

Fall 2016

# Ballet Review



From the Fall 2016  
issue of *Ballet Review*

**Seventeen  
Dancers  
Remember  
Legendary  
Teacher  
Maggie Black**

**Compiled by  
Joseph Garman**

On the cover: Photograph by  
Paul B. Goode, Paul Taylor Dance  
Company, of Jamie Rae Walker  
and Francisco Graciano in Doug  
Elkins' *The Weight of Smoke*

**Ballet Review 44.3  
Fall 2016**

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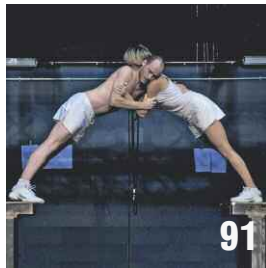
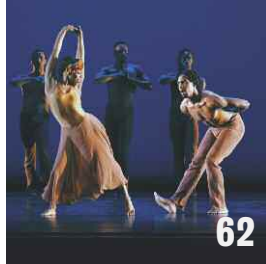
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Cover photograph by Paul B. Goode, Paul Taylor Dance Company: Jamie Rae Walker and Francisco Graciano in Doug Elkins' *The Weight of Smoke*.

# Maggie Black (1930–2015)

Joseph Carman

You can connect instantaneously with anyone you meet who took Maggie Black's classes over the three-plus decades she taught ballet. Those who studied with Maggie bonded in a similar way to those who worked at the Actors Studio: a shared philosophy, a dedicated work ethic, and a belief that the teachings worked.

What made Maggie special was that she shattered the concept of how a ballet teacher acted, taught, and looked. She wasn't Russian or glamorous in any way. (One actor friend of mine watched her class and remarked that, with her pigtails, she looked like Angela Lansbury in *Sweeney Todd*). She was unpretentious and straightforward. She didn't have any of the identifying physical features of a former ballet dancer, although when she moved across the floor, she demonstrated a still-intact sense of balance, placement, and form – even as a middle-aged woman. Her Rhode Island accent and piercing voice were more suited to a Back Bay cabdriver, but that voice delivered pearls of wisdom. And she wasn't starstruck. She was egalitarian in her approach, so that anyone who studied with her, from a modern dancer with severely limited ballet technique to an ABT or NYCB box-office-bolstering ballerina, deserved attention in proportion to their sincerity to absorb the lessons.

I once interviewed David Howard, a master teacher with a large following of dancers from major companies. Many thought David and Maggie had a rivalry throughout the 1970s and 1980s, although she really didn't feel intimidated by anyone in teaching, and David's popularity was huge. (In the early 1990s, Maggie even taught in David's studio near Lincoln Center.) But David emphatically said, "Maggie helped students in ways that I could never do." He meant that Maggie had a singular way of transforming a student's line, approach to

movement, and capacity for technical classicism. In the 1970s, Clive Barnes wrote a *New York Times* article about how beautifully the Joffrey dancers were dancing, including such specifics as the improvement of Gary Chryst's feet. That was due to Maggie; for quite a while her class was virtually the Joffrey company class. Balanchine named her "Black Magic."

Maggie could stare twenty yards across a studio and spot a hip gravitating half an inch forward, even when that hip was swaddled in sweat pants and sweaters. She had wonderful ideas about the organic rise and fall of movement and the ways to navigate the tricky shifts in weight in classical ballet. The task of teaching proper port de bras became something almost effortless – it was all part of the organic movement and progression of technique. She was so dedicated to helping students that she never charged a dime for a coaching session on a role, even after she had taught two or three marathon classes in a day. With her voice nearly gone, Maggie rasped her way through a coaching session, distilling a role to its essence.

She coached me in roles as disparate as Puck in *The Dream*, one of the sailors in *Fancy Free*, and Melancholic in *The Four Temperaments*. I was always struck by how she could break down the movement to capture the style and momentum of a piece. It was something she may have gleaned from Antony Tudor, in whose class at the Metropolitan Opera she often stood front and center to demonstrate Tudor's devilish combinations. But Maggie possessed her own genius that no one else could duplicate, and probably never will.

