
Meeting “Mr. B.”

I wasn't exactly born in a trunk, but pretty close, and being raised in Hollywood certainly had its advantages. I was born on June 12, 1947, at the Queen of Angels Hospital in Los Angeles. My parents were Robert Clifford and Betty Louise Cadwell, and they met while performing in the *Earl Carroll Vanities*, one of the last bastions of vaudeville. My father was the top half of a two-man adagio acrobatic act called “Park and Clifford,” and my mother sang light opera and pop songs, like a latter-day Deanna Durbin. She was the “class act,” as it was then known. It wasn't until I was thirty-two that I found out Clifford was a stage name. My family name is something completely different, Povailitis, which is the Greek spelling of a Lithuanian name. I came to understand this many years later when Vangelis, the Greek composer of the musical score for the film *Chariots of Fire*, told me that Povailitis was a common name in Greece. When I told Balanchine my real name, and that Clifford was only my father's stage name, and that I was really Greek-Lithuanian, he said, “You know, dear, I always knew!” He never missed a beat.

When they weren't touring, my parents performed at the former Moulin Rouge Theater on Sunset Boulevard, near Vine Street in Hollywood. I appeared on that stage for the first time when I was around three years old, and one of my earliest memories is seeing the audience—upside down. This was due to the fact that I was doing a headstand on my father's hand. He would often bring me out at the end of his act, throw me up into the air, and I'd land either on my two feet, being supported by one of his hands, or in a headstand. The audience always loved it, and I loved the applause. My mother had a beautiful lyric soprano voice; actually for years I thought I would be a singer instead of a dancer. With my background, I don't see how I could have been anything but a “ham.” Luckily, Balanchine didn't mind it when



Top right: My mother, circa 1947. Courtesy of the author.

My father and me, circa 1950–1951.
Courtesy of the author.



My birthday party at five years old with the cast of *Minsky's Follies*, circa 1952. Courtesy of the author.

I was being a little too extroverted. He understood that it was in my genes. I once heard him say to a dancer who was criticizing my over-the-top performing style, “He can’t help it. He’s from Hollywood.”

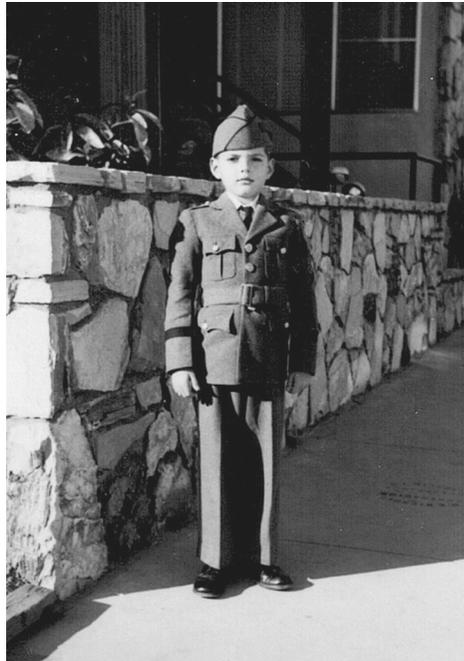
I also have early memories of touring across the United States with my parents when I was about four. My crib was a dresser drawer in the various hotels. Between being tossed about in my dad’s act and touring the country at that young age, it becomes obvious why I can’t ever be still. From as far back as I can remember, there was this strange thing about me: I could not stop moving! I suppose if I were a child today, I’d be medicated. “Hyperactive” I think covers it.

So, I expended that energy by dancing. Because I was brought up in a basically vaudevillian environment and was always around dancers, it seemed totally natural to me. I still remember standing in the orchestra pit watching the show girls, and to this day I’ll never forget those fish-net stockings and high heels. I saw show business as a perfectly normal way of life and, besides, I knew no other.

My mother and father divorced when I was six years old, which I think explains my sense of independence. I’ve had five different fathers in the course of my life (maybe six, but I lost count) and, looking back,

I think the lack of a strong father figure explains part of my intense devotion to Balanchine. He became the male role model I never had as a kid. I was also lucky that at such a young age I got to see different lifestyles and religions. I was baptized Roman Catholic, my third father was Jewish, my fourth father was . . . I forget. Once, when I was around five and my parents were on tour, I was boarded with a family of Nazarenes, an evangelical Christian sect. Talk about confusing! After all these fathers and experiences with different religions, I decided that everything was subjective. No person or religion was totally right or wrong, good or bad. I suppose you'd call me an agnostic at heart. I believe in "spirit," not "religion." I also spent two years in the first and second grades in a Catholic military boarding school. The discipline I received there proved very useful to me as a professional dancer. I learned at a very young age how to take orders.

