



## **Remembering Frank Bourman, 1934-2008**

*by Anne Easterling*

There are four teachers from my training years as a dancer who made an indelible impression on me as a child, and who have left their mark on me as a person. Frank Bourman is one of those teachers.

I consider Mr. Bourman to be my first “true” ballet teacher, even though technically he was my third. I wanted to study ballet because I had had a fascination with fancy shoes from the time I could first walk, and I loved moving to music and wrapping myself in my mother’s old prom dresses and pretending they were tutus. So finally when I was seven years old my mother took me to the Minnesota Dance Theatre (MDT) for my first dance lessons, and she enrolled me in a modern dance class. I was shocked to learn that, not only did I not get to wear pointe shoes, but I was not allowed to wear ANY shoes because it was modern dance. I recovered though and went on to love my dance class and love my teacher.

A year or so later I finally enrolled in a ballet class, and I didn’t like it at all, because it was so rigid and boring compared to modern class, and we never got to move freely. However, the following year (the fall of 1977, I believe) Mr. Bourman came to MDT, and my feelings about ballet completely changed. Ever since then, ballet has been my favorite discipline.

He made just standing in first position fun; he made every gesture and every step interesting and engaging. He would give fabulous imitations of us when we would do a step incorrectly - I remember his outlandish imitation of a football player when we danced with our shoulders up, or his “farmer-in-the-dell” imitation when we bounced too much during pas de basque. He also had an extraordinary way of expressing surprise at our thoughts and actions - he would press his hands against his cheeks and google his eyes and raise his eyebrows - he could always twist his face into an indescribable expression. If I had to describe his personality in one word, it would be outrageous.

I remember how he would give us the same class for one or two weeks, and would expect us to remember the combinations for the next class after learning them only once in the first class. For the second class he would call on us to demonstrate the exercises, and he would make a goofy face if we couldn’t remember them. I had a knack for remembering combinations and therefore became the reliable source for my classmates to turn to before class for a quick review. I remember the feeling of responsibility mixed with pride that I had because I could remember all of the combinations. I would always review all of



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the combinations during the hour-long bus ride that I took to get from school to ballet class so that I could demonstrate any combination if called upon.

As I recall, I don't think he used many words when teaching - he mostly used his body and his face, and a few economical sentences. I remember the contrast between the general quietness of his class and the bursts of laughter he would elicit from us when he would do or say something funny.

I also remember with enormous pride the Bournonville combination that he taught us. I was the first student in my class to master the combination, and I can still remember him asking me to demonstrate it for the entire class - I remember the exact copen blue leotard that I was wearing, I remember the look of the studio - and of course I remember the steps.

Mr. Bourman left MDT after about two or three years, but I continued to study ballet as well as modern. When I was 13 I attended a summer program at San Francisco Ballet with three other classmates from MDT and there we met Eric Bourman, who was about the same age as we and who, in our eyes, possessed super-star celebrity status because he was the son of Mr. Bourman. I remember the first time that I ever stepped foot in the Pacific Ocean was with Eric.

I have been teaching ballet now since 1997, and I usually give my students the same set class for one or two weeks, and push my students to remember the combinations from class to class, as Mr. Bourman did. I teach his Bournonville combination to all of my students, once they are ready. I always tell them too who taught me the combination, and I tell them about how fabulous Mr. Bourman was, and about his wacky loopy mustache. I tell them about his white shirt and white pants that he wore, with his curly chest hair sprouting out of the part in the v-neck of his shirt, and the whiff of his cologne that I would sniff as he passed by. I tell them about how ballet is a tradition passed down from generation to generation, and how Mr. Bourman is their teacher too.

I am so saddened to hear of his death. I will never ever forget him, and I so wish that I could have told him about my own work and my own students and how much a part of that he is before he passed on.