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# Ballet Review



**A Conversation  
with Betty Nichols  
from Ballet Review  
Fall 2013**

Cover Photograph by Marty Sohl,  
ABT: Polina Semionova and  
Marcelo Gomes in Alexei  
Ratmansky's *Symphony #9*.

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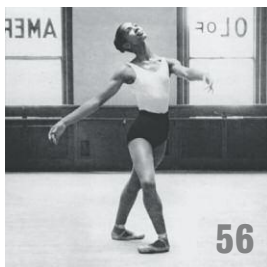
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- 4 New York – Harris Green
- 6 Brooklyn – George Jackson
- 7 St. Petersburg – Kevin Ng
- 8 New York – Harris Green
- 9 Stuttgart – Gary Smith
- 11 New York – Sandra Genter
- 12 Stuttgart – Gary Smith
- 13 London – David Mead
- 15 Chicago – Joseph Houseal
- 16 Toronto – Gary Smith
- 17 New York – Harris Green
- 18 Rome – Joseph Houseal

**David Vaughan**

- 20 *On Your Toes*

**Jay Rogoff**

- 26 *Summer Varieties*

**Karen Greenspan**

- 37 *Personal Territory*

**Gerhard Brunner**

- 41 *Sag Harbor*

**Joseph Houseal**

- 44 *The Khmer Dance Project*

**Jeffrey Gantz**

- 46 *Momentum*

**Joel Lobenthal**

- 56 *A Conversation with Betty Nichols*

**Julia Ritter**

- 61 *Claudia Gitelman (1936-2012)*

**Lisa Traiger**

- 62 *Northern Exposure*

**Francis Mason**

- 67 *Bonnie Bird on Graham*

**Francis Mason**

- 74 *Nina Fonaroff on Graham*

**David Vaughan**

- 78 *Ashton and Ratmansky at ABT*

**Darrell Wilkins**

- 84 *Meta-Sex-Cinema*

- 89 *London Reporter – Clement Crisp*

- 95 *Bennington Redux – Alice Helpern*

- 96 *Music on Disc – George Dorris*

- 100 *Check It Out*

# A Conversation with Betty Nichols

Joel Lobenthal

Betty Nichols: I started at the School of American Ballet, probably in 1943. I was the first black in the school. I knocked on the door and presented myself. I thought there was considerable surprise, but the door was opened and that was it. After a while I was offered a scholarship, and so I had to stop doing Broadway shows. You had to have all your energy.

BR: Musicals, that's what you were doing before?

Nichols: Well, just one, *Carmen Jones*.

BR: Who was the choreographer?

Nichols: Eugene Loring. He was from [Balanchine and Kirstein's] American Ballet company, and he was delighted when I told him that I was at the school. SAB was wonderful. Our teachers were fantastic. Oboukhov was the love of my life – the love of everybody's life. Great, great teacher.

BR: What dance had you done before then?

Nichols: In Philadelphia I did primarily modern dance. I was in a ballet school. Bad ballet, I mean the worst. But it gave me an appetite for it. Later I went to better schools. At the time in Philadelphia, modern was better. I studied with Merrill Hirsh. She's still dancing, someone told me. Then Marjorie Mazia, a dancer and teacher, mostly modern. She was married to Woody Guthrie.

I came here to New York and my first few months I took a summer course with Hanya Holm. She had a studio; she lived above it. I can't remember where it was. I did special music classes there with John Colman. He used to play occasionally for class at SAB. That was something out of this world.

From time to time SAB would say, "All right

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In February 1983 Betty Nichols (1924–2010) spoke with BR on a visit from her home in Lausanne at the start of the fiftieth-anniversary celebrations for the School of American Ballet.

you can do this," on Broadway. I worked with Antony Tudor in *St. Louis Woman* and became a friend of his. Loved the man. Still do. I worked also with Michael Kidd for a very short time in *Finian's Rainbow*. I went in as a replacement. It was only eight weeks, I think. Then I went into *Inside U.S.A.* Valerie Bettis was our star dancer. Helen Tamiris did the choreography. That was the last Broadway thing I did, in 1948.

BR: By 1946, Ballet Society was happening all around you at the school.

Nichols: The whole period was astounding. We had the chance to watch rehearsals, watch the creation. We had direct contact with these people. It was not a big major company. It was like a family. The organization is so different now.

I saw all the marvelous rehearsals for *The Four Temperaments*. The wonderful thing in *Sanguinic*: the lift where the legs go out, the pushing; I haven't seen anyone do it as beautifully as Mary Ellen Moylan. There was a softness, the movement really never ended.