Some of the critiques she barked in class were priceless. She once assessed my rendition of one of her combinations with, "Joe, that had a high degree of spasticity!" She often ordered dancers, "Get your ass in gear." Maggie probably awoke each morning at 5 a.m. to construct her classes and had no qualms about reprimanding those who weren't giving 100 percent: "It's a good thing I got energy, 'cause you sure don't." If any students didn't do what she wanted after a warning or two, she un-



Maggie Black, 1955. (Photo: proof sheet of Louis Melancon photographs, courtesy of The Metropolitan Opera Archives)

hesitatingly threw them out of class. You had to listen – or bye-bye.

When Maggie taught at her studio on lower Fifth Avenue in the late 1970s and early 1980s, she offered a midday men's class. Maggie loved her men, and maybe loved that class more than any other. One day she laid herself down on the floor to demonstrate that correct execution of beats, and all the guys gathered around to observe her pelvic and leg action. As she crisscrossed her legs, the postman entered directly into the studio from the elevator and did a wide-eyed double take. "He probably thinks I'm crazy," she chirped.

Maggie often took on a parental role, offering career advice or emotional support. The late Clark Tippet used to call her "Yoda." When Gelsey Kirkland studied with her in the 1970s, Maggie held her hand through her insecurities. She later predicted that Gelsey, without proper guidance, "won't last." (Fortunately Kirkland experienced her own renaissance after her drug-fueled flameout.) Maggie reserved the lowering of her emotional guard for those who were close to her, but she was deeply sensitive in many ways. The loss of many of her students to the AIDS epidemic took a huge toll on her.

Even though she described herself as "steak and potatoes, Scotch and water," she had a gift for teaching that was complex and brilliant, and yet readily digestible. The influence she has had on students and teachers around the world is nearly incomprehensible. No one else before her had brought students together from all backgrounds and companies into a common ballet workspace. What she offered was a thoroughly American viewpoint of ballet technique – logical, elegant, and efficient – and its easy adaptability to the stage.

So let's raise a glass of Scotch and water, or whatever you're drinking today, to the one and only Maggie Black.

### Valda Setterfield

The ability to work side by side with great dancers from both classical and contemporary companies, coupled with Maggie's unflinching

warmth, enthusiasm, and interest in teaching us all, made her class particular, valuable, and a rare pleasure.

### Tom Fowler

I found the energy in Maggie's classes to be very positive, very democratic and encouraging. From the very first, it was easy for me to understand her concepts of correct placement and where to feel your weight. Without her ongoing encouragement, I doubt that I would have had the belief in myself to pursue my chosen path. May she find as much joy and meaning in her next journey as she did onstage, in the studio, and in the audience watching her students.

### Francis J. Roach

Luigi sent me to her. I went for a few classes but did not have any desire to do ballet. Yet, I carry on his respect and her love of good ballet placement.

### John Sowinski

Maggie was there 100 percent for anyone who walked into her studio and then gave all she had, independent of their affiliation with any other teacher or dance company. She never talked bad about other teachers or a company aesthetic, although she did have a very definite point of view about ballet dancing. She gave her time and studio, made dancers available when I did choreography, and gave me coaching on a role I was preparing. "Generosity" is a meager term to describe her. Like her approach to ballet technique or not, she kept many of us going when the going got tough. My heart will always remember her even though she could be tough when she had to be. You had to be there to know her as so many of us were.

### Eileen (Brady) Pixley

I was a novice Joffrey Ballet member when my buddies Gary Chryst and Billy dragged me up to her class. Everyone from every company was there. Gary said, "Just wait till you see her, Eileen. Her legs and feet, you will die! And



turnout!” When Maggie arrived, I gave Gary an evil look like a wounded sibling would. Then, she taught one of the most beautiful classes I’d ever taken. I realized the worth in being a renegade. I really liked the freedom and lack of screaming and yelling that was still prevalent in most other New York City studios. I was hooked.

