwestern woman, I didn't know what to think, came in. And so Ruth stood up introduced me. And she says, "Hi I'm Mrs. McCormick." I think her first name is Ruth, also. I'm not sure. "It's nice to meet you" Like wow. So she sat down and we chat and she said, "Ruth says you're a really terrific dancer. I can't wait to see you. I'll be there opening night." So she's perfect charming and lovely. But as soon as she sat down the chair she says, "Oh darn I forgot my drink." And so just what do you want. She says, "I'll have the maid get you anything you want." "No, I want my own drink." So she comes over and she comes back with a big tumbler, plastic tumbler you can't see through. So after she left Ruth was laughing she says, "Oh, it's all full of straight Vodka. She doesn't want anybody to know how much she's drinking." [laughter] So a couple weeks later we open in the Nutcracker. Ruth and Mrs. McCormick came to McCormick Place before the show was

this huge bouquet of two dozen long stemmed red roses and all the girls are running to see which one of their boyfriends had sent it, and said, "Oh it's for Lawrence." And it was from Mrs. McCormick. And it was a very sweet message like, "With love. So happy to have you here dancing." I was just very sweet and she and Ruth came back after the performance and they're both kissing me and hugging me and Ruth, to me she felt like my grandmother. I never got to meet either my real grandmothers. So she sort of took that place in my life and I just adored her.

[00:22:52] About how old were you then?

[00:22:52] Mid 20s. Twenty-four I think. So Ruth had-- was asking me about you know, about my dance life like we're discussing now. I said, "You know I'm thinking about maybe doing a performance. I do a thing that's really odd. I said I write my own poetry. And I dance to it." "Oh darling, I did that in the '30s and '40s! We're soulmates." Which brings us this: Ruth Page's book. I don't know if you can see this on camera, but it was like two or three weeks after being there, Ruth called me to the side of the stage at McCormick Place, said, "I have something to give you." And I think it says, "To Larry, my soul mate. Happy Holidays. Ruth Page." And for me being a young dancer getting that kind of attention from somebody like her that I admired so much, it just really made me believe in myself. So she says, "Darling, we must do a performance while you're here." So, what eventually became my dance company, Dance Celebration. I did my first performance. She invited all these people, Ann Barzel, who was the dance critic for Dance Magazine at the time. The person who was head of the Pittsburgh Ballet at the time was in town. She always had all these incredible dance friends. And Helgi Tomasson and Kay Mazzo were dancing with us at the time, they came and watched. It was like overwhelming. And it was very well received. She says, "You have to start your own dance company now," and at the end of the season I went back to New York and that's exactly what I did. I performed-- It was this-- There were solo dances, por deux section was a small section of the whole thing, But I created all of these dances. And my girlfriend [00:25:08] Elaine Bunsie, [0.3s] who was incredible opera singer and sang of companies all over the United States, and I hired her to sing some of the Wagner's "Wesendonck Lieder." I choreographed two pieces of those. And then one of my poems that composer Gerald Fisher wrote this rip roaring crowd pleaser, certainly the energy of West Side Story behind it at the end, and that became the signature piece for the company. It was called "Worth A Song," and I did performances in New York around March. And then all of a sudden I got chosen to represent the international-- to represent the United States of the International Choreographic Competitions in Paris. So the company went there and we had a lot of notoriety. We came back. And then I have to think about this. Then that summer I was invited to be guest artist for the Bat-Dor Dance Company in Tel Aviv. There are two dance-- two main dance companies, modern companies at the time, Bat-Dor and Batsheva, and then they had the Israel Classical Ballet, I think it was called. So I went and danced and Jeannette Ordman, who was a handful, was the director of the company and her partner, the Baroness Batsheva de Rothschild - yes, that family - financed the company was her partner and she had formerly, before this, financed Martha Graham. And from my understanding they were girlfriends. Her and Martha Graham. And then she hooked up with this woman. They-- Dancers in the company said, "Watch out for her. We call her the Wicked Witch of Tel Aviv." She had a mean streak. And not long after I was there we're dancing in a city in Israel called Haifa on the shore. And I was dancing. I'd just been there for a couple of weeks and we're dancing in a new piece. And I just felt a punch in my stomach, it was sickening. I never found a thing like it and I turned to where the energy coming from and it was her staring at me. It's like now I know people are talking about. So they confiscated my return ticket and my passport when I got there. It's like okay, this is not good. And I found out that a lot of

people, because they couldn't stand her, would take off after they got there they just packed their bags and leave. So I was held captive. And our-- The wonderful part about the summer is that, and one of the main reasons I went, is that Alvin Ailey came in and did a new piece on us. And Alvin Ailey and I just hit it off like crazy. He was a riot. And--

[00:28:39] I'm sorry, the mic [unintelligible]

[00:28:39] Maybe put it up higher?

