

**Interview with Bettijane Sills**  
**author with Elizabeth McPherson of**  
***Broadway, Balanchine, and Beyond: A Memoir***

**What motivated you to share your story with the world?**

My late husband had been urging me to write for a while. Plus, I felt I had a very different childhood from most ballet dancers I know. I wanted to share the fact that I had been a child actress before joining New York City Ballet and how that influenced my trajectory.

**Did your skills as an actor help you perform ballets?**

I was already familiar with stagecraft when I joined New York City Ballet and felt very comfortable in that environment. In addition to pure dancing roles, I relished the opportunities to perform roles which would show my acting ability and sense of timing.

**When you first started ballet, whose performances did you find most inspiring?**

I was most impressed with Maria Tallchief and Melissa Hayden—Maria as the “Firebird” and Melissa for her acting ability and beautiful legs and feet. She was the most versatile dancer I had ever seen and so exciting to watch.

**In 1962, you went on a three-month international tour to countries behind the Iron Curtain while on tour with the New York Ballet Company. In what ways did this experience challenge you?**

To be perfectly honest, I wasn’t thinking much about the Cold War and our relationship with the Soviet Union at that time. My thoughts and feelings revolved around the difficulties of touring in a country where the food and conditions were very different from life in the United States and not all that comfortable. It was only much later that I realized the seriousness of the situation we were in concerning the Cuban Missile Crisis.

**Balanchine insisted on thinness in his dancers to properly showcase his choreography—a standard other ballet companies have also adopted. What do you hope aspiring dancers can learn from your own struggles with weight and body image?** I would hope that “aspiring dancers” would have the maturity to realize that thinness is often a requirement for ballet and is not achieved and maintained by starvation. I dieted in a healthy way and I shed pounds but other issues held me back from keeping the weight off on a consistent basis.

**Looking back, what do you consider to be your greatest achievement while in the New York City Ballet?** Of course, dancing roles which Balanchine made for me could be considered achievements, and at times I am disappointed in myself for allowing my struggles with weight to hold me back. But then I look at the opportunities I had—working with Balanchine and Robbins and others—and see how fortunate I was to be able to perform some of the greatest ballets ever choreographed by these men. I never thought I would become a professor in a college dance program, but here I am and it is my experience with Balanchine that informs my teaching.

**Does your teaching focus on a particular area?**

I especially love staging the Balanchine repertoire for our students to perform. There are many modern dancers in the conservatory of dance and I need to approach them differently for the ballet-focused students. But I do emphasize energy and musicality in all my classes.

**What is the most important lesson you learned from dancing Balanchine ballets that you teach in your own dance classes?**

Honest, full-out dancing is what Mr. B wanted in class and on stage, and that's what I want from my students.

**Balanchine passed away in 1983, at the age of 79. How do you think Balanchine would feel about how his legacy has endured?**

I think Balanchine knew his worth and recognized his own genius from a young age. although he did not refer to himself in that way. Given the volume of masterpieces he created, it was left to dancers, critics, historians and, at first, Lincoln Kirstein to sing his praises. But I think he would be very pleased that his ballets populate the repertoire of companies, colleges, and dance programs throughout the world.