

Summer 2011

Ballet Review



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**A Conversation with
Francis Mason**

On the cover: NYCB's Teresa Reichlen
in Balanchine's *Rubies*.

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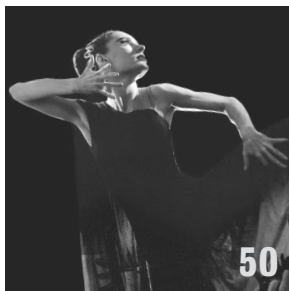
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Cover Photo by Paul Kolnik, NYCB: Teresa Reichlen in "Rubies."



Francis Mason in Yugoslavia.

This American Manifestation

Victoria Phillips Geduld

Francis Mason: I was in the U.S. Navy during the Second World War. I participated in the D-Day Invasion of Normandy in France and came back and got a job teaching in Annapolis, Maryland, at St. John's College, where I had gone to school. The best college in America for me, and, I think, *still* the best college in America.

At St. John's, I fortunately knew a number of people who were later very important in my life, in the dance world. Nicolas Nabokov, the old Russian composer, was a friend of Balanchine's, who used to visit him in Annapolis. I didn't know Balanchine in those days, I just knew about him from Nicolas.

I hadn't been to the ballet. Oh, I'd been to the ballet once, in 1937, when I was a high school kid in Philadelphia. I used to go to the Philadelphia Orchestra every Saturday night. I would stand in line two, three, four, five hours, sometimes in the bitter cold, to get a fifty-cent ticket for what was then the greatest orchestra in America. It was Leopold Stokowski's last season there.

I was in line when my friend said, "Francis, you know it's not the orchestra tonight. It's the ballet." I said, "What's that?" He said, "It's dancing. Stay, you may like it." Well, I had been in line for hours so I stayed. The curtain went up. David Lichine was in *Afternoon of a Faun*. I didn't, mind you, know anything about this. I loved it. For a seventeen-year-old, *Faun* was a cinch, you understand. I did that in my bed every night in a way. But then they did a big ballet to the Beethoven Seventh Symphony. *My Seventh Symphony?* I knew the Beethoven, from the Philadelphia Orchestra. I was outraged. Massine! All of this silly pos-

Francis Mason was the editor of *Ballet Review* from 1980 until his death in 2009. This article is based on a lengthy interview from April 2006.

turing. Nonsense, but with beautiful costumes and scenery by Christian Bérard, no less. I thought it was pompous. Hated it. I swore I'd never go to the ballet again.

Fast forward eleven years. I'm working in New York and I was seeing old friends of mine from St. John's College, one of my teachers, William Gorman, an Aristotelian and a Thomist, and his wife Natalie Bodanya, who was a soprano with the Met.

After Lincoln Kirstein got back from the war, he and Balanchine started a thing called Ballet Society in 1946. They did *The Four Ts* [*The Four Temperaments*] at the Central High School of Needle Trades downtown. I didn't know anything about that. But Bill and Natalie did. They were members of Ballet Society.

One day in the spring of 1948 I said to them, let's get together again next week. And they said, "Why don't you come to the ballet with us?" I said, "That's a stupid thing to do. Why are you doing *that*?" And they said, "Francis, you can't talk like that, that's an uncivilized remark from a person like you." I said, "But I've seen the ballet and I thought it was nonsense!" They asked, "What did you see?" I told them the Massine story and they said, "You're right! Massine is crap, but this is Balanchine." I said, "Oh, Balanchine, I know all about him." They said, "But you just said you don't know anything about the ballet." I told them, "I saw *The Goldwyn Follies*."

When Balanchine and his company The American Ballet were at the Met, or just afterwards, Sam Goldwyn, the movie producer, went out on a limb and asked Balanchine to Hollywood. Goldwyn was making a movie and he didn't know what he was going to do in it. Balanchine didn't like Goldwyn, but he saw that in Hollywood he could do anything, things that he couldn't do in the theater.

