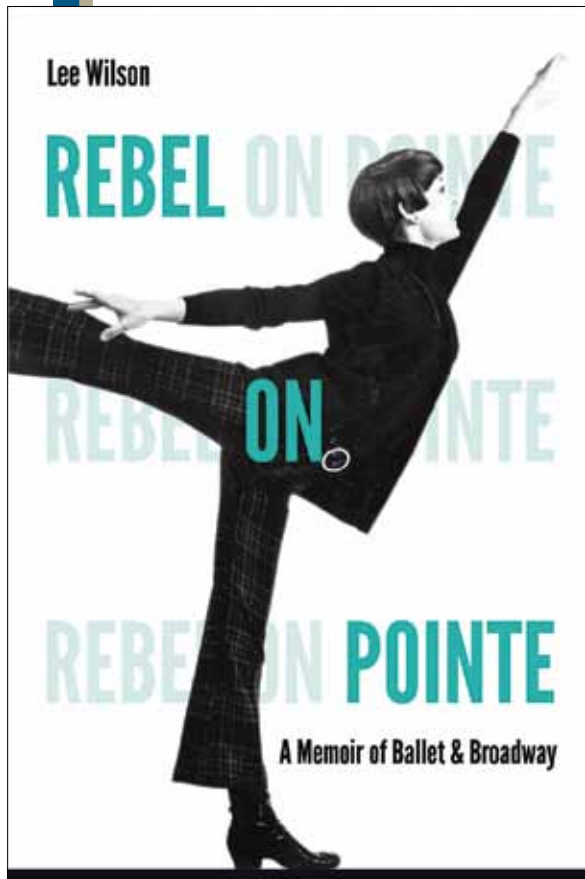


# WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING



“Touching and beautiful; Lee Wilson is an inspiration to us all for finding a passion in life and moving beyond familial pressures and societal norms.”—**ZIPPORA KARZ**, FORMER SOLOIST, NEW YORK CITY BALLET

“The culture of the ballet world is divulged in all its glorious detail. Wilson’s compelling account of her training and career shows the true courage and persistence this profession requires.”—**ALI DUFFY**, FOUNDER AND CHOREOGRAPHER, FLATLANDS DANCE THEATRE

“Lee brings to her writing the same keen intelligence she brought to her dancing. It is a joy to relive some of the important moments of ballet history with her and to

empathize as she uses her dance career to gain the independence and freedom she perceived as lacking for women like her mother only one generation earlier.”

—**MAINA GIELGUD**, FORMER DIRECTOR, THE AUSTRALIAN BALLET



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**REBEL ON POINTE**  
*A Memoir of Ballet and Broadway*  
LEE WILSON

**ISBN 978-0-8130-6008-8**  
Hardcover \$24.95  
224 pp. | 6 x 9 | 20 b/w photos  
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Credit: Lesley Bohm



**LEE WILSON** made her debut as a classical ballet dancer at the age of sixteen in a command performance for Prince Rainier and Princess Grace in Monte Carlo. She toured Europe with the *Hommage au Marquis de Cuevas* and was *première danseuse* of the Bordeaux Opera Ballet. At the age of eighteen, she joined the Metropolitan Opera Ballet under the direction of Dame Alicia Markova.

Wilson left ballet for Broadway when she joined the cast of *Hello, Dolly!*, starring Betty Grable. She continued her Broadway career with *Here's Where I Belong*, *How Now Dow Jones*, the Lincoln Center revival of *Oklahoma!*, and the original Broadway company of *You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown*, in which she played Patty.

She moved to Los Angeles with the original national company of *A Chorus Line*. While performing in feature films and on television, she received a Clio nomination for the Pepsi "Sky-writer" commercial and won the Communications Collaborative Award for the Cleveland Trust commercial "Ballerina."

In 1983, Wilson returned to Broadway for the record-breaking performance of *A Chorus Line*, and in 1989, for the musical *Meet Me in St. Louis*, for which she received the Gypsy Robe.