We kids were terribly excited about every production. Choreographers would come in. Very often they knew the top people they wanted for the principal things, but for the corps de ballet they would watch classes and select. Then you would go outside, and over the water cooler on the bulletin board there were the names of those who were chosen.

I remember when Todd Bolender came in to do *Zodiac*. Obviously, everybody wanted to be in the ballet. Great effervescence, nervousness. I thought, I am the only one who is not going to be nervous in this class because I know I'm not going to be chosen. It never occurred to me. So I did my class quite normally, and when we came out, everybody was going to the water cooler to see the names that were posted. Someone said, "Betty your name's here; you're in it!" I said, "Oh, sure." "No, but really!" That, of course, was the great surprise and joy. It was wonderful working with Todd. Bill Dollar danced. We were Gemini, the twins that upset the *Zodiac*. I was a virgin.

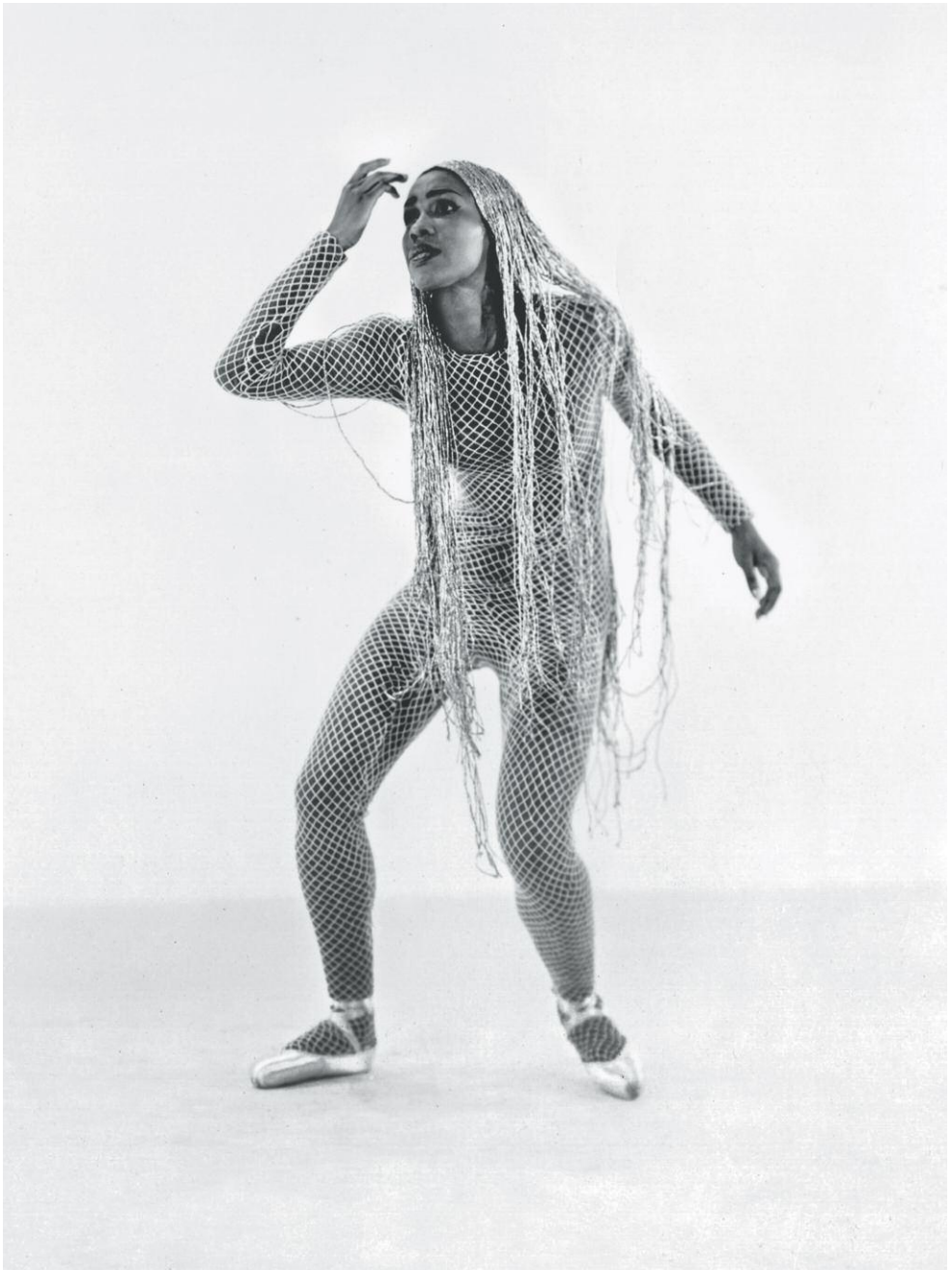
BR: You were Virgo.

