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YVONNE MOUNSEY

Posted by Joanne DiVito | Jun 6, 2019



Westside School of Ballet has been a home for thousands of young dancers both in the world of dance and beyond. We will be celebrating the creator, founder and spirit of Westside Ballet, the late but ever alive, Yvonne Mounsey on her 100th Birthday.

The Two days of festivities begin with a [Westside Ballet](#) Gala Fundraiser on **Saturday, June 8, 2019** (5pm Gala Reception, 6pm Performance, dinner following), and **June 9**, at **1pm** and **5pm**, **Westside's Spring Performances**. Both at the Broad Stage, at Santa Monica Performing Arts Center.



Yvonne Mounsey in Serenade – Photo
courtesy of Westside Ballet

In search of Westside's legacy, I interviewed some of their *dance warriors*. And from their forest of imagery, a clear picture emerged of this iconic school and training ground and the obvious question surfaced, *What did Yvonne and Rosemary instill in their students that produced such success?* While talking to Westside alumni, the picture came into focus: A child, innocent to this world and its challenges, believing they're coming to learn to dance and have fun, comes away with so much more. Slowly, gently they are

imbued, step by step, with the fun and passion for movement and art, music and family, along with the fortitude, discipline and

fearlessness to change; to define one's self as an artist, creates hope for a better and kinder world. Its secret is love, and respect! Its Spirit, Yvonne Mounsey; Its leaders and messengers, Yvonne, Rosemary, Caprice, Nadir, Martine and Westside's returning warriors of dance. They bring their love for dance and movement, teamwork and joy, most of all, their stories. This is Yvonne Mounsey and Westside Ballet's legacy. It has been since 1967. Grown like flowers, is the courage, artistry and leadership that is gifted to the world in the form of dance and theatre.

Several dancers featured in the Saturday Gala agreed to spend a few moments with me, answering some short but provocative questions. The artists were:

- **Francis Veyette**, (Westside alumni and former Principal dancer with Pennsylvania Ballet, Master teacher and now Faculty of Miami City Ballet),
- **Melissa Barak**, (former NYCB ballerina and choreographer, the Founder and Artistic Director of the groundbreaking **Barak Ballet**). Both will speak at the Gala on Saturday evening.
- **Lauren Fadeley**, former NYCB, Pennsylvania Ballet, a Bachelor of Science from Indiana University and now Principal Artist with Miami City Ballet,
- **Nicole Haskins**, dancer and choreographer, Sacramento Ballet, Washington Ballet, Smuin Ballet, and recent graduate of Saint Mary's College of California, the LEAP program with a BA in Performing Arts, and moving onto resident choreographer for Mid-Columbia Ballet in Washington State
- **Lyrice Blankfein (Woodruff)** triple-threat performer of Broadway and TV fame. (*Anastasia*, *Bunheads*, *Boston Commons*).
- **Lucia Connolly**, On her third season of the renowned Joffrey Ballet.

Their candidness and contribution shed much light on Yvonne and Westside's legacy along with their personal stories. They grace the Broad stage in Santa Monica this Saturday evening June 8, 2019.

JD: In your career, what did Yvonne and/or Rosemary instill in you that you attribute to your success?

Lyrice: I basically was born at Westside...my sister danced at Westside since she was 5 and she's 8 years older than me. After I was born my mom took me directly from the hospital to go pick up my sister from class. Yvonne really took me under her wing. From the time I was 2 years old, I would sit in the back while they were rehearsing "Flowers" and by the end I was practically in the front doing "Flowers"



(L-R) Joy Womack (formerly of Bolshoi), Lauren Fadeley, Andrew Veyelle, Dylan Gutierrez,

full out. Yvonne was more than just a teacher or mentor, to me she was like my grandma...like my family.

Lucia Connolly – Photo by Todd Lechtick

Melissa: I liked how they allowed us to love dance. Westside created an atmosphere of love and passion for dance. Because you loved it so much you worked hard. It allowed you to be creative, be yourself, be individual...to love and respect everything that ballet is about ...it instilled that feeling. In their approach to teaching, they were stern but very caring at the same time. They expected a lot from you but the joy of music, performing, acting – being imaginative – it was all just part of the daily culture. They instilled that love that stayed with me and kept me going through the harder times. That love never left me...

Fran: Westside had a “Standard” The standards they set; I use in my own teaching all the time. Be sparing with your praise and sparing with your discipline...make sure that both are earned. They were always pushing you to be better. That didn’t mean that it wasn’t good enough it just meant that “it was good for now, and what are you going to do to make it better?”

When I started out I was the only one in my family who was dancing. I had two brothers. Andy did gymnastics but then he came to ballet one year later and Michael played football and came to ballet the year after Andy. We were competitive with each other just by virtue of being brothers. But at Westside you were competitive with everyone, yet you loved them and supported them and still wanted them to do well...that was a normal thing. Yvonne and Rosemary created an environment where you wanted to be competitive, but competitive with yourself.