Goldwyn Follies had Vera Zorina, who became Balanchine's wife around that time, and she did something called the Waternymph ballet, in which she rises out of a pool – soaking wet. Then the pool becomes a mirror, she's dry, and she dances off with the American Ballet full force, men and women, and a huge de

Chirico-esque white horse in the background. Well, I adored it. I thought Zorina was extraordinary, so I said, "That's Balanchine!" They said, "But, Francis, this is a Balanchine ballet live on the stage. You have to see." I said, "Okay, maybe I'll be there."

I turned up, the next week – late, the last second. They were furious with me and dragged me to my seat and said, "Sit down and shut up. This is called *Orpheus*, you know about *Orpheus*." I indeed did know all about him.

I did not know it, but Stravinsky was in the pit that night. I saw this performance, with Noguchi's great setting, the great silk curtain that Balanchine had paid so much for. I was overwhelmed, really stunned. From that point on, I was interested in the subject.

The company started as the New York City Ballet in, I think, November [it was October 1948]. I went to lots of performances. I was captivated.

Nicolas Nabokov had stopped working at St. John's and moved to New York, working for the State Department, at the Voice of America, the International Broadcasting Division. He was living around the corner from me and was then married to Patricia Blake. I said to them one day, "Look, would you ask Balanchine and Maria Tallchief to dinner, so I can meet them?" Maria was my heroine in this ballet matter. They said, "Sure."

Nabokov told Balanchine that I was a writer and writing reviews for the *Hudson Review*, a new literary magazine. I said that indeed I was and interested in the ballet, chiefly in his work, and would like to know more. Balanchine said, "Well, come to the School. Can you dance?" I said, "I'm hopeless, I'm twenty-eight." I don't think I could move at all. I tried but I couldn't.

I began to go to the School of American Ballet, every Saturday – I was working. I went to all of Muriel Stuart's classes. She was one of the great teachers there. She'd studied with and had been in Pavlova's company. Muriel became a great friend and a great help to me. So I went to all of her classes.

Also I started to go to Balanchine's rehearsal.

I began to watch him make pieces. I saw him do *Bourrée Fantasque*. I saw him revive *Prodigal Son* with Jerry Robbins and Maria and other things. I was there all the time watching.

I began to write about it in the *Hudson Review* in 1950. Frederick Morgan, the editor of the magazine, was terrific. I took him and his wife, Connie, to the City Ballet one night and said, "Look, I want to write about this." They said, "Please do." So, I began to do that.

Then a couple of years into that, one of the students I'd had at St. John's when I was teaching there, Lawrence Sherman, a New Yorker, had a job at Doubleday. He called me: "Look we've just signed a contract with Balanchine to do a book of stories of the ballet." Doubleday had done a book that sold like hotcakes called *Milton Cross's Complete Stories of the Great Operas*. Milton Cross was the radio announcer for many years for the Met Saturday broadcast. People around the country knew all about opera because of Cross, so that book took off.

Doubleday wanted to do a book about the ballet with Jacques Fray, who was a French pianist and a music commentator on WQXR radio. He was a friend of George's and suggested to Doubleday that he do this book. At first it was going to be called "Balanchine's Complete Stories of the Great Ballets by Jacques Fray – with Jacques Fray," but Jacques couldn't write.

My friend Sherman said, "Somebody's got to write this book. Francis, why don't you write it?" I said, "Well, that's not for me to say, that's for Balanchine to say." He said, "I'll tell you what. Why don't you write up a history of the ballet as you would do it, and then I'll get a couple of other people to do it also. We'll show it to Balanchine and see which one he wants." I did that and he called up in a couple of weeks and said, "Balanchine wants you." "Fine," I said.

I told Balanchine, "I'm particularly interested in your work and what you have to say. But I'm also interested in anything you have to say about other ballets, anybody, anything."

