



# OREGON ARTSWATCH

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### CULTURE

## Tripping on Memory Lane

Turning points in a life of dance: Eric Skinner moves on, Balanchine's grave, Paul Taylor's passing, Pacific Ballet Theatre days, 'Napoli'

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A visit to Balanchine's grave (and my mother's).

The departure of Eric Skinner for a new life in Chicago.

A reunion of Pacific Ballet Theatre's dancers.

The death of Paul Taylor.

These are the happenings of the past five weeks that have sent me tripping on Memory Lane, making me realize that the personal and the professional are, in my case as in many, inextricable from each other.

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George Balanchine, who died on April 30, 1983, is buried in Oakland Cemetery in Sag Harbor, Long Island, one of this country's oldest whaling ports, and now, for better but more often worse, one of the Hamptons. He made no stipulation in his will about his final resting place, and some, according to Bernard Taper, his first biographer, thought he should have been buried in Venice, with Stravinsky and Diaghilev, or in Monte Carlo. But Balanchine detested Venice, was charmed by Sag Harbor on his visits there when he was in residence at his Southampton condominium (he reportedly told someone it reminded him of the South of France). And while he remained firmly rooted in Russian culture, he was without question the principal creator of American ballet style – an American citizen, and proud of it.



George Balanchine, right, with New York City Ballet dancers, in Amsterdam, August 26, 1965. Dutch National Archives, The Hague / Wikimedia Commons

Which made it entirely appropriate to bury him in this historic American cemetery, which contains a monument to whalers lost at sea, a marker for a soldier of the Revolutionary War who, and I quote, "Did not run away," and the graves of novelists Nelson Algren and William Gaddis, playwright Lanford Wilson, writer and actor Spalding Gray, pioneering site-specific artist Gordon Matta-Clark, and, across the path from Balanchine, dual pianists Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale, who were longtime friends of his. Close by as well lies Alexandra Danilova, his muse and common law wife, whose impact as ballerina and teacher on American dancers was nearly as powerful as his.

My mother, the quintessential artist's wife, who died in Southampton Hospital in 1980, is buried in Oakland Cemetery, because in 1960 my father moved her from New York, pretty much kicking and screaming, to an 1820 Sag Harbor saltbox he bought in 1959: He was one of many painters attracted to that end of Long Island by the light, and housing that in those days they could afford.

The light, the beaches, the salt water he loved notwithstanding, if Sag Harbor had reminded *him* of the South of France, a part of the world he detested as much as Balanchine did Venice, he would never have bought the house from which I was married in 1963 and in which we spent several sabbaticals and many summers after my mother's death in 1980. My father died in Spain, in 1966, and is buried in a much older cemetery than Oakland in Altea, a seaside village on the Mediterranean that he also loved.

The first year my parents lived in Sag Harbor I was there from time to time on weekends, bearing either proudly or sheepishly copies of Manhattan East, for which I reviewed visual arts, and, idiotically, one spring evening in 1961, Martha Graham's *Clytemnestra*, with Graham in the title role. (The editor didn't know who else to send.) Concert dance was mostly performed on the west side of town, and was outside of my upper east side beat, which kept me busy covering the many art galleries and museums, writing feature stories and church news (you heard me) – I worked easily sixty hours a week. I've no idea why my editor wanted Graham reviewed—maybe the theater advertised in the paper—and I no longer remember what I wrote, but it's a safe bet that my review was focused on Noguchi's props and set pieces, and Graham's own performance.