Wilson wrote and produced the live-action holiday specials *The Elf Who Saved Christmas* and *The Elf and the Magic Key*, which aired domestically on USA Network and have been seen worldwide. She also wrote and produced the award-winning television movie, *The Miracle of the Cards*.

Wilson holds a degree in performing arts from St. Mary's College of California.

**LEE WILSON**  
is available for interviews and appearances.



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# Q & A with

**LEE WILSON**

author of

**Rebel on Pointe**

*A Memoir of Ballet and Broadway*

**Tell us how you first came to be interested in dance.**

When I was four years old, I was pigeon-toed, and my pediatrician suggested dance lessons or corrective shoes, so my mother enrolled me in a tap class. I loved the sound of the taps. Even the words were fun to say: shuffle and flap.

**After so many years deeply entrenched in the dance community, how involved have you chosen to stay now?**

I still love to dance; I enjoy watching dance performances, and many of my friends are still working in the dance community. I hope dancers of all ages will enjoy reading my book.

**Of all the shows you danced in, what was your favorite and why?**

*Hello, Dolly!* has a special place in my heart because it was my first Broadway show, but I also loved dancing in *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, and *A Chorus Line*.

**What do you hope readers will enjoy the most about your book?**

I hope readers will enjoy the ups and downs of my journey and vicariously experience the joy of dance, the thrill of working with great artists, and the wonder of seeing New York, Paris, Monte Carlo, and Algiers through the eyes of a teenage girl trying to find her place in the world.

**Is there a particular dancer or show that inspired you to pursue dance yourself?**

Margot Fonteyn was my idol, but I could also see myself dancing with Gene Kelly.

**Who are your favorite living dancers, that you jump at the chance to see?**

I saw two performances this year that were particularly memorable: Natalia Osipova in *Giselle* and Alina Cojocaru in *Liliom*, but there are many wonderful dancers today, so I try to see as many companies as I can.

**You've expressed before that *Rebel on Pointe* "celebrates the ability of a girl to find her own way in life by deciding what is important to her." What was the biggest challenge you faced while trying to pursue your dreams?**

During the 1950s, dance was the rare community in which men and women were equally respected and equally paid, so I studied for twelve years to become a dancer, but in 1962, when I was ready to begin my career, Ballet Theatre was moving out of New York, and Ballet Russe was on its last legs, so I traveled to Europe. But when I got to Europe, the de Cuevas Ballet, the star-studded touring company in France, had just dissolved, and I learned that the Royal Ballet couldn't hire Americans unless they were stars. I really didn't know how to get my career started. Fortunately, Rosella Hightower took me under her wing and gave me wonderful opportunities.

**If you could give budding dancers one sentence of advice, what would it be?**

Dance is a gift that will enrich your life whether or not you choose dance as a career.

## Rebel on Pointe

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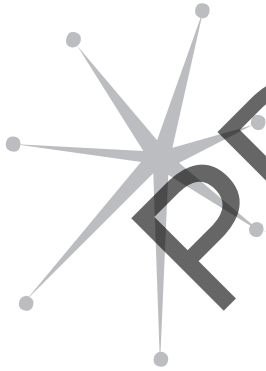
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Lee Wilson

# REBEL ON POINTE



A Memoir of Ballet & Broadway

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## Dance Requires Grit, 1957–1959

Madame Swoboda's year in Philadelphia came to an end, and Mom moved me to the Philadelphia Dance Academy, a school established and directed by Nadia Chilkovsky, a modern dancer. The Philadelphia Dance Academy was associated with the Philadelphia Musical Academy and had an Undergraduate Program and a Preparatory Program. The Undergraduate Program, a college program, included modern dance, classical ballet, repertory, dance notation, history of the dance, piano, theory, improvisation, composition, harmony, pedagogy, and academic courses. The Preparatory Program offered modern dance, classical ballet, improvisation, dance composition, and dance notation.