He said, “No, no, no, no, I don’t want to talk about everyone. You do that. I trust you.” I began to go to the ballet in a different way. I went with paper. I took a lot of notes and began to write. I was still working, so I had to do all this at night and on weekends.

I met with Balanchine all the time to talk about his ballets. Then I’d write them up and go to him. He would say, “Now read to me.” So I would read to him and he would say, “Too long. You’re saying much too much. Don’t tell everything. You’ve got to leave something to the imagination of the public or otherwise they will get to the theater and not be surprised. You’ve got to cut it down – cut all this stuff out.”

After I did it over, I’d get together with him again and read to him. He’d say, “Better. Shorter still.” He was a wonderful editor. He instinctively knew. The book took almost three years because . . . I forget how many stories were in the first edition, but it is *hundreds*. I went to all the ballets. I went to see everything. Those were great days. The Sadler’s Wells Ballet [Royal Ballet] coming to New York. There was Ballet Theatre. I got to know all the Antony Tudor work.

At the same time I began to do radio. Again, it was my friend Natalie Bodanya. She said, “I know the head of WNYC, the city’s station. Why don’t you go down there? Maybe you can do a series of shows on the City Ballet to help them out.” I met with Seymour M. Siegel, who was then the head of the station. He said fine. “Why don’t we do a series called ‘Meet Your New York City Ballet?’” I began to interview Balanchine and other people. I went to visit Kirstein and said, “You’ve got to be on the show.” He said, “*Radio!*? I never thought of that. It could be useful.”

WNYC already had a dance critic, but after those interview shows that series was over. Siegel told me one day, “We’ve let her go. We want you to be our new critic.” I said, “What do you want me to do?” He answered, “You can have forty-five minutes every Saturday afternoon at 5:00 o’clock. You can interview people, play music, do whatever you want.”

It was a *wonderful* open-book situation. The station manager, Bernard Buck, was very helpful to me. I’d already done all of the City Ballet people, all the big ones. I began to interview the ABT people, the Sadler’s Wells people, anybody who was performing ballet in town. As a result I got to know Tudor, Nora Kaye, Hugh Laing, Lucy [Lucia] Chase – the big shots at American Ballet Theatre.

In those days, you see, when City Ballet started out, Tudor was king. He, and his ballets for Ballet Theatre at the old Met were the big draw. Nora Kaye, in that repertory, was the star, magnificent. There is nothing like an interview, a long interview. It was wonderful for me to get to know these people in that way. I didn’t prepare them. We went on the air cold, more or less.

I saw that Martha Graham was going to have a season. I’d been to one Graham performance. A friend of mine in New York, Eugene Thaw, who now is the greatest art dealer in the world but was just starting out with a gallery in New York, told me that Graham had done a dance to *King Lear*, which he knew I was passionate about it, and that I should see it. So I went. I hated every minute of it.

She had made it for Erick Hawkins, to whom she was then married. I swore I’d never go again. But I was very impressed by Graham herself. I knew that nobody else could do that. I remembered that Kirstein said that Isadora was wonderful, but she was imitable. Nobody could do that again. So I dismissed Graham because nobody could do that again.

Later, in 1952, the year I got married, I saw that Graham, who was teaching at Juilliard, then up near Columbia University, was having a season and doing a new work, not for herself but for her dancers. Since I was doing broadcasts and reviews, I thought why don’t I see it. My wife and I went. It was a piece called *Canticle for Innocent Comedians*. It was about the elements: earth, air, fire, and water – the sun, the moon. It began with Bertram Ross and Yuriko. Ethel Winter I’m sure was in it, Linda Hodes was in it and Mary Hink-

son. I was overwhelmed. I thought it was perfect.

I wrote Graham a letter, introduced myself and said I was doing this show on WNYC every Saturday afternoon and would she come and let me interview her. She captivated me by calling me up on the telephone: "Mr. Mason?" "Yes?" "This is Martha Graham." "How nice of you to call. Would you be on my show?" She said, "Of course. What do you want me to do?" I said, "Come to the Municipal Building at quarter of five next Saturday, the thirty-fifth floor. And we'll talk."