George Balanchine's gravestone in Sag Harbor, complete with nutcracker figurines. Photo: Lewis Hess

My mother's grave, which I visited a few minutes before visiting Balanchine's, looked a bit neglected. My daughter tidied up her marker, and we left some dark-red flowers, saving a few for Balanchine. When we got to his grave, the two kids, *Nutcracker* veterans at six and ten, needed no explanation of why we were there: the vodka miniatures people used to leave for him have now been replaced with miniature Nutcrackers, Mouse Kings, and Sugar Plum Fairies, which made me snort. But then, Balanchine's *Nutcracker* also makes me snort these days, great choreographer that he was. I think he'd change it were he still alive—he changed his work all the time, including the Coffee divertissement in his *Nutcracker*, when he was still here. The *Serenade* that Pacific Ballet Theatre, one of the precursors to Oregon Ballet Theatre, did in the mid-eighties was not quite the *Serenade* that my mother took me to see City Ballet do in the late Forties, and that was hardly the *Serenade* danced in one-piece swimsuits when it was first performed by students in 1934 outside White Plains, New York.

If I'd thought to bring a couple of vodka miniatures with me I'd have left them for Mr. B. on that beautiful if hot August day. All I could offer him was my everlasting gratitude for being a part of my life for the past seventy years or so and, out loud, I thanked him for being one of the people who taught me how to look and how to see.

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Back in Portland, I received an invitation from dancer/choreographer/teacher Eric Skinner to bid him farewell at an informal open house. After 31 years as a modest-mannered yet pivotal figure in this city's ballet and modern dance worlds, Skinner was moving to Chicago, the city of his birth, permanently. This news shocked me profoundly. Images of him dancing flashed through my mind, starting with his Benvolio, one of a trio of Veronese hooligans (the others were Mark Goldweber as Mercutio and James Canfield as Romeo) in the latter's *Romeo and Juliet* for Pacific Ballet Theater. In a very different Shakespearean piece, Skinner danced an evil Iago in José Limon's *The Moor's Pavane*, also for Pacific Ballet Theatre, and when PBT merged with Ballet Oregon to become Oregon Ballet Theatre, his flying jetés in Canfield's 1990 all-male *Drifted in a Deeper Land*, revived by OBT last season, are what I continue to see when I think of that ballet.



Erik Skinner. Photo: Michael Shay

Skinner danced with OBT for another seven years, loving performing in much of Canfield's work, whose movement, he said in a conversation in my apartment three days before he packed up his Morris Mini and departed for Chicago, "felt good to dance." In part because he'd been trained at Indiana's Jordan College of the Arts at Butler University, whose focus is on ballet, but also requires that students learn modern, jazz, tap, character dance, and such historic social dances as the cakewalk, Skinner also loved dancing in Dennis Spaight's *Ellington Suite* and *Rhapsody in Blue*, and his ongoing interest in modern dance was reinforced by dancing in Bebe Miller's masterful *A Certain Kind of Heart, Also Love*, which come to think of it included every technique imaginable.

At the end of OBT's 1995-96 season, Skinner left the company to perform in Jamey Hampton and Ashley Roland's rollicking, sexy *Carmina Burana* with the Portland Opera (paired with *I Pagliacci*, using the same production, set in 20th century Italy, this was the third production at Portland Opera directed by current Managing Director Christopher Mattaliano). There he got to know Gregg Bielemeier, who also performed here and on tour, and in 1998 they both were cast in Bielemeier's *Odd Duck Lake*, the first work by a Portland choreographer presented by White Bird.

"Working in the studio with Gregg was a blast," Skinner told me. "I really started to get my modern chops with him. Gregg incorporated so much into his work: whimsy, music; he was engaging and inspiring." ArtsWatchers who remember Mike Barber's solo to the Saint-Saens Dying Swan, from *Carnival of the Animals* (NOT Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*) will agree with that statement. What I remember is a somewhat combative duet Bielemeier made for Skinner and Kirk, who were partners offstage and on, as well as a solo for Skinner whose musical accompaniment was performed by the choreographer, rattling ice cubes in a glass. This was based on Skinner's story of coming out to his parents: his supportive mother had known for some time that he was gay and took the news calmly; his father said nothing, but kept shaking his tumbler of Scotch on the rocks.