One day, Maggie placed me next to Gelsey. I tried to absorb every move she made, hoping that I could reproduce her genius by osmosis and by the force of my own will. . . . I never knew the why or the how of Maggie. Perhaps this was her genius. She certainly drew us dancers in, like tired refugees to fresh water. A great person, indeed.

### Violette Verdy

I took from Maggie, not a lot, but I loved her classes. They had a lot of depth, and a calm quality, something natural and organic. I liked her a lot as a person. She was actually a very powerful person, but at the same time, very reserved in a kind way toward other people. When I was taking her classes, guess who was there too? Makarova. Maggie asked me to give her advice on doing her makeup. Suki Schorer did a few classes and enjoyed them in those days, too.

### Jessica Zeller

I began studying with Maggie when I was sixteen, as part of the first class of students to study with her on Long Island. When I found out that she was going to be teaching at our school, I deferred admission to a university ballet program that I would attend the following year instead. All of us in that first class made a commitment to study with her in our own ways, and Maggie did, too: she drove ninety minutes each way in her red “Jimmy” truck from East Hampton to teach us three times a week. We took her two-hour ballet class followed by an hour-long pointe class each day. She also coached us in soloist roles for *The Nutcracker* and in classical variations for a school showcase performance in the spring.

Why Maggie decided that she was interest-

ed in working with a bunch of teenagers, as serious as we were – after working with the highest echelon of professionals for most of her career – is still a mystery to me, but she treated us with absolute professional respect. I have fond memories of her first class with us, despite my nerves. She seemed to magically know all of our names, and had even developed nicknames for us.

When the class started, she described her entire approach to alignment in one pithy moment, so we could understand where she was coming from: first the pelvis had to be placed “up” and squared off; then the legs could rotate independently and the weight could be centered through the feet; then the spine could come straight up out of the pelvis, and then the arms could work independently off the back. During my year-and-a-half studying with her, she would make clear how that simplicity could enable and support ballet as a moving, dancing, expressive art, no matter what physical structures one had to deal with to get there.

As such a highly renowned teacher, Maggie’s affirmation of and willingness to work with dancers with a range of body types and aspirations made her a rarity in the ballet world. She just wanted to work with those who wanted to work with her: she saw the student and the teacher as equals in the relationship, regardless of age.

Now teaching in a university ballet program myself, Maggie’s approach has become the basis of my pedagogy. Her theories of skeletal alignment and muscularity, clear movement, and nuanced musicality, come with me every day into the classes I teach. Even for today’s students, who strive for a degree of versatility that was unheard of even ten years ago, her ideas are applicable in that they can be utilized in tandem with other approaches or schools of thought. Her approach, in my experience, doesn’t demand that we relinquish other schools of thought; rather, it can work in conjunction with many of them.

In my relationships and communication with students, I aspire to Maggie’s effective

and down-to-earth example. I remember with such amazement how she stood in the corner and shouted corrections to each of us, by name, continuously throughout the class. Her eye was unmatched; it didn't matter what we wore to class, since she could see our alignment through a trash bag if necessary. Her words were straightforward – almost blunt – but they were always clear and understandable: “Butt up, Jess!” or “Jess, get your hip down!”

She also emphasized pragmatism in training – teaching us to take the work as seriously as possible, but not to become so wrapped up in it that we lose ourselves in the process. She often sent dancers out of the room to collect themselves if they were unable to work with a clear head. Given the kinds of psychological damage that ballet has become notorious for inflicting on dancers, Maggie worked to mediate that as much as she could. She did not tolerate drama or ego.

I consider myself privileged to have been able to study with her, and I am grateful to have the opportunity to pass her legacy on to today's generation of students.

### James Sutton

Maggie always said “good!” as a positive acknowledgement, but not always as praise. Usually it meant, “There, I saw it. You are working on it. We are in this together.” My favorite one was, “It's all turned in, Jim. Good!”

### Kim Abel

I studied with Maggie from 1972 to 1992. The first fourteen years I took from her almost daily. The last six, a bit more sporadically as I was ballet mistressing various places and then had a child. The first studio was near Lincoln Center. One was told to go to the “red door across from Lincoln Center.” You would open the door and face three flights of stairs. It was a large studio with barres along the wall and what seemed like a strange barre contraption that was assembled in the center. Class was at 5:30 p.m. Maggie would come to the studio in the morning, do her class, then leave the door open so that anyone who wanted to come in and use

the studio could. Either that or the key was under the mat.

