

Dancin' in the Rain

A Bit of Portland Dance History - 1900 to 1954

By Carol Shults and Martha Ullman West © 2000

When Bill Christensen arrived in Portland in 1932 he created an atmosphere that had not existed before here. Until then, dancing, except for ballroom dance, was an almost exclusively “ladies only” territory. It was long since respectable, but the energy, channeled into the “artistic” recitals presented by various teachers and their students was distinctly feminine. Portland had seen the American Ted Shawn and the Russian Mikhail Mordkin on the stage, but a local equivalent just didn't exist. Bill Christensen filled that gap. By 1934, after just two years of attracting supporters and training dancers, he was able to present a spectacle including portions of *The Nutcracker* at the Rose Festival in collaboration with the Portland Junior Symphony (the original incarnation of today's Youth Philharmonic).

Bill was just 30 years old when he came here after years of touring with his brothers and several partners on the Orpheum vaudeville circuit. Dancing of all kinds, but with a serious emphasis on the classical, was his heritage from the Danish progenitor Lars Christensen who had emigrated to Utah in 1854.

Bill was married and the Depression was on. “Nobody had a dime.” Mary Tooze, one of Bill's students, describes how her mother Ada Ausplund threw herself into supporting Christensen because “here was this wonderful, positive thing for young people to do.” The effort it took to transport 70 dancers to Seattle for performances there gives an idea of the motivating force Bill provided. His brothers Lew and Harold also went along to dance in *Coppelia* and *Chopiniana*, but by this time Bill had inspired and trained a number of local male dancers, including Bob Irwin who was to go on to a wonderful career in the Ballet Russe.



Pictured left to right in *The Nutcracker* (1934) Standing: Norma Nielsen, Willam Christensen, Geraldine Brown, Jacques Gershkovitch (conductor), Hinemoa Cloninger, Betty Dodson
Kneeling: Janet Reed (Sugar Plum Fairy), Natalie Lauterstein (Marie)
Photo reproduction - Blaine Covert

One reason Christensen was able to produce performances so quickly was the presence already in town of teachers of quality. First among these is the fascinating Katherine Laidlaw. Born in 1894 to the British Consul and his wife, Katherine was enamored of dance early on and studied with local teachers Edith Varney and Maud Ainsworth. Katherine's youth was in the heyday of American aesthetic dance, a phenomenon that culminated in the work of Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis, and it was Miss Ruth who attracted the young Portland girl. Katherine studied with St. Denis at Denishawn in Los Angeles and danced with the touring company, Ruth St. Denis Concert Dancers. Her colleagues in the school and on the road included Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Louise Brooks. Returning to Portland to teach and making frequent trips to study with teachers like Adolph Bolm, Leo Staats, and Ivan Tarasoff, Laidlaw became a teacher of great integrity, grounding her students in both classical ballet and the early modern dance that was her heritage from Denishawn.

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Dance in Portland retreated to the studios to survive the war, and after it a new period of training and episodic performing by local studios produced an organization that attempted to establish a local ballet company for the first time in twenty years. Founded in 1954, Portland Ballet Society grew out of a collaboration between prominent local teachers, Jacqueline Martin Schumacher and Nicholas Vasilieff, who held auditions and divided choreographic and rehearsal chores. While only lasting a few years the company inspired and nourished the performing skills of dozens of eager young dancers and many professional careers emerged.

When analysing the achievements of the many individuals whose efforts have created a "history" of dance here, it is impossible to overestimate the influence of the touring artists who performed here and all over the world in the first half of the twentieth century. It is a phenomenon that was made possible by the railroad and ocean liner, and later the bus routes across America and elsewhere, but most of all by a spirit of artistic evangelism that has been dead for several decades. Portland, Oregon, as well as many other fortunate cities across the continent, saw all the great dance artists of the age. The importance of that live performance experience as inspiration for both students and dance audiences cannot be overestimated.

JANET REED AND JACQUELINE MARTIN SCHUMACHER

Janet Reed and Jacqueline Martin Schumacher, two of the Portland dancers Christensen took with him to San Francisco in 1937, were both slated to become highly significant figures in the development of classical ballet as an American art form, Reed on the national scene, Martin in Oregon.

Their backgrounds were quite different and their careers diverged radically when America entered World War II, but their passion for the ballet as well as their professionalism - as dancers, teachers, choreographers and artistic directors - was instilled in them by Christensen. "He was a great teacher," Schumacher said in a recent interview. "He was able to project his great love of dance in his students in such a way that you became infected...he made everyone want to do it."



Jacqueline Martin Schumacher in her studio in the Odd Fellows Building on SW 10th, early '70s

In the 1930s, classical ballet was foreign; its terminology French and associated with Russia, because of the great Russian performers who toured America either with the various permutations of the Ballet Russe or on their own, especially Anna Pavlova. Martin's mother, however, was a well-read librarian, interested in all the arts, who knew all about the Russian Imperial School and when a doctor recommended her self-described "nervous hysterical tomboy" nine-year-old daughter be given an outside activity to calm her down, she immediately enrolled her in Katherine Laidlaw's school. Martin didn't like her classes there, but was made to stick with it; once she entered Christensen's school, however, she was well and truly hooked.