In the same period, Skinner and Kirk participated in the founding of the aerial dance company AeroBetty, making a very beautiful duet called "One", which they performed frequently over the years in their own company, Skinner/Kirk, although Skinner and Barber actually danced the premiere. A lot of the couple's work over the years seemed to be about their own relationship, but Skinner's view of it is much broader than that. "Yes," he said, "It was from a gay male perspective, but the intent was to show that two men can dance together without making people uncomfortable. Skinner, who was in his early twenties when he moved to Portland, believed the city was a place where "I could be me and not pretend the way I had when I was growing up in Muncie. Portland gave me the freedom to be myself and explore that in my work."

That work included dancing and choreographing for BodyVox, which Hampton and Roland

founded twenty years ago, following the success of *Carmina*. I maintain vivid memories of Skinner dancing in his solo, *Write My Book*, which I was delighted to see twice, when it premiered in 2010 and again in 2013. I remember Skinner leaping over and around and through some rubber tires with a very American, frank, witty exuberance, and the ease of the gymnast that he was in his Muncie, Indiana, adolescence. His dancing—everyone's dancing—in Hampton's *S.O.S.*, a piece based on the sinking of the Titanic while the musicians played on, also lives on in my critical memory.



Eric Skinner and Daniel Kirk, at angles. [jingzphotography.com](http://jingzphotography.com) / 2015

Skinner loved being in *BodyVox*, because, he said, "there is no 'normal'; you're always doing something new, and you don't know until you get on stage if the elements of the production are going to come together—the film projections, the lights." He also loved the touring because, like every Midwesterner I've ever known, including my mother, he loves to travel. "That's because we want to get out of there," Skinner said, laughing.

So why return? I asked him—not that Chicago, where such ballets as *Billy the Kid* premiered in 1938, and the Joffrey Ballet and Ballet Chicago, the latter headed by former New York City Ballet star Daniel Duell, are now located, bears much resemblance to Muncie. While Skinner is taking a break from dance generally—he has a job in Chicago writing proposals for a friend who is an architectural designer—Chicago has a growing modern and contemporary dance scene that interests him. The one thing he says he will miss is teaching ballet, something he has done for years at Reed College, at Southeast Portland's Center for Movement Arts, and at the BodyVox Dance Center, where last spring American Ballet Theatre principal ballerina Misty Copeland, in town to make a commercial for Nike, dropped in on his class. "She was just one of the students," Skinner said, beaming. "She took corrections; she wasn't a diva at all."

Skinner leaves with nothing negative to say about his time in Portland. "It has been a gift," he said. Mutual, I'm sure, Mr. Skinner. Thanks for the memories.

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More memories came flooding back at a 30th reunion party of some of the other dancers who performed with Pacific Ballet Theatre. It was thrown by Tracey Sartorio, currently Kevin Irving's assistant at OBT, and Elizabeth Lewis Burden at her home in Beaverton, a week after Skinner's departure. Kirk was there, bearing a large basket of plums for the potluck, joining Elizabeth Guerin, Anne Egan, Bill Brent, Lisa Kipp (who is rehearsal director at OBT), Pepe Raphael, Michelle Martin, and Angela Suchy Ingram. I, touched to have been invited, went to the party with Carol Shults, who has filled many roles in Portland's ballet companies, including as company teacher at Ballet Oregon and company historian at OBT. She also stages Spaight's ballets, most recently his *Scheherazade*, for Oklahoma City Ballet.



Memories: Dennis Spaight in the Oregon Ballet Theatre studio, 1988

Suchy Ingram, very young when she danced in Spaight's *Danses Sacrée et Profane*, immediately reminded me of that eloquent, hopeful ballet made late in his too-short life for Oregon Ballet Theatre. Talking with Anne Egan, who goes back to Ballet Oregon, where she danced a spectacular Cowgirl in Agnes de Mille's *Rodeo*, I remembered, too, Spaight's exuberant tap dance in the same ballet, where he performed the role of the Champion Roper who wins the Cowgirl's heart, and possibly her hand.