The next studio was 48th Street off of Broadway on the seventh floor. It was here that there were sometimes as many as eighty people in class. Her classes probably averaged fifty to sixty, and yet you always felt like you were receiving individual attention. There was a fire station on the corner at 8th Avenue. Class was routinely interrupted by loud sirens.

She had one or two observers' benches that had been painted by Gelsey. Gelsey would stand by me at the barre sometimes. Maggie would always come and stretch Gelsey after the barre. This consisted of Gelsey standing on half pointe at the barre while Maggie took her working leg around en dehors then en dedans in grande ronde jambe en l'air. Gelsey is the only person that I ever saw Maggie do this with. Their relationship ended at this studio. But I will never forget the day they both showed up and had bangs! This started a major trend in the ballet world – girls with bangs.

This is also the studio where Maggie announced to class one day that she was looking for sunglasses to match her new red fox coat in case anybody saw some that might work. I once saw her in Macy's going through the clothing racks with great speed and concentration. She liked her clothes. Being a redhead, her mother would not allow her to wear pink. That was a standard fate for redheads at the time. In adulthood she wore a lot of pink.

Many people remember her teaching class in her sweats and bedroom slippers, but that didn't happen until she was past fifty years of age. On 48th Street she wore a black leotard and pink tights. Her ballet slippers had ribbons, not elastics. She wore a lot of very nice, big knitted sweaters and leg warmers when it was cold. She also wore an elastic band around her waist. She had a storage ottoman in the studio with her dance wear in it. If you forgot your tights or something, she would lend you one of hers. Her dressing room was very sparse, but she always had her peppermint tea and Pepperidge Farm cookies.

Maggie stated that one shouldn't do ballet

past the age of fifty. She always seemed to be amazed when older dancers who trained with her came back and took class and didn't do badly. In her day that didn't exist, but I felt that she came to realize that the manner in which she taught and the concepts that she taught allowed people to dance far longer than she had imagined.

During this period at 48th Street, she was making really good money. She and (her husband) Joe Ragno, an actor, had purchased a two-acre property in East Hampton and spent weekends there. She got her first driver's license at close to age fifty and bought a Mercedes to drive out to the Island. Later, post-Joe, when she was in a relationship with her student Kevin Santee, she traded in the Mercedes for a station wagon, because she took the dogs out to the Island, too, and the wagon was more practical.

My husband Ric and I went sailing with them once. Maggie felt that for their relationship to continue, Kevin needed to be able to socialize with his own friends. I am not a big sailboat person so I was very glad that Maggie was even more cautious than I was. That day she wore a very tiny purple crocheted bikini. Her skin was super white, but she had a great body – maybe not for ballet, but she looked good in her little bikini. She didn't eat real well a lot of the time. She was a meat and potatoes girl – very well-done, thank you. She also like her Cognac. And, of course, her tea and cookies.

Just about everyone took from Maggie at this time – except, of course, Baryshnikov. Some of the people I remember are: Melissa Hayden – she would crack out a brand new pair of pointe shoes and put them on for class. This was near the end of her career. She did not come a lot, but she was memorable when she came. She and Eleanor D'Antuono would come to class in long fur coats with their leotards and tights underneath. They never went into the dressing room.

Others included Suki Schorer, Stephanie Salland, Robert Denvers, Penny Duddleston, Ulrik Trojborg, Peter Naumann, Susie Pilarre,

Phyllis Goldman and her daughter Susie (who was ten years old at the time), David Richardson, John Bass, Bruce Padgett, Kevin McKenzie and a lot of other Washington Ballet dancers, Martine Van Hamel, Violette Verdy, Natasha Makarova, Marcia Haydée, Richard Cragun, all the Joffrey dancers (Gary Chryst, Christian Holder, Rebecca Wright, Russell Sultzbach, Greg Huffman, Francesca Corkle, Burton Taylor), Dermot Burke, Naomi Sorkin, Eliot Feld, Lone Isaksen, Galina Panov, and I haven't even started on the modern dancers and Twyla's company. We would be so packed at the barres that everyone had to face inward, yet you still felt like you were getting individual attention.