She said, "No rehearsal?" I said, "No rehearsal." So, she came! I'd never met her before. We sat, and talked. I began to ask her a lot of questions, many of them impertinent. At one point I said to her, "You've been dancing a long time, Miss Graham. How often do you succeed?" She said, "That's for you to say." She was extraordinary. I was bewitched.

The engineer expected me to talk to her for twelve minutes and then play a recording of *Appalachian Spring*, Aaron Copland's score, which he initially titled "Ballet for Martha." As we talked on the engineer kept waving his hands in the control room saying, "What are you doing?" And I just kept signaling, "Shut up!" I talked with Graham for forty-three minutes, and the engineer said to me later, "I've seen lots of drama in this studio, but this took the cake. You came on like a *lion*, Francis, but you left like a *lamb*."

As a result of that, I began to go see Martha. I went to her studio, I went to her classes, her rehearsals, and I talked to her. We used to have tea. Tea for Martha Graham in those days was bourbon on the rocks, in a *big* Old-Fashioned glass. Since bourbon was my tippie too, we would get pleasantly plastered for a couple of hours, once every couple of months.

—

Victoria Phillips Geduld: How did you first go to work for the Voice of America?

Mason: Nicolas Nabokov, my teacher from St. John's, lived around the corner from me, up on East 95th Street. I'd see him all the time. This is before he got married again. He was

sharing an apartment with Charles W. Thayer of the State Department, who headed the Voice of America – the International Broadcasting Division. Thayer had been a foreign service officer who was one of the first Americans to serve in our embassy in Russia, in the 1930s, when we got going over there.

I was at their apartment one night and Charlie said to me, "Nicolas tells me you're looking for a job, you want one?" I said, "Yes! What have you got?" He said, "We're starting a research unit at the Voice of America. Go see this man." So I went, again through a St. John's connection, and I got this job.

At the Voice of America various people were doing broadcasts in seventeen or eighteen languages. Many of them were native speakers from Yugoslavia, Albania, parts of the Soviet Union, China, Japan, everywhere. They knew about their own country, but many were recent arrivals in America and didn't know much about America.

I would get a call: "Francis, Labor Day, what is it?" So I would research it and write something. Then I began to write a daily calendar, an almanac, for all of the language desks, telling them it was George Washington's birthday, for example, and who he was.

I found my wife, Patricia Michaels, there. She was an international person, too. Her father was English and she'd gone to the London School of Economics and traveled a lot in Europe. Then the State Department decided that Voice of America was going to move to Washington. This was at the beginning of the Eisenhower administration. I didn't want to go. Pat had a new job at *Fortune* magazine as a researcher, and I could get another job.

The guy who was going to head up the unit in Washington came to New York and said, "What's this? You're not coming to Washington?" I said, "No, I don't want to go there." Washington in 1954? What shall I say? I knew Washington, I had known it since 1933, when my family had taken me there. I said, "There's the museums, and that's all there is! I'm not interested in going to Washington under any circumstances."

But this man, whose name was Louis Olom, said to me one of the great things that we all dream about. He said, "Mason, you've got to stay with us. You've been so great here. You don't have to come to Washington to work for the State Department. Isn't there some other place you'd like to go?" How often in life do you get a question like that?

I thought for a second and said, "Well, what about Belgrade?" He said, "Belgrade? Why?" I replied, "Tito's broken with Stalin. He's the only communist who's done that. He understands what the Soviet situation is. The Hungarians, the Czechs, the Bulgarians are all in Stalin's pocket, but Tito has got a different view. If you're going to have any understanding at all of what the Soviet Union is all about, you will get it, I think, in Belgrade." He said, "How incredible. You really want to go?" I said, "Well, you just asked me," and I thought, why not?