[00:28:57] That'll work. Thank you. So Alvin Ailey--

[00:28:58] Yes, he did this new piece on the company which is the main reason I went. And we used to hang out together, go to clubs. He was so much fun. And he says, "What the hell are you doing here? You need to get back to the United States." I said "Yeah, I plan to leave at the end." Our dance master who was a really nice gay guy Kenneth Mason from the Royal Ballet, I think he'd been a soloist there, he also encouraged me subtly. He couldn't really say it, you know, to get out of there. So at the end of my stay Alvin Ailey says, "I'll tell you what to do. Tell her--" because they have a meeting with you before you leave, this thing, what they think of you whatever your evaluation. And she invited me to come back to join the company it's like I'd rather slit my wrist than spend a year in her company. So I said "Oh yeah uh-huh." I said, "Well I need to go back to New York this summer so I can empty out my apartment and get my belongings," which is what Ailey told me to say. So I got my passport and my ticket back, and went back to New York relieved. So glad to get out of there. I mean I enjoyed the experience of being there and dancing and meeting the dancers and working there. But she made it very uncomfortable. So I get back to New York and Kenneth Mason was also in New York for summer vacation, called me up, he says, "You're not coming back are you?" I said, "No." He said, "I didn't think so." So I was back and I continued working on some new pieces for my dance company and Ruth invited me back for a second season of The Nutcracker, which--

[00:31:03] Can we back up for a minute and talk about the first Chicago stay? Where was your show produced? Do you remember the theater?

[00:31:08] My dance company? There was a theater called The Priory. Which is part of a theater that was on 75th or 76 street. It was a legit off-Broadway house. And the show "Promenade" played-- "Promenade Hall" played there with Madeline Kahn. And "The Three Wives," Edward Albee's play played there. It was a well-known theater but they had a second, small theater where they would book dance, it was called The Priory.

[00:31:45] So this was here?

[00:31:45] Yes in New York.

[00:31:47] What about in Chicago?

[00:31:47] In her dance studio, in the Nureyev Room

[00:31:51] Oh wow, in her house?

[00:31:51] In her house. And she had a big cocktail party, invited all these people.

[00:31:57] So that was her idea?

[00:31:58] Yes. And she also made sure that I had a letter of recommendation, which I was looking for yesterday, praising me. It said, "I highly recommend Lawrence. Lawrence Leritz who's helping me for funding, Ruth Page-Fisher." I remember. So I went back and danced a second season. The only thing I really remember from that season is-- Oh, the first season though, was really funny when I came back from Hamburg is they had the cast, We took class the first morning with Larry Long, who was a very good teacher. And Chicago Ballet was as much fun as Israel was not. It was just a great experience. I loved being there. I looked up on the board and I couldn't find my name and I looked and I looked and I looked and it's like my name must be here somewhere. She invited me to Chicago to dance, I had dinner with her last night. What's going on? So then I see this little tiny paper next to it and it's the list of principles and soloists, like "Oh my God." So basically after a year of being out of the School of American Ballet, I'm the soloist of a major American dance company.

[00:33:29] Do you remember the other soloists that you--

[00:33:30] Cynthia Ann Roses it was in the company for a long time, who I danced with together at Harkness they would send us out to kind of lecture demo kind of things. And we're good friends. All the people came in as like guest artists like I did. Helgi was there, Helgi and Kay Mazzo, and one of the lead dancers from Joffrey I don't remember. But anyway, going back to the second season, my main memory was we had a sick out, and the flu had just totally decimated our company and there were about ten people out. And, in the second-- In the opening second act they had this huge big jump thing which is my expertise, what I was known for, I did huge split jumps across the stage. So they cast me in the two butterflies that did that and Arie Crown is a big theater. It's like getting across the Metropolitan Opera stage it was no joke. You had to really, as dancers said back then, "haul ass" to get across the stage. So Larry Long was always on my back, "Jump higher, jump higher!" It was a joke because I was the highest jumper by far, anybody in the company. But you know, he wanted to make me better and I understood that but occasionally got on my nerves. So, because the sick out, he had to go in. He said, "I haven't danced on stage in five or 10 years, and I'm going to do this?" And he was the other butterfly. No it's hilarious. I mean he said to me, "And Leritz, don't jump so goddamn high!" So that was interesting. Then I came back I did another season with my dance company here. And I started getting offers to do other things. I got involved to do some acting. I ended up doing some principal roles on "All My Children," which was the number one soap opera at the time. It just kind of fell into my lap. And so my career started veering off into different pathways. I ended up auditioning for "Fiddler On The Roof" revival on Broadway which was it was the last time that Jerome Robbins directed and choreographed. It was a second revival and Jerome Robbins and I'd been friendly for New York City Ballet, so when I went to audition I had an in. And Tommy Abbott was there. Who was Jerome Robbins' assistant who I also knew from City Ballet. So they picked me. And I was a replacement on Broadway. They had already toured for a year. And I joined the company right after they opened on Broadway, and it was a great experience. And it was a limited run at the New York State Theatre at Lincoln Center. And after that we closed we started going on tour across the country. And we ended up in L.A., where I ended up living for about on and off for about ten years. I really loved it there and. After the L.A. leg I left "Fiddler," and I stayed in L.A. for a year. There was also another soap opera called "Capital," and also started performing - singing at a nightclub there, and that started another layer of my career. I didn't know it at the time. And I ended up-- The casting director on "Capital," his name was Joe Graham, and he started asked me about the people that I knew in New York, and we knew a lot of people in common. He said, "Well