At seventeen Martin left Portland - and high school - for San Francisco. Until 1942, she toured with the San Francisco Opera Ballet, performing all over the west coast and midwest. The company brought classical ballet to Klamath Falls for the first time, where Martin was

reviewed in 1939 as “the joy of the balletmaster for her strength and perfection, feeling for line and form.” In 1940, she danced the role of Odette, the white swan queen, in Christensen’s *Swan Lake*, the first evening-length American production of the ballet and Reed danced Odile, the black swan.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor put the blossoming San Francisco company on hold; Martin married Frederick Schumacher and when the war ended returned to Portland where she established a school in her home on Mt. Tabor. The school’s last location in the 1980s was in the Pythian Building on Southwest Tenth and Morrison.

For forty years, “Mrs. S” trained dancers, including her daughters Gretchen, who danced with Ballet Theatre and Heidi, who after performing with Portland Ballet Company and Ballet Oregon, now teaches at the University of Portland; Maria Grandy, a principal dancer with the Joffrey Ballet early on who taught at Juilliard; Eric Clopper, who danced with the Joffrey and Pacific Ballet Theatre; Eric Horenstein, of Ballet Oregon and the Royal Winnipeg Ballet; Nancy Killough of Ballet Oregon, Pacific Ballet Theatre and Oregon Ballet Theatre; and Nancy Matschek Martino, now a successful presenter of contemporary dance in San Francisco. Countless students did not go on to professional careers, but gained a lifelong respect for the decorum and discipline of the art form.

In the sixties, Schumacher was one of the teachers the Ford Foundation sponsored in New York to learn from George Balanchine. In the seventies, she founded the Portland Ballet Company, one of Oregon Ballet Theatre’s precursors.

Janet Reed, born in 1916 in Tolo, a wide place in the road northwest of Medford in Southern Oregon, discovered as a six year old that she was a born performer. As she told New York critic Tobi Tobias, she was in a pageant, more interested in her new dress than anything else, but once on stage loved playing to the audience. In 1924 her beautician mother brought her to Portland, where she studied with Isa Dora Moldovan and Alta Easton Travis, who recommended her to Christensen. The diminutive redhead showed such promise he admitted her tuition-free if her mother would do his wife and aunt’s hair. Five years later the depression hit, and for a short time Reed was dancing in a speakeasy to earn money to maintain herself and her mother in a small, barely furnished apartment.

The 5’1¼” tall dancer was part of many firsts in American ballet: the first Sugarplum Fairy in 1934; the first Odile in 1940; the first Swanhilda in the same period. In 1944, she created the role of a pretty girl in *Fancy Free*, Jerome Robbins first ballet accompanied by Leonard Bernstein’s first ballet score. In the course of her long dancing career, she was much beloved by audiences and critics for her comic energy, fine-tuned technique and abilities as a dramatic dancer.



Janet Reed as Marzipan in Balanchine’s *The Nutcracker* (1954)

In 1945, Hilmar Grondahl reviewing performances by Ballet Theatre at the Civic Auditorium wrote, “It’s now all right to dance in the Petipa tradition without having to end your name in ova or ski. Janet Reed is an example of someone not born within 500 miles of the Dnieper.”

When Schumacher returned to Portland, Reed headed for New York where she danced first with the short-lived Dance Players, then with Ballet Theatre from 1942-1949, shifting to Balanchine’s fledgling New York City Ballet. “Janet had a very short torso which Balanchine loved,” choreographer Todd Bolender, Reed’s long time friend and dancing partner said last November. “He loved girls who were all-over legs and short torso. But everybody used to think of Janet as being adorable, [they] loved to see [her] on stage, because she was what everybody

thought a dancer should be in those years, small, chic, very pretty and a very good dancer.” Choreographers loved her too: Antony Tudor cast her in *Gala Performance* and *Pillar of Fire*; Agnes deMille gave her her own role in *Tally Ho*; Bolender used her in his *Mother Goose Suite*; and she originated the role of the dance hall girl in Balanchine’s *Western Symphony*. Reed danced with City Ballet until 1958 and was ballet mistress there until 1964. In the early seventies she returned to the Pacific Northwest where she was the founding artistic director of Pacific Northwest Ballet, personally sanding the floors of the company’s early home at the Good Shepherd Center in Seattle. She died in Seattle in February of 2000.

DANCE IN PORTLAND - TIMELINE - 1900-1954

- 1900s:** Professor Genserowski and the “Dancing Ladies” touring group A group of ballerinas from Europe appear at the Lewis and Clark Exposition (1904)
- 1910s:** Local dance teachers established: Miss Edith Varney and Miss Maud Ainsworth Katherine Laidlaw (1894-1967) goes to Denishawn to study in 1916. Visits by legendary ballet stars: Anna Pavlova and Company in 1915 and 1916, and the Diaghilev Ballets Russes led by Vaslav Nijinsky in 1917 (Heilig Theater)
- 1920s:** Katherine Laidlaw’s School of Dance established; in 1922 presents students in recital at Heilig Theater. Visits by Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn’s Denishawn modern dance company and another visit by Pavlova.
- 1930s:** William F. Christensen(1902-2001) arrives, opens Repertory Ballet School in 1934. In 1937 he leaves with group of dancers for job with San Francisco Opera Ballet. Visits by Col. De Basil’s Ballets Russes
- 1940s:** Local teachers: Richard Billings for tap and ballroom Jacqueline Schumacher begins teaching ballet for Billings upon return to Portland Nicholas Vasilieff opens school after career dancing in San Francisco and with the Ballet Theatre in New York. Visits by many international touring companies: Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, Ballet Theatre, Ballet Caravan, Markova-Dolin, Sadler’s Wells Ballet. Other local teachers of ballet: Marcelle Renoux and Sergei and Maria Dare.
- 1950s:** Local teachers collaborative effort results in founding of Portland Ballet Society in 1954

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