

## **THE CROSS-TOWN BUS**

**By: Gus Dick Andros**

I can't believe I am sitting here on the 86th street cross-town bus next to Frederic Franklin. I enjoyed hearing him tell stories of his early days as a dancer with The Markova-Dolin Company and as the premiere danseur of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. It was with the Ballet Russe that I first saw him dance. I was just 15 years old, in need of a hero, and Mr. Franklin became it.

How did a boy living in Oklahoma City get to see the Ballet Russe? None of my friends had ever been to the ballet, but I had the good fortune to have a divorced aunt, who needed an escort to the cultural events that infrequently played our city. My aunt made sure I was a good ballroom dancer so I could be her dance partner when the Big Name Bands played our area. She was responsible for my brother and I studying ballroom dance at a very early age. I was delighted and proud to be with her because she was interested in me as a person and she backed every project I undertook. Trying to bring culture to my family was a full-time job, and while she was very successful with her nieces, I think I was her only success among her nephews.

In 1940 the war in Europe was beginning to threaten America and many of the older boys began to enlist. Because of the war there were fewer and fewer cultural events for us to enjoy, so when the Ballet Russe first came to Oklahoma, I was sitting in the audience spellbound by what I saw on stage. I loved the music, the movement, the pattern, and costumes. As I watched Mr. Franklin with his princely demeanor dance with Alexandra Danilova, I knew dance was what I wanted to do. Frederic Franklin was the first male ballet dancer whom I had ever seen, of course, I had been to Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly movies, and I enjoyed them, but the Hollywood musicals did not inspire me to become a dancer.

The very next day I called the local teacher to take lessons, but because there were no other boys in her school she would not take me. Years later when I was dancing with the San Francisco Ballet, she came to take a summer course and I told her that she had refused me as a student; she replied that she didn't know how to teach boys. I didn't tell her how disappointed I was, and I thought I had no choice but to give up the idea of ever dancing. After my dream of becoming a ballet dancer was shattered, I turned my interest to art and theater. I also worked hard to be the best ballroom dancer in high school.

Many years later when I was a soldier working for Special Service in Japan, I had the chance to befriend many USO performers. I was the director of Club Ichiban, the largest enlisted men's club in the Pacific theater, Barbara, one of the USO performers, wanted to use the ballroom at the club to give herself class. I told her she could if she let me try it with her. She taught me some positions and steps. When she asked me to point and my foot stretched to a better point than many professional dancers and when she told me to turn and I did on the correct foot and in the proper direction--she was flabbergasted

by how quickly I could pick up movement. She was so impressed that she taught me some routines which we performed at the club. I had studied theater in Oklahoma and had done some plays--in fact in the State of Oklahoma I had won first place in a competition for humorist reading--so I was not new to an audience. One might think that the men I served with would not appreciate my dancing, but they cheered me on and made sure to know when I would performed again so they could be there. Many of the servicemen were starved for entertainment. They were curious enough to asked if I had been a professional before my induction.

Barbara was as supportive as my aunt and encouraged me to give dancing a try when I got my discharge. She even wrote her dance friends in San Francisco and told them to expect me. After three lessons with Barbara's teacher, I was asked to dance with her group. It was with this group that I danced on the same program as Ruth St. Denis. I soon started my studies at the San Francisco Ballet School. I picked up so quickly and had such a flexible body, that within six months I was invited into the company. At last my dreams were coming true and Mr. Franklin was responsible for starting them.

When Ballet Russe was performing at the San Francisco Opera House, starring Mr. Franklin and Alexandra Danilova, I never missed a performance. I knew more about ballet by then and I still thought they were the definitive dancers of that time. Their Giselle was one of technique and drama. It took many years before I saw another production of that ballet that could compare.

One day when I was on my way to class, I saw Mr. Franklin window shopping, and like a small puppy I followed him for blocks. After this incident in San Francisco, it was Mr. Franklin on stage and me in the audience. Decades have past, and after performing in a ballet company, stock, night clubs, TV, operating a successful school in Brooklyn, being assistant director of the Bat Dor Company in Israel, and teaching at the High School of the Performing Arts, Harkness Dance Center and the New York School of Ballet, I finally had a chance to meet Mr. Franklin. And today on the cross-town bus, 45 years later, I finally told him of his influence on my life. He looked at me and was pleased by what he heard, but I knew many other dancers had told him the same thing. Sitting here at 67 and feeling like I was 15--WOW!

One day when Christine Sarry was taking my class, I looked up to see Mr. Franklin standing at the door. My voice just ceased to work. I tried to get my mind back on the class, but my eyes kept going back to the doorway. After class Christine Sarry introduced me to Mr. Franklin, who was there to coach her in a role. He told me that he enjoyed watching me teach. I thanked him, hoping that he didn't hear my heart beat. I wondered, if Mr. Franklin was aware that he was responsible for my being a ballet teacher.

"Here we are at Broadway, the last stop." Mr. Franklin's voice brought me out of my daydream. "Good-bye, Dick. I hope to see you again soon." He is calling me by my first name, I thought. "Good-bye, Mr. Franklin!"