Andrew Veyette, Lauren Fadeley
– Principals with NYC Ballet and
Miami City Ballet – Photo by
Todd Lechtick

Nicole: One of the most incredible things about Westside is that it completely prepared me to be a professional dancer. Even when you were a little kid, they always thought that you were smart and capable enough to be given a particular responsibility...that no one needed to be in the wings doing your choreography, that you were capable of having all the information and putting on a show, just like a professional would.

So, I was an apprentice for one year, and joined a company. I don’t think that happens very much now – I think there’s second company tracks now. However, I do think so much concentration is just on the technique, or just on the dancing itself. I think the students need to learn how to be a professional, how to learn choreography, how to deal with problems on stage, how to do your own makeup and hair. I think Westside was an amazing school in the fact that it truly prepared you for the rigors of the ballet world.

I’ve encountered more dancers that are nervous, really fearful, they can’t deal with last minute changes, which are all things that happen in professional companies. Someone goes out last minute and you must make adjustments. I feel like Westside

taught us professionalism, which I think comes from respecting the students.

Lucia: I started dancing because my sister started, she loved it, but I was 5 and I just thought it was fun, because I could spend all day Saturday with my friends. Yvonne was really passionate about dance and she made it very clear it was a way to express yourself. I think that was the way to my success. She instilled the importance of artistry. At the end of the day, dance is not just how high your leg is going.

Lauren: I taught for Westside for the first time a few summers ago when Fran, my husband, and I were visiting the family. I always heard of the studio, and seeing their photos up on the wall, seeing all that history....

For me I always heard about the studio's legacy... there's all those posters of Yvonne and I looked at them and realized I danced all her roles because I was a taller girl and Yvonne was of tall stature. A lot of the roles like the *Prodigal's Son*, the Queen in *The Cage* were created on Yvonne, and I got to dance those parts. I just did the four temperaments ... and to get into the studio and see her pictures, I felt the connection. it's just an honor for me to be a part of the gala.



(L-R) Lucia Connolly, Dylan Gutierrez – Both with Joffrey Ballet – Photo by Todd Lechtick

JD: *Yvonne had a favorite quote, "Ballet is a beautiful art, but a very cruel profession." How might that resonate with you personally?*

Fran: It's really hard work and really competitive so the end goal is always to create something beautiful – so people can go away with something special.

Melissa: Growing up at Westside I was one of the ones...who had real promise. I got to fulfill that through performing. I got recognition through the roles I danced. But when I got to SAB and eventually New York City Ballet it was like a splash of cold water in the face. I realized, *Oh, I'm not the only good dancer out there*. That was a little hard for me, to be honest. That real competition, not competition amongst just good dancers but some of the best dancers from across the country were there.

It's very cruel, I certainly experienced it. It's not any particular director...it's the nature of itself. It's incredibly competitive and exhausting, it's incredibly physically and emotionally taxing, especially when you fall in love with it. It's hard, it's like any relationship. Rejection is just part of life and it can be incredibly painful. When you're a professional and you care so much, you want to see your career go to a certain place. People hit ceilings at various stages of their dance careers, some very early, some when they're still in school; others in professional companies realize they can only go so far. So, it is a cruel profession because you love it so much and want so much from it. There's not always a big return on that love and care. You learn to be appreciative and love it for what you can get from it, or you have to decide if it's time to move on...it's like any relationship.



Rosemary Valaire, Yvonne Mounsey - Photo courtesy of Westside Ballet



Lyrica: It's the perfect quote of what ballet is...it's cruel mentally and physically – some don't mind it – I wanted something more than that. Yvonne knew I wanted to be a professional dancer, specifically for ballet but she turned to my mom during one of our jazz pieces and said, "are you sure this is what she wants?" My mom said "Yes, she wants to be a ballet dancer." And Yvonne said, "I know that she acts, and she sings...are you sure ballet will be enough for her?"

I went on to SAB's winter term, Yvonne told me to go. "I know you'll succeed," she said. I graduated in 2014 and received the "Mae L. Wien Award for Outstanding Promise" and then ended up going on to Broadway's "Anastasia." ... Yvonne was right.

Nicole; I think that there's a specialness in their teaching...it wasn't given to you, you had to work hard. Also, by time I was in the higher levels, Rosemary had passed away. However, with Yvonne, I never felt like I would have been less in her eyes if I would not have become a professional. Especially now when we're having all these discussions about dancers struggling with retiring or not having a job, I feel like Westside very much passed on that *dance will always be a part of you, whether or not it becomes your profession*. And from that I feel that dancers can leave Westside and go onto Law School or teach or go to college and come back and take adult classes and perhaps become donors to a ballet company. They always leave with immense love of dance.