when you come back to L.A. next time," I only stayed for like nine months, "you have to meet my partner. He's an actor too." So I came back and I went with a friend, and just I hit it off this guy and we were laughing, and I went to the bathroom, and I saw like all these trophies of, "TV Star," "Winner of the Match Game," or whatever and I came back out I said Are you famous or something. And my friend yelled at me, and he said, "Yeah that's Ron Palillo! He played Horshack in "Welcome Back, Kotter," but because I was dancing in Europe, I never saw television, so I didn't know who he was, which he loved. So he became a lifelong friend and supporter. I came back to New York after that year. And I started producing, directing, and choreographing huge musical industrials, I guess. They were musical industrials "light" because I got to do what I wanted to do, they just had to wear the product. And one was for Christian Dior, Lalia France. Very expensive lingerie. So I did "Broadway Show Stoppers" and I rented out Broadway theaters for one night, and I got the cream of the crop of Broadway dancers. People were friends of mine. Jerry Mitchell, who's now Tony-winning famous Broadway dancer and choreographer. Mercedes Ellington, Duke Ellington's granddaughter. The list goes on. And that show was very successful as at the Hudson Theater, which is just about to be reopened again as a legit theater. And right away then but admitted to a second one. And we did that Town Hall about six months later, and I did "Broadway Show Stoppers 2," and they, their sales went up five times during these shows. They used just spend that money on doing a full page ad in The New York Times, instead they produced a show. So the owner-- The president of the company Jack Cassidy was thrilled, so we did the second one. And it was also really successful, and a bunch of smaller ones we did all over the country in Chicago and Philadelphia. And John DeLuca was one of my dancers who's the choreographer and producer of the movie, "Into the Woods," and "Chicago," with Rob Marshall. And I just started spanning often all these different directions. I started choreographing films and I was like all over the place doing all these different things. And I went back to L.A. for a while. Plácido Domingo offered me a stint starting the first dance company at the L.A. Opera, and I was also their guest artist. And that was a wonderful experience. The first opera I did there was "La Cenerentola." It's hard to say-- with Frederica von Stade, and Sir Neville Marriner was the conductor, and it was a great time. And then, my ballet career got going again and I started guesting with different companies again. I did Nutcracker in Canton, Ohio in an old vaudeville theater. That was fun. And then I started appearing on cover of different dance magazines. So I had this renaissance, and at the time I was also asked-- They were doing the fiftieth anniversary gala - and this is actually important for dance history - of the American Guild of Musical Artists which was the union that represents ballet and opera in our country. And they're in the process of booking every AGMA company in the United States, which would be including Maria Tallchief's company, Chicago City Ballet I think it was called at the time. And it was so important. And one half of the program was dance and one half of the program was opera. And Alex DuBay who was the manager for my dance company-- I ended up sort of being instrumental in him becoming the first dance director of AGMA before that, dancers who are just like, crowded into everything else. And he came in and made dancers and dance really important. And they started this gala, and the Broadway choreographer Donald Sadler was in charge of it. It turns out it like. he may have started like losing his memory at all but then I'm not sure what the reason was, but things were done and we would call people-- They would call people up to confirm them and nobody knew about it. So it's like ugh, we needed to hire Lawrence, you know, to get the job done. So they asked me if I would come in about three weeks before and I did. I spent-- Alex and I spent morning, night, and noon lining up every dance company. We had American Ballet Theatre in New York City Ballet, Martha Graham, [00:44:12] woman chance, [0.4s] Chicago City Ballet, Dallas Ballet, San Francisco Ballet. And it was incredible. Alvin Ailey. Saw him for the first time after all these years. Picked me up in the air when he saw me and kissed me and hugged me. It was a