Mom enrolled me for one ballet class a week while I was still studying tap and ballet with Anna Marie. My class was on Thursday afternoons, and it ended after dark, so the school insisted that I take a taxi back to the Suburban Station, even though I had made the one-mile walk earlier in the day. Taxis were one more expense added to the cost of lessons, trains, leotards,

tights, tap shoes, ballet shoes, toe shoes, and recital costumes. I worried that Dad would hate me for wasting his money if I took dance lessons for ten or twelve years and didn't make it into a company, and a brief conversation with Dad increased my insecurity. A girl on our block turned sixteen, and her father gave her a used car. Although my own sixteenth birthday was over four years in the future, I asked Dad if he would buy me a car when I turned sixteen. He stared at me in disbelief and said, "What have you ever done for me that I would buy you a car?"

Dad wasn't the only parent who seemed eager for me to become self-supporting. Mom reminded me that the baby ballerinas of the 1930s, Irina Baronova, Tamara Toumanova, and Tatiana Riabouchinska, were as young as twelve when they began dancing with Ballet Russe. I knew I couldn't compete with the baby ballerinas. At twelve, I looked ten. With three boys to raise, Mom couldn't tour like the mothers of the baby ballerinas, and neither of my parents would co-sign a contract until I had a high school diploma. I felt that I was falling behind.

Mom also informed me that I needed to go on a diet. She said that all I had to do to lose weight was eat a little less and give up bread, so for lunch, instead of two pieces of bread with a tablespoon of peanut butter, I counted out four little Ritz crackers and put a tablespoon of peanut butter on each. There was no calorie count on the packaging, so I had no idea that I had doubled my calories, and I didn't understand why I wasn't losing weight. Like most dancers, I became obsessed with my weight.

Dancers walk a tightrope between looks and health. They have to be thin, but they also have to be strong. A dancer who is too heavy, or a dancer whose energy flags, is a dancer on unemployment. Every day, dancers work in leotards and tights in front of mirrors that show every ounce. A dancer's line is affected by weight. A dancer's jump is affected by weight. A dancer's ability to get work is affected by weight. I found ninety-two to ninety-four pounds to be a good weight for me. Below ninety-two pounds, I had too little stamina. Above ninety-four pounds, I didn't like my line; my flexibility decreased, and I had more weight to lift when I jumped. Dancers usually try to determine their peak weight and then maintain it.

In the 1970s, I knew dancers who starved themselves or threw up after

meals to stay thin. At the time, many dancers considered bulimia to be a clever method of weight control. They could enjoy big meals, not get teased by bigger eaters, and still stay thin. I knew one bulimic dancer who mentioned Roman vomitoriums to give historical stature and acceptability to a less-than-elegant practice. Today, anorexia and bulimia are considered potentially fatal diseases, but in the 1950s, most people knew nothing about them. However, at age twelve, I was afraid that a diet wouldn't solve my weight problem because my muscular legs were genetic, as Mom pointed out when she said, "It's a shame you got your father's legs instead of mine."

My self-confidence continued to plummet when Mom gave me bright turquoise tights for my twelfth birthday. The last thing I wanted were tights that called attention to my thighs. I told Mom that everyone in ballet class wore pink. "Good," said Mom. "You'll stand out. Turquoise will look beautiful with your black leotard." I was stuck with turquoise tights.

I was particularly vulnerable that year because I was bored and frustrated with my classes at the Philadelphia Dance Academy. The window into the professional world that Madame Swoboda had opened was slammed shut. At the Philadelphia Dance Academy, I was placed in a small class of teenage, non-professional students, and my teacher was an American who talked like a science teacher. Instead of using metaphors and images to describe movement, she used muscle groups: "Lift your leg with the muscles beneath the leg, not the quadriceps," she said. I didn't know how to activate one muscle and deactivate another, and she couldn't explain. Instead of imagining that my fingers extended out through space, past the stars, into infinity, I imagined different muscles in my body fighting for control. When I looked in the mirror, I saw only turquoise tights that made me look like a circus performer.