Nichols: Yes, and so I became the sort of *fille*

*de joie* when everything was reversed. Have you seen any photos of the decor? There were ropes.

BR: No, but I've seen a picture of you in the costume, also by Esteban Francés.

Nichols: Yes, it was a kind of net, and they dyed the leotard my skin color. I had long, long twisted metallic gold ribbons for hair. It was spectacular. There was a little variation done on the ropes with a cigarette. I'd never smoked



Betty Nichols in Todd Bolender's *Zodiac*. (Photo: New York City Ballet Archives)



At the School of American Ballet. (Photo: Ballet Society Collection, NYCB Archives)

a cigarette before, and I was worried. I thought that the hair could go up in flames.

In 1949 I decided that I was going to take every penny out of the bank and go on a three-month cultural vacation to Europe. I had a friend at the school, Hilda Garcia. She was going to go with me, but she got a job with José Greco and went to Spain. Then I inherited her younger sister, Ana, who was also at the school. Ana said she would come with me. That was fine. We had our tickets. Everything was done. Then she auditioned for Alicia Alonso's company and was accepted. She was overjoyed. As soon as Tanny [Tanaquil Le Clercq] knew about that, she called me: "Betty, can I take Ana's place?" That's how it was that we went.

Tanny had been fantastic in Ballet Society. We were just breathless because she was so beautiful. She had a very special thing, already when she was very young. She had wit. You didn't see it in ballet then. You don't see it much in ballet now. There was nothing precious about her. Just the opposite: she was absolutely sophisticated. Tanny was something original. You can't say that she was contemporary with something new going up. She was unique. I would say, "Kid, you're great."

I forget which ballet that was, but I could not come to the opening at City Center because I was working. It was during *Inside U.S.A.* But I was so happy for her, and worried about it at the same time. I got huge helium balloons

with ribbons attached and tied-on toys – big, splashy lollipops and all kinds of toys – to give for such a young, baby ballerina.

It had to have been a matinee day, Wednesday or Saturday. I did all this, and then took it to the theater before I went back for my evening performance. I left it with the doorman: “Please give this to Tanny Le Clercq.”

Balanchine saw it when he came into the theater, and he said it must be presented to her onstage. He knew immediately that that would create an ambiance. At the end, instead of bringing flowers, they came out with this. Tanny told me that people went wild. Everyone knew she was young and they were just absolutely delighted.

Tanny and I went to Europe on the *De Graff*. It took nine days. We had first class. Tchelitchew was going back to Paris because Louis Jouvet was doing the Jean Giraudoux *Ondine* again. Tchelitchew had done the costumes and sets, which were spectacular. That was one of the reasons that he was going; he wanted to see that. Well, he was our godfather. When we got to Paris, we had entrée everywhere. He introduced us to everybody. 1949 was a fantastic year in Paris. Everything was happening. Everybody was there. It was recovering from the war fast.

Tanny and I had been in Paris a week. We were walking on the *pavé* of St. Chapelle and heard “Betty! Tanny!” We turned; it was Merce Cunningham and John Cage. “We’re going to have a recital. You’ve got to do it with us.” I knew Merce because he was at SAB. He took class. I didn’t know him personally, but Tanny had danced Merce’s *Seasons* at Ballet Society.

The Cage music was very difficult. I remember being terrified because he gave us such liberty – already – that I said, “I’m never going to know when to come in.”

“That’s all right, that’s all right,” Merce said. “You’ll find it.” But I was never sure. I don’t think I was doing it the same each time.

BR: He didn’t care.

Nichols: Exactly, it didn’t seem to matter. At that time I didn’t know anything about that.

Maybe even Merce didn’t. Maybe that was just beginning. We had ballet shoes and we wore rehearsal clothes. We had tights and a sweater. Pat McBride’s mother used to knit these sweaters for dancers.

It was done in the painter Jean Héliou’s studio. There was tremendous publicity about the program. It was the first time Paris had ever seen anything like that, and it was so astounding that they didn’t know how to criticize it. So what they said was – they always fall back on this when they can’t think of anything else – “It was so beautiful.” Giacometti was there, and Alice B. Toklas. *Le tout Paris* came. People said that we were Giacomettis: Tanny, Merce, and I were very long and thin, all three of us.