wonderful event. And we also had stars of the dance who were too old to dance but they came on and would take bows like Alexandra Danilova. And for opera, William Warfield who was Old Joe in the movie of "Showboat" in the '50s, and as it was just a wonderful evening. And there was a point to the story. But it was literally, dance history was on stage for one night. Oh and at the end of it, the City Ballet and the Balanchine-- By that time it was the Balanchine estate, gave us permission to restage "Stars and Stripes." Oh now I'm remembering my two stories. "Stars and Stripes" for like a finale, come on and bow. So I was in charge of the choreographer line, and there was Alvin Ailey, Robert Joffrey - all these people I'd worked with - John Butler, who I had danced in a piece of his in Israel, Arpino, I guess it was Donald Sadler was in that line. It just went on and on and on. Everybody I had worked for, it was like, wow, this is a powerful moment. My entire dance past coming back and I'm telling them what to do. So it's like it was some sort of simple thing and I told them what to do. Robert Joffrey was on the front of the line. He was so nervous. And Alvin Ailey, he was a jokester, he says, "What's wrong with you?" I wouldn't say the word that he called him. "Big chicken," basically is what he said, says "I'll go first. Go behind me." So Alvin Ailey marched out first. It was just a wonderful time. But when I first started working in the AGMA offices, helping them produce that, they said, "What do you think our big problem is?" I said, "Your first problem is that you don't have your hosts nailed down." And I said, "The way you build a show is you call all these companies and say 'so-and-so is going to be our host of our show. Would you like to be a part of it?' Well then you can get everybody but you have to start with something." So Peter Martins who I was very friendly with from my time at City Ballet and School of American Ballet, I contacted him and he said, "Yes I know about it. I don't know if I'm going to do it or not." So I was like great, so the co-host for opera was Beverly Sills. And I knew I had charm with women. I learned that from Ruth Page. Whatever. So I thought, well. And they sent me this, now here you go Lawrence, she'll like you. So I went to her offices and at that time she's director of the New York City Opera. So I'd done, between producing my dance company and a lot of these different things that I'd produced at the time, I knew how to build a show, so I said to her-- We made nice-nice and just very hedgey about doing it. I said, "What would it take for you to want to do the show? What would be your dream come true?" She says, "Well it would be dancing with Peter Martins." And I thought uh-oh, this is not gonna go over well. So I came back and I told Alex DuBay, I said, "Let me sleep on it, I'll figure out something. So the next morning I got on the phone, and I called Peter Martins, and I said, "Peter, I have an idea. Somebody else also suggested it. I think it's a really great idea. We're going to do the opening of--" You know, the dance was the second act-- We had opened it with Balanchine's "Vienna Waltzes." And wouldn't it be a great idea. The head of the dance world and the head of the opera world to waltz out on stage together at the opening in "Vienna Waltzes" as just a waltz across the stage it'd be so easy. There was dead silence on the telephone. And he said, "Well, will you rehearse me? Will you show me what to do? Can I just show up the day of the performance?" And I said "Yes," and he said, "Call me tomorrow. I'll let you know." So I wait another day. I said "What do you think?" And he said, "Well, I'm still kind of thinking about it." "Peter," I said, "do this for me. I would do any favor for you in the future. Anything you ever want." He said, "Okay I'll do it as long as you promise to rehearse me before I go on stage." So that's how it happened. And Peter Martins and Beverly Sills waltzed across the stage at the New York Stage Theater and it brought down the house. I've never heard so much applause in my life. It was thunderous. And everybody was thrilled with what happened and I was able to use Peter Martins and Beverly Sills host and that's how I pitched the entire show and got it up on stage and it was a huge success.

[00:50:18] I have a couple questions. Hearing about all the different things you've done in your career, different acts, producing, directing, choreographing. Who in all of the people

you worked with, who do you think was really instrumental in helping you discover yourself?

[00:50:37] Ruth Page.

[00:50:40] Say that one more time?

[00:50:40] Ruth Page.

[00:50:44] Why?

[00:50:44] She always believed in me totally from the beginning. Ballet as we know can sometimes be a rigid art form, especially in those days. And people didn't like to think out of the box. Ruth Page always thought out of the box and she recognized that uniqueness in me, and that I was the same way. And it's very scary for a young dancer to be different. And she just encouraged it, thought it was the best thing ever. And where a lot of choreographers wanted you to be like a robot, she just loved that you were different. And she loved that I was, you know, I was a performer on stage and she loved that and, she just encouraged everything that I wanted to do. We truly were soulmates. I still feel her around me, in spirit sometimes. I can really feel her, like, talking to me sometimes in dance class. I mean she's just a beautiful soul.