In three months I was there. They gave me a crash course in Serbo-Croatian at the Foreign Service Institute in Washington. I commuted. I went to Washington every week to do that and came back home to Pat, who was still at *Fortune*, and then we up and went.

Belgrade in 1954 was a fascinating city, wonderfully situated with two rivers, the Sava and the Danube, meeting at the city. The country was a controlled dictatorship. There were no American newspapers, although the *New York Times* had a correspondent there. There were no books, no magazines. What could one do? We began with the books, American authors translated into Serbo-Croatian.

Then, I had an idea about American plays. The Yugoslavs had theaters, repertory theaters, in all the capitals of the republic, in Skopje, Macedonia, Sarajevo, Bosnia, Zagreb, and other places. They wanted badly to do Eugene O'Neill, but they couldn't get permission. I came back on home leave and laid siege to his widow, Carlotta, at her New York hotel. She would never see me, but I kept writing her notes, letters, asking her. She said she wouldn't give any communist outfit, any place like that, permission to do her late husband's plays.

But we got the rights to do Tennessee Williams and other things. We got Elia Kazan, the great director of the Williams plays to come. I'd seen *Streetcar* and another early play here. Kazan and his wife came to Yugoslavia and spent perhaps three weeks. We went everywhere. Traveled all over. He met all the theater people, saw their productions, gave them lots of advice.

I read in the newspaper that Isaac Stern was in Venice. I called him up and said, "I'm Francis Mason, the cultural attaché at the embassy in Belgrade. Why don't you come over here and do a couple of recitals?" Stern said, "What?! When do you want me?" I said, "I can put you on day after tomorrow." He said, "You're kidding." I said, "No, fly over." He said, "I have a rehearsal with Leonard Bernstein in Florence at the end of the week." I said, "Don't worry, we'll get our air attaché to fly you back." He said, "Mason, you're crazy." I said, "Not at all, get on a plane and come."

He arrived two days later, in the morning. Six o'clock in the morning. He said, "What are we doing?" I said, "Well, you're going to play." The Yugoslavs were just overwhelmed. Then he played in Zagreb, and they loved it. Stern was a formidable musician and one of the most intelligent men in the world.

They loved his music. They thought he was – how did they put it – the most beautiful music in the world played by the ugliest man. He was short and fat. He could really talk to the Yugoslavs very straightforwardly. He was our friend from then on. We used to see the Sterns whenever we came to New York and did until the end of his days. We all know he saved Carnegie Hall. He and his wife, Vera, did magnificent things. A great man.

When Louis Armstrong came to Belgrade, of course it was an absolute sensation. Well, we knew that: Armstrong is a sensation. He traveled around and everybody was just overwhelmed. Eleanor Steber, the opera singer, came and sang.

American orchestras were another matter. The Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra came and had a big success, but what did they play?

Beethoven! Mozart! They played a European repertory, same as the Belgrade Philharmonic played. I was stubborn and awful and said to the State Department, "Please don't send us any more orchestras. The Yugoslavs have symphony orchestras and *they* play Beethoven, Schubert, and Schumann." They said, "But Mason . . ."

George Szell, then the greatest conductor in North America, and his Cleveland orchestra were scheduled to visit. I called him up and said, "I hear you're coming to Belgrade." He said, "Yes, we look forward to that very much." I said, "And what are you going to play, Mr. Szell? A five-minute American piece?" He said, "How did you know? It's four minutes, actually." I said, "You think that if you play a token piece of American music and then the standard repertory you'll make a big hit. I don't want that, I'm not interested in that." He said, "What are you saying?" I said, "I don't think the Cleveland Orchestra should come to Belgrade if that's all you've got." He was furious and they didn't come.

I told the State Department to send conductors instead. Send us American conductors who can work with the Yugoslavs on the classical repertory and on new music. They were great and cabled, "What about Leopold Stokowski?" Well, he was my hero as a teenager in Philadelphia. He came to Belgrade – alone!