I have somehow managed to put my priorities first. This meant a daily class and not falling into the trap of so many of my contemporaries from the 1960s, namely drugs. I reserved all my excesses for my work. Adhering to form and discipline saved me from myself on more than one occasion. Don't get me wrong. I'm no saint. I tried pot a



Me in military school at six years old. Courtesy of the author.

couple of times, but that was it, never pills or anything stronger. However, considering that I came of age in the wild and open 1960s, when “free love” and recreational drugs were everywhere, it’s worth noting that I never became part of that world, nor was I particularly interested. I didn’t need hallucinogens. I was high enough on life.

I was around nine years old when it became clear that my dancing around the house was not a childish phase. My mother quite reluctantly went shopping for a ballet teacher (she said she wanted me to be a lawyer because I liked to argue). We were living in Hollywood at the time, and Kathryn Etienne’s ballet school was quite popular and convenient. Mme. Etienne (“Ketty”) was from the famous Charisse Ballet Troupe, a family of eleven dancing children who toured all over Europe in the 1930s. Before that, they were the opening act for Anna Pavlova at New York’s Hippodrome. As a matter of fact, that’s how Cyd Charisse got her name. Her first husband was one of Ketty’s brothers, Nico Charisse. He was first her teacher, then later her husband. How very Balanchine.

I studied not only classical ballet with Mme. Etienne but also a form of Flamenco, and I even learned how to play the castanets. I loved all types of dance even then. Her students regularly performed at various ladies’ clubs, and that got me onstage very early as a “ballet dancer.” My first appearance was approximately two months after I started studying. I was usually a Pierrot. I was also the only boy. My regular partner was Suzanne Cupito, now known as Morgan Brittany, who was an actress on the series *Dallas* and “Baby June” in the film of *Gypsy*; she was quite a beauty even at ten years old.

During those years (late 1950s), one of the most respected and successful TV dance-makers was Tony Charmoli, and he was also the choreographer of Dinah Shore’s weekly variety show. Once a year she would present child performers, singers, tap dancers, acrobats, jugglers, and more, and in 1957, just after I turned ten, she decided to present a ballet. After an open audition Suzie and I were chosen to dance the Waltz from Act I of *Swan Lake*, choreographed by Mr. Charmoli. About a year later she was doing another children’s program, and Tony remembered us, so we were invited back, but what was even more important, that year was my first introduction to George Balanchine.

In the 1950s the New York City Ballet performed annual summer seasons at the Greek Theater, a 4,600-seat amphitheater in Los Angeles,



Suzanne Cupito and me at ten years old with students of Kathryn Etienne's school of ballet. Courtesy of the author.

and in 1958 they presented Balanchine's production of *The Nutcracker*. This was the same year it was shown on national television and started the *Nutcracker* Christmas tradition in America. The first full-length *Nutcracker* in the United States was produced by the San Francisco Ballet, but the Balanchine version on national television brought it to a huge audience. Having the *Nutcracker* play during the summer was a very novel idea, and the whole town was buzzing about it.

The audition for the local children was held in the downstairs rehearsal room of the Greek Theater, and there were at least three hundred of us all lined up with our mothers. I must say this for my mom: she always stayed in the background. For those *Nutcracker* auditions, she just dropped me off. I sometimes wished she would have been more

supportive and involved, but her non-involvement did make me stand on my own two feet, as it were, so I suppose that was good in the long run.

I still remember the ballet combination given by the company's ultra-perky ballet mistress, who had been a former star with the company, Janet Reed. She had us all do an *échappé-passé* combination from the Polichinelles *divertissement* for children and a giant Mother Ginger in Act II. I suppose I did it all right because she separated me from the rest of the dancers and told me to wait. After she dismissed most of the children, she kept a few of us boys and started teaching us the Prince's pantomime monologue from the second act. The Prince's pantomime in the Balanchine version of *The Nutcracker* is the same as in the original 1892 Imperial Russian Ballet production, which was choreographed by Lev Ivanov to the plan of Marius Petipa. It is very



Me and Dianne Reese in a production of *George Balanchine's The Nutcracker*® at the Greek Theater (1958). Courtesy of the author. Choreography by George Balanchine © The George Balanchine Trust.