[00:51:59] Did you mostly interact with her in the studio? Like, in rehearsals, or--

[00:52:01] Everywhere. She just totally open her life to me. I went to her apartment many times. She just treated me as a friend from the beginning. There wasn't that director/dancer separation with her.

[00:52:18] What was she like in rehearsal?

[00:52:18] Well Larry Long mainly directed. But she would come and give you tips. She'd call you to the side and give you tips. The funniest thing was she taught the company class one day, and showed the girls the "Dying Swan" pose. So the men are, like, standing in the back twiddling our thumbs. She says, "Oh no, the men have to do it too." So we did, I guess the bourées, and I loved it. She's just totally out there. Her mind had no limits and she was full of love and expression and just felt the creative energy coming off of her. And jumping way forwards-- I'll make this short because it's supposed to be about dancing but. After this period of time after the AGMA gala, I went back to California and I ended up on an all these different magazines, had 13 million people following me in the physical fitness world. I started recording-- And a major record producer named Corey Wade who was head of T.K. records during the disco era, was during a remake of one of the songs and I recorded it and it was a hit. I toured on and off for a year and a half all over the world with it. It went to number one on the dance charts. I also was contacted by Chris Cohen who is Alexander Cohen's son the Broadway producer who was David Merrick's rival during that period, to do an exercise video. He had just finished one with Cindy Crawford. And it was during the Richard Simmons. And I did the first stretch video ever called "Total Stretch." And the magazines all launched it and 13 million readers. It was in-- Hit all the stores, it was one of the top sellers in Borders. Then I produced a television event for three years called "The Day of Compassion," which, at the time there was not the cocktail that people who are HIV positive were able to take. People were still dying in masses. So this was a television event which wasn't at-- They weren't asking for money. They're just hiring people who are HIV positive and those who have already died from AIDS. I had lost so many

friends especially from the dance world. You know all these choreographers died one by one, and most of them had passed from AIDS, unfortunately. Ken Duncan the photographer. It was heartbreaking. So I suggest it was a small event at the time. I think after the-- I think I joined it maybe in its third year or second year. They had like six soap operas during it. And I got on board. I moved back to New York. I was the east coast director and after my three years with it it became the largest one day event on television and in television history, it still is. You know, over 200 shows on the air. Every talk show, every soap opera, every news program, cable around the world. So, I was back in New York and I started acting more. I started getting involved in that. And this brings me back to dance somehow. So I'm just going to skip over my acting stuff. I've been on a lot of movies. "Across the Universe" with Julie Taymor who is the director of "The Lion King." Loved her. "The Adjustment Bureau" with Matt Damon. Some TV gigs, one of my favorites was The Cosby Show with Madeline Kahn who became a friend of mine. I was just interviewed for her book. Danced in a movie with Gwen Verden. But recently I produced a tribute to Ruth Page at the St. Luke's Theater with a friend of mine, Andrew Wentink, who was instrumental in writing her second book. This one: "Page by Page." Like, come prepared. I gathered everything together yesterday but I had it right within arm's length on my shelf. And I'm not really that involved in dancing anymore because of all my other careers, but it's my first love and I'm always sort of involved with it. And we did a tribute to Ruth at St. Luke's, and we brought in a lot of people who I knew that I had been involved with in Chicago Ballet. Dolores Lipinski, who was Larry Long, the ballet master's wife. Patti Klekovic who was before my time but she-- I remember her being around and she was the prima ballerina for Ruth for many years. Cynthia Ann Roses came, a lot of people who danced in the television version on PBS from "The Merry Widow" on PBS. A lot of those people came who were friends of mine. George de la Peña, who had been a principle in ABT. And it was a marvelous affair. We really hit all aspects of her life discussing-- I think that first panel that I was on was about people who had danced for various companies in Chicago. And then another panel was about her artsy stuff. Her relationship with Noguchi, the famous artist which she had had a personal relationship with, but how they had influenced each other. I mean it's really just remarkable. The life and the extent her influence had. And it was very well received. A story I told you earlier that I said at the beginning of the show - I introduced the show - And I'd brought Andrew in and had talked Dancers over 40 into sponsoring this and I thought I was a great idea. So the head of Dancers Over 40 asked me to open the show, and basically I talked about my great love for Ruth. And how-- That I had worked for-- with Balanchine, and Robbins, and Ailey, and Sir Frederick Ashton. All these great people, but no one was a greater influence on my career than Ruth Page. And I said, "Somebody may get out tomatoes and throw them at me now on stage to make this statement, but," I said, "I believe this to the bottom of my heart, this is a true statement," That Ruth and Agnes de Mille got going at the same time and Ruth had already choreographed her famous ballet, "Frankie and Johnny," in I think in '29, part of the federal works projects rather '28, '29, and had already had a big dance career on Broadway too. Dancing with Pavlova's company. Had she done and choreographed what she was doing in Chicago, in New York at the time, she would have been as famous as Agnes de Mille and a rival to her. Because she certainly had equal creativity and talent if not more. And the audience loved that. I had a captive audience for Ruth Page. It's true.