I thought it'd be a good idea not to do the usual thing and put him with the Belgrade Philharmonic. I arranged for him to conduct the Yugoslav Army Symphony Orchestra, which was then an up-and-coming young institution.

Stokowski, bless him, worked with them like a dog for weeks, at the end of which they had a concert under his direction that shook Belgrade. I mean, the Belgrade Philharmonic being upstaged by the *Army* orchestra? It was wonderful. He was wonderful. He got to know all the local young composers.

I thought the Yugoslavs should see American painting, which was very important to me. Locally there were a lot of painters, a number of whom I knew. They were all associated

with or tied in with the 1910s, 1920s, 1930s school of Paris. That's all very well, but we were doing something new in America and I wanted them to see it.

The Museum of Modern Art at that time, headed by René d'Harnoncourt, had a huge exhibition touring Europe called Modern Art in the United States. It had been at the Tate in London, it had been in Paris. I went up to Vienna when it was being shown there. A huge show, something like 120 paintings and, I don't know, some 50 or 60 sculptures – *big* sculptures, like Lachaise's *Floating Woman* from MoMA's sculpture garden, Elie Nadelman, lots of drawings, and a lot of photographs.

I asked d'Harnoncourt, "Would you send this show to Belgrade? I think it's important that the Yugoslavs see the new art scene in America. They don't know anything about it." He replied, "Well, that's very difficult, after Vienna we're scheduled to go to Rome." Then I said, "Rome? The Romans have had everything."

D'Harnoncourt answered, "You know, you are right." I said, "Send it to us instead." He said, "How preposterous." I said, "No, not at all." He asked, "Can you put on all this stuff?" I said, "Sure!" although I didn't really know what I was talking about. But I knew the heads of galleries in lots of places in Belgrade where I thought we could put the work. He cancelled Rome and sent Modern Art in the United States to Belgrade.

My ambassador, James W. Riddleberger, a wonderful man with a wife who was very interested in the arts, had gone to see the exhibition and said, "Mason, this will be ghastly. What have you done? It's going to be appalling. The Yugoslavs will be angry. They'll hate it." I said, "Mr. Ambassador, can't we wait and see? I want to have a big opening. There's going to be a reception." He said, "I don't want a big opening and reception. Just open the show quietly." I said okay. He said, "I think you've made a big mistake."

Belgrade was then a town of 500,000 people, if I remember correctly. At any rate, we opened the show quietly. All the young people

came. Twenty-five thousand people came to see it. Did you hear what I just said? Twenty-five thousand people! They stormed the place. They couldn't believe what this was, this American manifestation, in galleries all over town: photographs here, drawings over there, sculptures everywhere.

Geduld: What year was this?

Mason: 1955 or 1956. I was very pleased. It had a great deal to do with changing the youth of Yugoslavia to an American point of view. It had nothing to do with politics. Jackson Pollock doesn't have anything to do with politics, De Kooning. Rothko, too, and we had their most important work.

The State Department was important for their openness in using the arts in America in response to Soviet artistic exports. They saw, and they knew from our embassies abroad, the power of the Soviets to try to rule the world. Later, Martha came to Yugoslavia – I had arranged for her to come – just as I was leaving. She had a wonderful triumph in Belgrade and in Zagreb.

I was transferred to London, kicking and screaming. I'd been in London during the war. What was a cultural officer going to do in London? At the time the Labor Party was giving America a hard time politically. It was the Eisenhower administration. He was a great war hero to the British, but they didn't like our position with the Soviets. It was not an easy time. The British press was much more anti-American than the Yugoslav press had been.

In London, I got to know Clive Barnes, who was the up-and-coming critic on the *Daily Express* and an editor with Peter Williams of the magazine called *Dance and Dancers*. Clive was very keen on Graham and kept saying, "You gotta bring Graham to London." I told him, "We can't do that." He said, "But she's just been to Germany. She's been in Helsinki."