Maggie would coach people after class. Also, her husband Joe would bring actors there in the evening and he and Maggie would both work with them. One evening, it may have been a weekend or holiday, Joe and Maggie were locked in the elevator overnight. After that she only use the stairs. Maggie was at this studio in 1977 during the big blackout. I walked from 93rd Street to 48th Street to take class (I think class was around 11 a.m. at that time). There were about six of us there. Plus Maggie and possibly a pianist. If she didn't have a pianist, she sang class. But class went on no matter what. The only thing that would delay class is if she was hot on the trail of a stray dog! Then we might start a few minutes late. Very, very rarely something would come up and class would be cancelled, but Maggie would arrange for the studio to be open and you could go in and do your own class, or someone like Gary Chryst might lead a class.

Maggie had no patience for anything that disturbed her teaching. She never stopped class to say hello to people who dropped by. She just kept teaching and if they were there at the end of class, then she would speak with them.

In the studio above hers on 48th Street, George Faison was working on an original show, *The Wiz*. He would pound the floor with a cane for hours. Maggie had many words either with him, the management, or both. I was



glad the show was a hit because by the sound of those rehearsals, I would have never guessed that it was going to work. Maggie's next studio was on Fifth Avenue around 16th or 17th Street. It was very pretty with an exposed brick wall. There was a barre in front of the mirror that could hold about five dancers. One day Shelley Washington, on a hunch, took a survey and found that all of us who regularly stood at this barre were Scorpios.

Maggie did three classes a day at this studio. Two days a week the first would be a women's class with a pointe emphasis. And two days a week it would be a men's class. Friday would be a normal mixed class. The second class would be a normal mixed class and the third class would be an "intermediate" class. She would teach them back to back. In the pointe class we would start the barre in flat shoes (Maggie was a firm believer that you needed to warm up your feet before putting on pointe shoes) then around *ronde jambe en l'air* or *grand battement* we would put our pointe shoes on.

At one point, Maggie came to me and said that she felt my weight was fine, but the people hiring for companies would like to see dancers who were a little thinner. She did this so benignly, with no judgment, that I embarked upon eating in a more intelligent manner. It took me two years to lose the weight, but because I did it slowly and in a healthy manner, I never had a weight or energy problem throughout my performing career.

Maggie said to me after I had begun ballet mistressing that "it isn't so much what you teach, but how you teach." I got to see her teaching evolve over the twenty years I studied with her and then further when I would go observe her teaching the kids on Long Island. We had a house in Southampton and went out every weekend so I would go watch her teach several times a year. I would stand out on the side of the road in Southampton and she would pick me up when she drove by on her way to Stony Brook.

The classes were amazing to watch. At first, I didn't recognize what she was doing with

these younger dancers because it was so different from what she had done with us, but as time went on and she worked with them and they understood what she was doing, then the classes began to resemble what I knew. By this time, she could clearly and concisely explain exactly how she taught and what each student needed to do in a short 5-10 minute spiel. She always had an incredible eye, but she could get to the gist of the problem with unbelievable speed and clarity as time went on.

She had a genius to go to the heart of a dancer's problem and work from there. It was so much more efficient and so much clearer for the dancer to understand. She gave the dancer the tools to assess for themselves when something went off and, therefore, could self-correct and get themselves back on track. This way, you didn't need to be entirely dependent upon her, but could take responsibility for your own dancing. Of course, she believed that one always trained and had someone else to look at our dancing and guide you, but when you studied with her and then went off to your rehearsal or on tour, you had the ability to carry on the work that she had already put in place.