[01:01:04] Why do you think she chose to stay in Chicago [unintelligible]

[01:01:04] I think she felt comfortable there and she married Tom, her husband who was an attorney, who was very supportive to her. And I think she really got to have a solo voice there where, when you're in New York you're crowded in with a million other great

choreographers and dance companies and she really got to do her own thing and she always did. And I think that made her happy.

[01:01:35] You think it was just the fact that media wasn't paying attention to Chicago?

[01:01:42] Yeah. We didn't have media in those days. Like I look at things now online it's like if only the stuff had been documented when we were doing it, we would have a totally different reality. I mean this is why it's so great what you're doing. To be documented. We're documenting things now. I remember back when I was like at Harkness Ballet. When they did a videotape of something it was a huge thing. I mean we were forced to take classes and Labanotation. Little stick figures to remember the choreography. Yeah I mean really the only outreach to dance was my Dance Magazine. You read about it in Dance Magazine. It's sad.

[01:02:39] It is sad. It strikes me that, you know, it seems like Ruth worked really hard to-- She seems really social in a way. She worked really hard to maintain relationships with everybody involved with art, globally. She knew everybody.

[01:02:48] She was the first person who presented Nureyev in this country at the Brooklyn Academy. She had so many firsts. She's the first person to have African-American people dancing. She was the first person to put a lesbian character in "Frankie and Johnny." She had no boundaries. She had no judgments. That's what was so incredible about her. She's a beautiful, free soul. Such a spiritual human being. It's just her. It's natural.

[01:03:33] Did she ever talk about feeling like she wasn't getting enough recognition?

[01:03:33] Ann Barzel, the dance critic, was mainly the one who spoke about that all the time. Ruth really didn't toot her own horn. But other people stood up for her. And you know people in the know in dance-- Bill Como from Dance Magazine became a great friend of mine during this period. And he just, like, would rave about Ruth Page and how great she was and how great her work was and, I mean he agreed with me. Had she spent her career in New York she would be up there with Agnes de Mille and recognition.

[01:04:26] I have one more question. Anyway. What about-- Can you maybe describe one or two creative breakthroughs you had?

[01:04:32] Because of her?

[01:04:37] Or just in general, I guess. A point in time where you felt like, I don't know, you jumped over a big hurdle in technique or, you know, when you first started choreography, or some sort of--

[01:04:38] I would have never gone on to choreograph or to do any of those shows or start my dance company without her encouragement. Her belief in me made me believe in myself and that was probably my biggest life hurdle, to get out of thinking well, I can only dance with major ballet companies. And how I'm a principal dancer and a guest artist. I have to stay in this mode. She made me think beyond that. And I think it served my entire life because I've always thought beyond what was acceptable. I mean, when I did the Day of Compassion, I was on the Rosie O'Donnell's show and Maury Povich and all this talk shows talking about you know compassion for people who were dying from this terrible disease. And it was very daring to do that at the time. And she always made me not judge

anything and to always have an open mind and to be your best creative self and that all came from her.

[01:06:06] How did you learn about-- You know, we talk a lot about learning technique, taking classes, but we don't address, like, how did you learn stage presence?

[01:06:22] I just always had it. First time I was on stage before actually doing "State Fair," was our high school, Marquette High School in Alton, Illinois. When I went to high school, I did a one-act play festival. And the year that I was a freshman was the first year-- Each class participated except for freshman because they're too stupid to put on a play, I guess their logic was. So this year, they're letting the freshmen do it for the first time. And a friend of mine was going to audition-- One of my best friends in school. He says, "Come with me I'm too nervous." So I went. I wasn't there to audition. And the director says, "Would you like to read?" I said, "No, not really." He says, "Well, just try it." So I got cast in this four-character play called "Weenies on Wednesday." Yes it's about as good as the title sounds but it was a hilarious one act play. And I walked on stage and the audience was roaring with laughter. I didn't know what was going on, but I did all these ridiculous things on stage. And had a contest between the four plays, and I tied for "best actor." My first time walking on stage. "So, I always had whatever that was, but people like Ruth Page encouraged it. And a lot of times in ballet, I felt like I had to push that part of myself backwards because it was big. I remember John Neumeier saying to me in Hamburg Ballet, "No matter what you're doing on stage," he said, "You're really distracting." He says, "Your energy is so big. My eye always goes right to you on stage."