Raphael, now director of the band Pepe and the Bottle Blondes, wanted to show me his turnout, something he didn't need when he danced in *The Moor's Pavane*; and I took one look at Elizabeth Guerin and the image of her deer-like leaps in Paul Taylor's *Cloven Kingdom* flashed across my brain. And THAT made me think of the stellar performances OBT's dancers all delivered in that choreographic take on party animals, particularly Skinner, Kirk, and the late Michael Rios.

There was no leaping about in outrageous headgear, as in Taylor's piece, at the PBT reunion, which was held on the Burdens' wonderful backyard deck: just good food and drink and a lot of conversations beginning with "Do you remember when?" and "whatever happened to?" Marlene Montooth, who was development director at OBT when Johann Jacobs was the managing director, was asked whether he's retired, and whether his partner, David Heuvel, who made the costumes for *Danses Sacrée* and many other OBT ballets, is still practicing his art. (Answer: Jacobs did retire from Ballet West, but couldn't not work for long: he is now, I think she said, development officer for the Salt Lake City art museum, and Heuvel remains the master of the tutu.)

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Paul Taylor Dance Company, "Arden Court." Photo: Paul B. Goode/2017

Five days later, Taylor's death was announced, and while it certainly was not unexpected, (he was 88) I found myself shocked. We've seen quite a bit of Taylor's work in Portland over the years. In 2003, Christopher Stowell initiated his first season as OBT's artistic director with Taylor's *Company B*, a piece made originally for Houston Ballet, and danced to the Andrews Sisters' hit song *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy*, and thus highly evocative of World War Two. In 2003 the Iraqi war was still going on, and this ballet, which is about American soldiers on leave, had a painful relevance.



Paul Taylor in 1960. Photo: Carl Van Vechten / Wikimedia Commons

Much earlier, twenty-one years ago in fact, *White Bird* started its series with a single performance by the Taylor Company, and in the intervening years has presented the company a total, I think, of six times.

"Without Paul Taylor, there would be no *White Bird*," Walter Jaffe e-mailed me in response to condolences. And without *White Bird* we would not have seen Taylor's *Promethean Fire*, made in response to 9/11, which I believe to be a masterpiece of the choreographer's art. Or the joyful *Espanade*, another masterpiece, or his marvelous company, which will, unlike so many others, continue without him, dancing his work and the work of other modern choreographers.

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OBT's upcoming performances of Bournonville's *Napoli* have also sent me tripping on memory lane. Frank Andersen, his wife, Eva Kloborg, and Dinna Bjorn are staging the three-act ballet in the version I saw at the Bournonville Festival in Copenhagen in 2005, possibly the most eye-opening experience of my professional life, and certainly the most delightful—I was high on the lightness, speed, and precision of Bournonville technique, not to mention the charm of his ballets for ten days.



Makino Hildestad in the company premiere of August Bournonville's *Napoli*, one of two works on Oregon Ballet Theatre's *Amore Italiano* program, running October 10-17, 2015 at the Keller Auditorium. Photo by James McGrew.

Makino Hildestad in Oregon Ballet Theatre's premiere of Act III of August Bournonville's "Napoli" in 2015. The company will perform the full ballet in October. Photo: James McGrew.

One extremely pleasing thing about that festival was that the queen of Denmark was in her box every night, including at the performance of a ballet called *A Folk Tale*, for which she had designed the sets and costumes. *Napoli* itself is an example of how much the country's rulers care about the art: the tale of good triumphing over evil and love conquering all (with the help of a religious medal) is the result of Bournonville's observations of Neapolitan dance and street life, when he had been exiled by the king. The ballet premiered in 1842, in Copenhagen, and presumably the choreographer's transgressions—whatever they were, I've forgotten—had been forgiven. I would love to live in a country whose rulers care that much about the arts. Meanwhile, I look forward very much indeed to OBT's *Napoli*, with sets and costumes built right here in Portland. We could use a little charm, not to mention the vanquishing of an evil monster.



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