The teacher told me not to force my turnout because forcing is hard on the knees, but I knew that if I didn't force my turnout, I would never acquire the necessary turnout for ballet companies. The teacher wanted me to start my pirouettes from a perfect position and would stop me mid-pirouette if one of my heels moved in advance of the rest of my body. It seemed that I was incapable of even one decent pirouette.

The Philadelphia Dance Academy also stressed the importance of

learning Labanotation, a system of writing movement similar to the way music is written so that others trained in the language can read it. The system is very complex and time-consuming, and after taking a few classes, I couldn't imagine that professional dancers would have time to record dance in writing. Labanotation would have to be done by people who were not working full-time as dancers. Perhaps the school was trying to tell me that I didn't have the body or the talent to become a professional dancer. It didn't occur to me that the Preparatory Program might have been designed *not* to prepare girls for a ballet company (where girls begin careers in their teens), but to prepare them for the Undergraduate Program and careers which can begin at a later age, such as modern dance, choreography, dance criticism, dance history, and teaching.

I decided that I had to consider alternatives to ballet. I loved Perry Mason and thought I would enjoy fighting for truth and justice, but I didn't know of any female lawyers, and the Supreme Court was comprised of nine men. (It would be more than two decades before Sandra Day O'Connor became the first female Justice of the Supreme Court.)

Another career possibility was concert pianist. I had a partial scholarship to the Wilmington Music School, and I enjoyed listening to Mom's 78 rpm records of Vladimir Horowitz and Artur Schnabel. I saw advertisements for Rudolf Serkin's concerts in the newspapers, and everybody knew the name of Van Cliburn, the 23-year-old American who had become a superstar in the spring of 1958 when he won the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow. After he played, Van Cliburn received an eight-minute standing ovation, and the judges asked Premier Khrushchev if they could give first prize to an American. Khrushchev asked, "Is he the best? Then give him the prize!" Even during the Cold War, art could transcend politics. I asked my piano teacher if there were any female concert pianists. She knew of only one, Myra Hess, but no else I asked had ever heard of her, and the newspapers never mentioned female pianists. Besides, my hands were small, and I doubted I would ever be able to reach a tenth (a span of ten white keys).

Dance seemed to be my best option. It was probably the most accessible art for women because it is an art in which men and women are not

interchangeable. *Sleeping Beauty* is always danced by a woman, and the Prince by a man, so women represent no threat to men's jobs and no man risks the indignity of seeing a woman perform his job better than he. This is not true in the other arts. On the concert stage and in symphony orchestras, instruments can be played by men or by women. In writing, painting, and architecture, the gender of the artist is not even visible in the finished work. In these arts, men could lose jobs to women if women were allowed to compete. In the 1950s, many conductors and musicians claimed that female musicians simply didn't have the strength or the temperament to play as well as men. That fallacy was later exposed when the musicians' unions began to require that auditioning musicians be hidden from the judges by screens. When this policy was first put into effect, the concert master of the Metropolitan Opera orchestra told me that the screens were pointless because the judges could hear the click of high heels as women took their places behind the screens, but women soon learned to kick off their shoes or wear flats, and when they were judged solely by the sound coming from their instruments, women came flooding into symphony orchestras—jobs previously held almost exclusively by men. But in the 1950s, many people accepted the myth that women pianists simply didn't have the digital strength to produce as good a sound as men.

Dance was also accessible to women because many of the company founders and decision-makers were female. Ninette de Valois established and ran the Royal Ballet in London; Lucia Chase was the founding patron and artistic director of Ballet Theatre in New York, and Martha Graham was the founder and director of the Martha Graham Dance Company, the best-known modern dance company in America. In the other arts, most of the decision-makers were male.

Dance was also open to women because dance is associated with grace and elegance, qualities associated with women, and like most jobs associated with women, dance had a low pay scale. Most men did not consider dance a desirable profession, so women were able to have power.

As I dragged myself to classes at the Philadelphia Dance Academy, ballet seemed to be my best prospect—even though I felt hopelessly inadequate. Then, one Sunday, I learned the difference a great teacher can make.