Tchelitchew was ill already by then. Actually when he had tickets to see the Giraudoux, he was ill. We went and of course we went backstage to see Jouvet. We had seen foreign films and had seen the great Jouvet. He was a man who was always acting, on and off the stage, it seemed to me. Anyway, he was when we were there. We were very much impressed by him.

We had tea with Leonor Fini, and she decided that I should take part in a pageant at this great ball given for Lady Diana Duff Cooper at a fantastic house on the Rue des Livres. All the young girls from high society in Paris took part. They were supposed to be the virgins and all wore beautiful white dresses. Fini said, “And you must.” I said, “Well, Tanny has to come, too.” We thought, We don’t belong in this company. We’d better take our own young men; otherwise no one will ever dance with us.

We took Merce and John. We had so much fun. Of course it was black tie. Merce had some kind of black jacket, but he didn’t have black shoes. He found a pair of basketball shoes, sports shoes with a white rubber sole, and dyed them with India ink. He looked so handsome.

We went to see Roland Petit’s Ballets de Paris, his *Carmen*, and thought it was charming. We were not shocked, but, Well, that’s French! And *L’Oeuf à la Coque* with Colette

Marchand. I think we liked that even better. It was so much fun. There was a lift she had to do that was very extravagant, very complicated, terribly dangerous. We both said, "I wouldn't like to have to do that!" And within two weeks I was doing it!

We went backstage to see Joy Williams, an American friend. She had been at SAB and was now with Petit's company. On the way we passed in front of Roland's dressing room. He always had a whole host of women, a court. One of these women came and said, "Roland wants to see you." He said he'd seen me in New York. He came to the school for a visit with Belinda Wright, who was also in *Carmen*.

"I would like to see you dance because I need someone to replace Colette Marchand. She's going to be away for a while. Does that interest you? I want to see you dance," and he suggested an audition. I said, "Yes, of course. But I am going to dance with Merce Cunningham." All right, he'd come to see that, but he arrived just as we were finishing. So then Merce, being so generous, said, "We will do it again just for you." It was at one of the small theaters. Roland arranged that, and we did the program again for him.

Marchand coached me in *L'Oeuf à la Coque* and I said, "Oh, I'm terrified of that lift," that famous lift that we had seen. "I'm afraid he's going to fall, and he'll fall right on my head." And she said, she spoke English for the moment, "Serge [Perrault] will never let you fall." He was like André Eglevsky, strong.

I wore Colette's costume: very pretty, black, cut down like this, quite low. We were the same height, had the same legs. When I put it on, it was perfect. They said that they didn't have to do anything to the costume. But I never rehearsed in it, and once I put it on for the first performance, I saw that I was going to be exposed. Colette was a little shorter in the torso. I was horrified.

I found Roland. It was only minutes before

the curtain, and he didn't understand English well. "Roland, what are we going to do? They'll stop the show and put me in jail. Don't you see?" "What are you talking about?" he asked. "Philadelphia Nichols" they called me. I had come from Broadway, where at that time that couldn't be done. They did do one show, I forgot which one it was. They had caryatids and they could be bare, but they couldn't move.

Later I danced the ballet with Roland. He was fantastic. The costume had a kind of necklace, beads, a high collar. I had a fine gold chain. I wore it all the time. Before I went on, I had left the chain on. He saw it and said, "You have to take that off." I admired him for it, for the discipline, perfection. I did; I was pleased to take it off. Except that I'm not so sure that that perfection was applied to more important things too.

Later I did a tiny role in a Brecht play. It was done by a group of actors from Jean-Louis Barrault's company who formed a group to do avant-garde pieces. I met them through Hélion and his wife, Pegeen Guggenheim. Truth be known, I have always been more of an actress than a dancer. My classical technique was never good. I supposed I had what you call presence more than anything else. It surely wasn't technique.

So much had happened for me in France that I decided that I would stay, not indefinitely, but I said, "I'm going to stay longer. I'm not going home." Tanny said, "I will stay, too. I'm going to stay with you." Then she got a telegram from the school and a letter from her mother saying that she had to come back. She owed it to the school. She was already the great hope of the school. She had to go back immediately. I remember Tanny cried. She wanted to stay so badly.

Of course she went back to become prima ballerina and Mrs. Balanchine. And I stayed in Europe and in 1951 got married to Jacques Schibler.