I said, "Yes, but Germany and Helsinki are contiguous to the Soviet Union. That's why she's there." He said, "But why can't she come here?" I said, "The American government will not pay to send her to the United Kingdom.

Find somebody who'll pay for it, and we'll try to pick her up as she goes again to the Continent." I arranged that with the State Department and they said, "Sure, but you've got to find somebody who'll pay for her."

One day, a man named Robin Howard called me. He was an Englishman who ran a hotel and a restaurant. He had seen Graham when she first came to England, when she'd been such a disaster, only a couple of dozen people in the theater, night after night. Wretched reviews. Only Andrew Porter and Dicky [Richard] Buckle, the best people, had come and covered her. But then Dicky found Robin, who asked how much it would cost to bring Graham. I named a figure and he said, "That doesn't frighten me." It was forty thousand dollars, twenty thousand dollars a week.

The London season was an incredible triumph for Graham. She really shook London. Two weeks at the Prince of Wales Theatre, *sold out*. You see, I had had lunch with Robin and Clive, and Clive had a brilliant idea: "Look, Robin, get her to the Edinburgh Festival in August, before she comes to London. We'll all go to Edinburgh and review her, and then you'll sell out."

Clive and Dicky and others went to the festival to see the Graham season for a week. Edinburgh's a Presbyterian town and some of Martha's work is not very palatable to that situation. But the festival had an international audience. They went *mad* for Graham and it was a bloody triumph. Barnes and Buckle reviewed it in the *Daily Express* and the *Observer*, respectively, in London, and by the time the company came to town we were selling out! It was for Martha a *big* thing, to turn London around.

After the first night, my wife and I had a big party for Martha, a dinner. Everyone came. Ninette de Valois, Marie Rambert, John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier, everyone. Rambert, who was a big fan of Martha's, called me up a couple of days after we opened – she had gone back to see Graham again – and said, "Francis, I went down to my seat, looked around, and said, 'Who *are* all these people?'" And I

said, “We’re in now, aren’t we?” She said, “You said it boy, you’re in.”

When Robin decided to start a school to teach Graham technique and to get a modern repertory into the United Kingdom, he asked Rambert to be on his board, and she said yes. Don’t fight ‘em, join ‘em. That was Madame’s intelligence. She was really, really something. Rambert was the joy of my life in London. She was a corker.

Geduld: Graham went to Asia. Why that particular location?

Mason: It was the government’s idea. She wanted to go to Europe, but the Eisenhower administration said, “No, we want you to go to Asia.”

Geduld: Do you know why?

Mason: Sure: because all those countries were anti-American. The British – good God – should have been in our pockets, but even they weren’t! No one was in our pockets, really.

The Asians were stubborn and didn’t like the United States of America. The State Department quite rightly had sense enough to say to Martha that she must go there. Martha had been with Denishawn and knew Ruth St. Denis’ devotion to that part of the world.

Martha was a fantastic woman. She knew everything! There was never a more cultivated person than Martha Graham. She really could stand up with the best of them. She would have press conferences and talk to people. She handled all that *so well*, but it was the power of her presence and the drama that she put onstage that won everybody’s heart.

Geduld: Did you have any interaction with Eisenhower? Or was it through intermediaries?

Mason: Always through intermediaries. I met the President when he came to London, on a state visit, in the first couple years I was there. People always thought that Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was just a reactionary Republican. On the contrary, he and his State Department sponsored all of this stuff.

I’m looking right now for an old issue of *Dance Chronicle* [vol. 23, no. 1, 2000], in which

I have an article about the State Department’s programs. It’s a review. . . . There was a book, *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy in the Cold War*.

Geduld: Yes, by Naima Prevots.

Mason: The review is only three or four pages. You may have it if you’d like.*

Geduld: Thank you, Francis. You were obviously a very special cultural attaché. You had a long experience and a great understanding of the arts. Was everyone like you?