One of her greatest talents was the ability to ignore things that were hideous (like arms) until a dancer had a better understanding and command of alignment and other concepts. There was definitely an order to how you worked on things so that it was most efficient. Often, if alignment or other issues were dealt with, then foot line, arm shape, etc., would be fixed on their own. When you get to the root of the problem, other things automatically fall into place. For her, arms and head were a last issue. And you always worked on alignment and movement quality in tandem because her belief was that movement quality came out of the alignment and the sense of moving through space in one cohesive unit. The whole point of alignment was to create greater movement quality and individual personality. Dancers who think that Maggie was just about placement never really understood what she was doing.

In my opinion, she was very musical. I had a fair amount of musical training and when I started with her it made perfect sense to me. She used music in a very literal way, but not all of the time. I never encountered a combination or exercise that seemed awkward musically. The music was used in a way to serve the physicality of the movement for the purpose of learning and advancing specific ideas. The class was not choreographic in any way. It addressed how to dance and the music was used in a way to best achieve that physically.

### William Whitener

Maggie was a brilliant teacher. She was particularly gifted at developing individuality as she taught large groups of ballet and modern dancers. I especially enjoyed the intimacy of our private coaching sessions and benefitted enormously from her insights into creating a believable and complete character. I can still hear her saying “Stop, Billy. Go back. Do it again. What are you thinking of when you do that movement? Well, it’s not reading. Let’s find another choice for that moment. There, that’s better. Good!”

### Shelley Washington

I still hear the resonant sound of her voice calling out to me in her class: “Whoa Whoa Whoa! Who’s the girl with the curly hair and turned in legs?”

My first encounter with Maggie was in the 1970s. I studied with her a few times when I was at Juilliard and then followed her as she taught in various studios around the city. But really it was after I broke my fifth metatarsal in 1979 and was in recovery that I went back to her. She nurtured me with private classes and guided me back to health. I left her classes feeling like I had been rebalanced, revitalized, and renewed.

Maggie had an astounding ability to utilize the most basic foundations of movement to bring about incredibly profound realizations of body awareness. She changed the shape and constitution of my body. She helped me to gain a deep awareness of the

subtleties of energy and line and the power of simplicity. She not only changed my body, but my life as well.

Every time I think of her, I smile with the memories of the wonderment of community that was created by the many different dancers that gravitated to her. So many deep and life-long friendships were developed among a diverse cast of characters that attended her classes. She was the bridge that connected us, coming from many backgrounds and styles of dance. We were drawn together, pulled by the powerful force of the tiny woman with pink, fuzzy house slippers and red pigtails. Her classes were a fertile ground for dancers to improve, heal, and grow. Not only did we learn from her, but we also learned from each other as well.

Maggie cared for us on a very personal, deep, and sincere level. Even after I stopped dancing in 1990, we stayed in touch, exchanging yearly Christmas cards and phone calls. She was a trusted friend to whom I could open my heart.

### Stephanie Saland

Six months after entering New York City Ballet in 1972 I was taken in hand by Gelsey to Maggie, albeit a bit nervous as this was verboten for a NYCB dancer. Gelsey explained that there was no one better to correct my lack of understanding and the gaps in my technique. No short order, as I had hurriedly trained in three and a half years and found myself smack center in NYCB with 102 other dancers. The world of dance opened up in Maggie’s studio. Dancers from every discipline attended, and for my limited experience, it was a fascinating mix. Maggie set the tone. We were all on an even playing field. No stars, no frills, no ego. Just simple, earnest, brass-tacks work. Line the body up. Stabilize and maintain alignment and focus.

Maggie’s pigtails, sweatpants, and fluffy bedroom slippers were almost comical, especially given the pressure in the ballet world to keep up appearances. And Maggie’s famous vocal squeak belied a fierce resolve. I do recall

that she had no trouble dismissing a student if he or she did not show the results of her concentrated input. Her “musicality,” even for my relatively untrained ear, was dubious and confounding, but so endearing.

We were all blessed to be taken into the fold and have a safe zone to be simple and apolitical in our class work. Maggie was a critical factor in our training and careers.