[01:08:21] Had to learn to modulate your energy--

[01:08:22] Yes.

[01:08:29] based on the type of performance it was.

[01:08:29] Yeah.

[01:08:30] Interesting. Ballet and musical theater are really two different animals.

[01:08:34] Very different.

[01:08:40] Yet you kept working in both. What were--

[01:08:41] I learned. It's like stage acting and television acting. Stage acting it's very big, you know. You want like a theater, like the St. Louis Muny, when I went back and "Can-Can" in 1983 with Judy Kaye and my dance partner Lorene Yarnell. Remember Shields and Yarnell? The mime duo. They had their own TV show. When I played back to the 12,000 people in television and film it's the opposite. You're talking to another person. And as you know, the camera picks up on your thoughts. You don't have to do anything extra. You have to be honest with what you're feeling what you're talking about, and have a conversation with the other person and that's all it is. It's very different from stage. And the same with, in one sense with ballet and Broadway.

[01:09:48] Do you remember any moments or an example of anything that's incredibly challenging for you that you overcame, or some big unexpected reward?

[01:10:03] When I was in this-- Right before I went to the School of American Ballet, this small dance company, they asked me to go and tour with them for like a week, and I needed the money so. We rehearsed out of Carnegie Hall and we went to the Midwest, and it was literally like a month before I was to start School of American Ballet, and this one theater was in Manhattan, Kansas I think, and we were dancing at a university. The stage was concrete. And I was simply doing a grand plie on stage. And I heard "pop!" My foot was this big the next morning. And I came back. And went to City Ballet's doctor who is a fantastic man, Doctor Hamilton, who took care of all the dancer injuries. He shook his head and he said, "Well, we're going to put you in a cast." He said, "You'll be in this for two or three months." So I'm thinking who I'm going to focus on my good mojo healing energy on it. And after about three weeks I was putting the hanger down my cast because it was itching. So I made an appointment and went back and saw Dr. Hamilton. He says, "What reason did you come in." I said, "Well my my leg is itching like crazy, and," I said, "all the dancers tell me your leg is healed when you do that." He said, "Well, it's only been three weeks but let's cut it off." So he cut it off and I'm sitting on the medical thing they put you on. And my legs are dangling. I said, "Can I walk?" And he said, "I don't know, can you?" So I got off the table, bent over, I picked up the cast and walked out of the office, and he shook his head and he said, "I've never seen anything like this," but for about a year after that I really had to-- it was my right foot-- I really had to baby that because it took a long time to get strong. And it's very frustrating year for me because I was used to being the highest flyer, the highest jumper in class. I was at School of American Ballet too. And I had to take steps back to mend it back to health but it healed.

[01:12:40] That injury--

[01:12:45] Suck.

[01:13:02] [Unintelligible] Ruth Page's Nutcracker obviously doesn't exist anymore, but it was pretty legendary. For those of us that never had a chance to experience it, can you just describe it, what was it like?

[01:13:02] Can we cut there for just a second? I have to run to the bathroom. I had coffee too--

[01:13:09] Yeah.

[01:14:21] Sorry.

[01:14:21] No worries. Are you still okay on time?

[01:14:25] Yeah.

[01:14:45] So I was asking about if you could describe Ruth Page's Nutcracker.

[01:14:45] It was legendary. Out of all the Nutcrackers, I mean-- I danced in John Neumeier's, I danced in a bunch of different Nutcrackers, and Ruth Page I thought had the best Nutcracker. And I think Balanchine's Nutcracker is great and is equally great but hers was so dancey. That's what was so great about her choreography. It was so musical. And I've worked for choreographers, I won't mention names, who were not very musical. There would be sections in their ballet that were musical and fun to dance, and other sections that were just were very clumsy. One choreographer in particular I never understood that. So, getting to dance in Ruth's Nutcracker was like a breath of fresh air. It's like ugh, this is

so great. Everything's musical, everything's fun. She was a very joyful person and it just really expressed her joy and her fun and express her personality and really express her soul I thought.

[01:16:06] What made-- You said it was so fun to be there. What made it so fun?