Mason: Sure! There were a lot of people. I can’t speak about all my colleagues, but most of the ones I knew were very cultivated men and women. It was the most exciting job in the world! To be able to show aspects of the United States of America that we personally loved and knew would have an impact if it were let loose.

London got excited about the new work of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. Rauschenberg had just won the Venice Biennale. I wired Leo Castelli, whom I knew here in New York, and Leo arranged for Bob to stop in London on the way back. Then we arranged for him to have a big exhibition in London, at the Whitechapel Gallery, which hundreds of thousands of people saw. We got Bob on British television.

Jerry Robbins, when he broke away from City Ballet, formed his small company Ballets: USA, with Kay Mazzo and others. They had been this big hit at the Spoleto Festival in Italy. I arranged for them to come to London, where they had an earthshaking success.

Geduld: The whole Dulles thing is so interesting. He understood this?

Mason: Yes!

Geduld: Do you think Secretary Dulles understood modern art?

Mason: At first nobody had the sense to see that if the Soviets were exporting their art,

* In Mason’s review of *Dance for Export*, he wrote, “I wish [Prevots] had given as much detail from overseas reports . . .” With this sentence, he gave me the gift of inspiration for my doctoral dissertation, nearing completion at Columbia University. I remain forever grateful. – V. P. G.

why didn't we do the same? Dulles saw that it worked. President Eisenhower was a conservative Sunday painter, but he saw the impact the work made, and the impact that the artists personally made because they all would have press conferences. They could talk and if there was anything wrong with the United States from their point of view, they wouldn't hesitate to say so. Foreigners were overwhelmed by that.

I heard Isaac Stern say, at dinner after one of his first concerts in Belgrade, "Has [David] Oistrakh been here?" "Oh, of course," they said. Isaac said, "Aha! The Soviets send you their violinist from Odessa. I'm from Odessa too, and America sends you its violinist from Odessa. It's one world, ladies and gentlemen!"

Geduld: You worked under the Kennedy administration, too. Was there a transition or was it seamless, something that already had been set in motion?

Mason: It was seamless. We had great ambassadors in London when I was there. First John Hay Whitney under the Republican administration. And then under Kennedy, David Bruce, a career ambassador who was astute and fantastic, with a wonderful wife who knew and cared about every manifestation of American culture.

I answered the phone one morning: "Francis, this is Evangeline Bruce. I see Marlene Dietrich's in town. Why don't you get her for lunch on Thursday?" I'd arranged for Bob Rauschenberg, I think, for the Bruces to have lunch with that day . . . or maybe it was Jasper Johns. And she said, "Well, why not have them both."

Merce Cunningham came to London, and

Pat and I planned a big party for the company at our house. I invited the ambassador and his wife. "Come to the performance, and to the party." Well, they went to the performance. David Bruce and Merce Cunningham, come on! Bruce couldn't see the point of any of it. He asked, "Francis, is this really good?"

"Yes, Mister Ambassador, take it from me, it is good and the reviews tomorrow will say so." His wife was an angel and wanted to know anything that she should see or go to. I'd take her, or she and the ambassador would go, or I'd arrange for them to go. She knew the cultural scene; he knew how important it was.

They had a lot of respect for the work that we did in the cultural section of the embassy. The ambassador was kind enough to say when I left London in 1965 that I was the best-known and best-liked American official in London. Well, I said, "That's wonderful." And he said, "Nonsense, you've done it. Every person in the arts you speak to knows who Francis Mason is." We worked with British organizations to get all these people involved. It was not just the universities, the academic world, we took interest in.

Today, our cultural officers around the world we hope are helping to facilitate people in other countries to understand what we're doing. The budgets have been cut. I dare say there are half as many cultural officers as we used to have. But there's no better representation for the United States of America than the arts. And the individuals whose work can speak to millions of people, like nobody else. Trust the arts. Get our people out there. It'll work. You don't have to say anything, just show it.