### Liz Connell

My relationship with Maggie began in the early 1980s. I was on my way to being promoted from soloist to principal dancer with the Cleveland Ballet, when I learned that I needed to have tendon release surgery on both ankles. Everyone told me that I should go to Maggie Black to rehabilitate and come back to dancing on a professional level. I went to meet with her; she took me into her small dressing room in her studio in New York. I told her about my situation, and my desire to study with her in order to get back to work. She made it very clear that I would have to forget my previous Russian training, and begin all over with her. She stressed that she would not accept any resistance to her methodology. My ego was a bit bruised, but I agreed to her terms, and the slow process began.

Throughout the whole endeavor, Maggie was positive and encouraging. She insisted that if something was not working, that I had to analyze it, so that I could relearn how to execute the technique. I discovered that I had been working with too much tension, and through the proper alignment, I was able to release tension. She put a lot of emphasis on movement quality, and finding the freedom in movement.

I went back to dance with the Cleveland Ballet; and then subsequently with Peridance in New York, and Ballet Oregon in Portland. My career was given a whole new start as a result of training with Maggie. I was able to dance until my midthirties, and then began a long teaching career.

I give Maggie the credit for the success and longevity of my career as a dancer, and as a

teacher. I am very grateful for her incredible eye and her unique teaching method. I will miss her very much.

### Rachel Miscenich-Catanzariti

I met Maggie after a very scary back injury in the mid-1980s. I couldn't find her “secret” studio until I spied another dancer on the street and followed him, right into the men's dressing room! She laughed so hard at the comedy of it; maybe the good laugh is what got me a place in class. She had such a no-nonsense way, and yet still nurturing – she cared about the dancers in her studio. I was extremely afraid of letting go after the back injury, but she got me moving without fear again. With her I found a more grounded way of dancing; I learned to work with my own personal alignment, to control my body, but not to fight with it. I went on to dance without pain, which had seemed impossible before. She helped me get my career back. Now, all these years later, the concepts I learned in her studio inform my own teaching. . . . I hope I do her justice.

### Wendy Whelan

I first heard of Maggie Black, back in 1978, when I was eleven years old. I will never forget seeing the door swing open during one of my ballet classes, and catching my first glimpse of Robbie Dicello, a former student of Maggie's, as he entered our studio. He had just returned home to Louisville, Kentucky, to begin his new job, teaching at my ballet school. He juxtaposed his teaching of all things “Maggie,” with his own stylistic love for Balanchine.

Through Robbie's teaching I was transformed. Until then, I had felt confused, frustrated and behind most of the other girls in my class. I had always looked at ballet (in class) nervously from the outside and worked at it “piece by piece,” but this “new” understanding put me, for the first time, deeply into my body, finally giving me an understanding of my skeleton and my musculature, and the physics of how to “stand up,” send energy out and “into” the ground at the same time, in or-

der to create physical harmony, ease, coordination, and balance.

This intense, early training I had in Maggie's philosophy and teachings, without a doubt, got me out of Louisville and into SAB. It secured me a place within NYCB and helped me reach the rank of principal dancer for twenty-three of my thirty years performing with NYCB. In fact, it has allowed me to continue my dancing today, at the ripe old age of forty-eight. Her teachings and philosophy have kept me injury free for nearly all of my career. As a professional dancer in the 1990s, I found "the real" Maggie Black teaching on West 61st Street. I took her classes daily for many years.

I absolutely adored her as both a person and teacher and felt her love back, not only toward each of her students, but also flowing among and within the body of her class, crossing the boundaries of people from every dance form. *Every* dancer found a home with Maggie, every "body" found alignment with Maggie, and with this depth of focus always came joy and laughter. I will always have her with me. . . . She's built into my DNA.

#### Daniel Mantei Keene

I first took class with Maggie when I was in American Ballet Theatre's Studio Company. We did a couple of performances at Stony Brook University. At that time, Maggie was teaching at Stony Brook, I think three times a week. She taught our warm-up classes. I later went out and took a few of Maggie's classes with my friend Nydia, who had studied with Maggie at Stony Brook. This was in 2003 or 2004. Then I didn't work again with Maggie until 2007.