[01:16:06] All the dancers are great. There wasn't the snotty New York attitude there. Even though a lot of us were from New York, everybody just got into the energy there. Larry Long was strict but also made it fun. He taught us the Nutcracker mostly. Ruth. Ruth came in and would take class with us almost every morning. And by that point she'd gotten mugged in Chicago. And she'd gotten a little bit crippled. And even then she would take that-- her leg, which had been damaged and she'd come and take class with us and stretch at the barre, and I guess she was around 80 at the time or something. She was just a force of nature. I just loved her and just you know grew this enthusiasm and everything just made it fun. It was hard work. And I think was the first year we started performances I think like the week before Thanksgiving and went through New Year's. And on Christmas Day, doing two shows a day, six days a week, I was so tired. We did a matinee on Christmas Eve. I went home and thought I'll just take a little nap. I slept I think 20 hours straight. The only time that has ever happened. I missed part of Christmas Day. I went to Cynthia Ann Roses's house for Christmas and then where in the heck is Larry? But when you do that many shows together you make a great camaraderie you know. Very--

[01:18:11] Yeah, and I guess they were bringing in some new people for the Nutcracker over a holiday.

[01:18:11] Right.

[01:18:15] They were all away from their families with you.

[01:18:15] Everybody made it fun for everybody else. There was just a really great spirit.

[01:18:25] Yeah, it doesn't sound like you were, relatively speaking, you spent a short amount of time in Chicago, but it left a big impact.

[01:18:32] Huge. Huge.

[01:18:36] In general, what do you think dancing has taught you about how to live life?

[01:18:42] Well I think dancers are some of the smartest people on the planet. With my work with American Guild of Musical Artist, I was on the Board of Governors for 18 years. And I would often be the go-to person to ask for dance advice, especially before we had a dance director. And they asked me to write an article which was very edgy at the time, on what dancers can do after they finish their career. And I personally have known many friends who have gone on to become great doctors, attorneys. Dancers are very smart. Now if you think about, which I said in the article, think about dancers' basic skill. Being humble, listening, attention to detail, memory, never giving up. Those qualities and many more. When you take that into the regular work force, you already had 90 percent of the people out there. There's no one that that's more attentive and willing to work hard than a dancer. Dancers can do anything. At least, I think.

[01:20:18] That's a good answer. And I have one more question. If there is one, what is the Chicago aesthetic? What makes Chicago's dance distinct?

[01:20:28] Well I like-- Chicago dance is great because it's not in the system of, like, New York. Each company is very individualized. They really-- Like, Gus Giordano with his jazz company, Ruth with her company, Maria Tallchief who had Chicago City Ballet which was sort of a Balanchine-esque company, Joffrey's there now. Each company has its definite own stamp, and is proud of that. You know it's-- Where some companies-- I mean, some companies are kind of derivative of each other I think. The strict classical companies. Each one really had its own distinct stamp. And they're were really proud of being dancers and having a dance company and-- I don't know how else to describe it. And these people who ran those companies and also distinctive. That they really left their mark in the dance world. And I know from having so much of my dance career in New York and in Europe that those people were really honored and recognized. Like even the teachers there, Bentley Stone. All these people.

[01:22:06] Yeah. I mean, then they essentially built the community that's there today, which is so, I would say pretty individualized and proud of their identity.

[01:22:16] And so many dancers have come from Chicago.

[01:22:19] Yeah. Is that a thing here? Like when you would do shows here or L.A. or in Europe, did that ever come up? Like I studied with so-and-so in Chicago?

[01:22:31] Oh, yeah. My best friend at Harkness was-- had danced in Ruth Page's Nutcracker.

[01:22:39] Who was that?

[01:22:39] Name is Roxanne Captor. Her name was Roxanne Messina then.

[01:22:47] Yeah. I would be curious to find out how many people, even just working professionally here now studied in Chicago at some point.

[01:22:54] A lot. I know a Broadway producer who danced for Ruth, studied with Stone & Camryn.

[01:23:03] Yeah, Tom Gold, do you know him?

[01:23:04] Yeah he was on the Ruth Page tribute that we did at St. Luke's. He sat next to me. Great guy.

[01:23:13] Oh okay. I got to interview him a couple weeks ago. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. They're all over. Well is there anything that we haven't talked about that you want to make sure that we do?

[01:23:24] Just that-- I mean the point in doing the tribute to Ruth at St. Luke's, was to put all of her information out there in one evening. And it was filmed which is great. And it's what you guys are doing. That I want her to continue on living. And to be recognized in this age of media where they didn't have that opportunity then. It takes us to bring her to life. You know, dance is one of the few things that has always been handed down from generation to generation to generation by word of mouth. I mean think about dance history starting back in the court of Louis XIV. They didn't have a cell phone to tape things. It was

that careful handing down, and the respect and the love and the art form. And it's our responsibility to the next generation to preserve it for those who come after us.