I was dancing at ABT, but was told that my job was in jeopardy, that I wasn't dancing with enough energy in my back. I didn't really un-



(Photo: courtesy of Daniel Mantei Keene)

derstand what that meant, so I went to many local teachers and asked for their advice. I decided I needed Maggie. After all, she was the teacher of my director at ABT. I ended up writing a letter to her and passing it along to Christian Holder who was in mail correspondence with her. She called me early one morning the next week, and we worked out a time for me to work with her in East Hampton and to stay nearby with Nydia's parents.

In the studio, first off, she wanted to know what my director had said about my dancing. Then she had me stand in a neutral, parallel position, maintaining the natural three curve alignment of the spine. At that point she assessed that my upper back was a little bit "back." This ended up being the origins of the "energy in the back" problem. It was a small placement issue. We worked on keeping the natural alignment of the spine and pelvis and on keeping a plumb-line in the legs, turning out from the hips, and not the knees or feet. We worked on equal turnout in both hips and moving in one piece from the back.

Maggie worked on key concepts like symmetry (feeling equal sides of the back) and

squareness. In my mind, these both can be boiled down to the neutral spinal and pelvic alignment. That was part of her genius, the simplicity of her concepts. After four or five days, I went back to the city and continue to work with her ideas. Then I planned to go back out to work with her on my next break. My boss saw a difference very quickly, and I ended up getting more opportunities to dance. Also he renewed my contract, but I decided to take an opportunity as a soloist at the National Ballet of Canada.

Unfortunately, when I got to Toronto I experienced trouble in my dancing. I was trying to work on the concepts I had learned with Maggie, but I fell into a way of dancing with a lot of tension, which I wasn't aware of at the time. I was to dance the peasant pas de quatre in *Giselle*, and in working with my coaches in Canada, I felt the role got more difficult from the beginning to the end. I called Maggie, and she would give me advice. Before I danced my first pas de quatre: "Just go for it."

I ended up moving back to New York and ABT because I wanted to continue (and in a sense, finish) my work with Maggie. I would continue to go out to Long Island when I could. Each time it was like peeling away layers of an onion. Maggie's approach to coaching a role was very different from what I had ever experienced. She was almost like an acting coach. She would first ask who you are in a role. Analyzing the psychology of your character would lead to the interpretation of the movement. I think she learned that from her work with Tudor.

I didn't know until later that she was paying the cost of our studio time, and she never asked for compensation. She even refused to accept payment for her coaching. Then around 2011, Maggie's health became worse and she was unable to work, but we would continue to talk long distance every few weeks, until finally I could tell she did not recognize who I was on the phone.

Maggie was a tremendous source of support. She was an example of how a great ballet coach is like a psychologist. She gave me a lot of confidence and built me up. She believed I could accomplish a great deal, and that I was dancing at a soloist level meant a great deal to me. We would laugh a lot when we worked. I think she thought we were both idealists. If I did a step really well, it would give her such a joy – a few times coming over to give a hug and a kiss on the cheek. She was like my ballet grandmother guru. She knew what a difficult environment ABT is (having worked there herself as a ballet mistress and having quit in frustration) and was helpful giving advice on surviving in a large ballet company. For her, it always seemed to be about the work and also about the individual dancer. She wasn't putting movement onto a dancer; she was bringing it out from within.

She changed my life because she changed the way that ballet feels in my body. I had always been about struggling against my body instead of working with it. She talked a lot about connecting to dancing through feeling. Dancing is a feeling, not a "looking." We did not use the mirrors in class. A dancer needs to connect to the way a step feels. When Maggie made me do a step again and "move more in one piece from my back," she would make sure that I felt the difference within my body, so that I could connect to that feeling and continue moving forward with that feeling.

We talked a lot. I think it was important to her that I understood through verbal confirmation and from asking questions. I'm looking at a note she sent me. On the front is an angel and she wrote "Here is a Guardian Angel for you!! Put him on the right shoulder!!" Within the body of text, this line stands out to me, "The more you are directed and control your own dancing, the easier it becomes to move forward." It was always about dancing from one's own sense of self, interpreting a role from one's own identity.





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