(L-R) Zachary Guthier – Principal with California Ballet, Joy Womack – Photo by Todd Lechtick

JD: *Did you feel prepared to move on to each transition of your career? Please explain why or why not. Was there anything from Yvonne or Rosemary that helped you through those transitions?*

Lucia: yes –obviously moving to a different city and having to completely

reestablish your life... I don't think anything will prepare you for that. That's a big thing and you don't know how you're going to react. But I do think dancing-wise I was ready. At SAB- they help you find a job. There's a person who tries to place the students. They invite Directors from all over the world to come and teach class and my Director, Ashley Weider from Joffrey Ballet, came and taught class for a week and from there he hired me.

Nicole: I think that balance of doing corps work and then having opportunities to have solos, having parts to learn where you're a little more featured, you get that balance of working with others and finding how you shine the best...how you can show yourself off in the best way [this allows any transition more breadth and preparation for the next step].

Fran: A few years back...I don't know why it took me so long but a few years back, I actually went home and taught a class at Westside – It was a very emotional moment for me. Of all the places I taught around the country for how many ever years, I actually set foot in there. And sitting in the chair where Yvonne and Rosemary, where Nadir and Caprice sat teaching, in that studio that I grew up and trained in was a humbling moment for me... to have the circle come all the way around like that, was emotional.

JD: *How would you like to carry on Rosemary and Yvonne's legacy, since their mission was to make sure you also did your best work?*

Melissa: it's my mission with Barak Ballet to continue to bring in choreographers that bring out the best, new, innovative and moving work. To continue to attract the kind of dancers that live that experience; hard working, those that unlock that spirit and continue the growth of dance in Los Angeles, both growing and attracting solid dancers that are on the same page.

Fran: I tell stories to my students – sometimes in class your muscles just need a break so I tell stories, if my kids are misbehaving or are tired, they get a wag of a fingerand I tell a story.

I think it's important to remember our past and where we came from. Westside has multiple family trees. Yvonne danced for Balanchine, Rosemary the Royal Ballet and Nadir was the Russian school, so I carry all three of those legacies with me when I teach my students. Even though most of my career was in the Balanchine realm, my teaching style has everything they taught me and then everything I gained over the years I was working. The teachers I encountered in different places, the teachers that came to set a ballet, different dance styles that I encountered from Balanchine, to classical to contemporary to Modern – Twyla Tharpe, Paul Taylor – different kinds of rep ... now I definitely try to incorporate those things to pass onto my students.

You can't get it all out there in one class...but if you keep working with the students you can get the lessons that you learned across and hopefully they learn them by the time they go out and become professionals. They can then take their experiences from you and add their own ...it's a never ending cycle of taking what you've learned, learning some more and passing it on. If I'm going to have anything to do with Yvonne and Rosemary's legacy,

and I hope I do, I think continuing to learn and passing it on is the biggest part of that.

Yvonne and Rosemary were very special women and there are a whole lot of us...after they're gone, that owe a whole lot to them. Westside is a very special place and the people that are there are continuing with their legacy. We miss them terribly and most of us that are still around are doing our darndest to live up to the legacy that they left. If you want to see how we're doing, come to the show on June 8th.

Please join us **Saturday, June 8**, 5pm, Gala reception, 6pm Gala performance, with dinner following; -and- **Sunday, June 9, 2019**: Spring Performances 1 p.m. and 5 p.m. All at the Broad Stage at the Santa Monica College Performing Arts Center, 1310 11th St, Santa Monica, CA 90401. Sunday tickets are \$35. Gala tickets are \$85, \$120, and \$195 with dinner. Tickets for this must-see dance event of the season may be purchased online by [clicking here](#), or by phone (additional fees apply) at **(800) 595 – 4849 (4TIX)**.

Featured image: Westside Ballet's *Serenade* – Photo courtesy of the company.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Joanne DiVito

Joanne began her dance career in Chicago as a demi soloist with the Illinois Ballet Company, having studied with Edna MacRae (Ballet Mistress for Joffrey) and Richard & Christine Ellis from the Royal Ballet. She then moved to New York City where she studied at Ballet Russes and Ballet Theatre. Fortuitously, on her way to joining Ballet Russes, the company disbanded, and Joanne landed her first Broadway show, "Kismet," choreographed by Jack Cole, the "Father of Jazz Dance," and never looked back. She worked with such Luminaries as Michael Bennett, Jaime Rogers, Danny Daniels, Onna White, Joe Layton, and historic Broadway Icons like Ethel Merman, Richard Rodgers, George Abbott, Alfred Drake & Irving Berlin.

Joanne went on to have a long successful career as a Director/Choreographer completing over 100 commercials, Broadway projects; "Gangs" for David Merrick & "Jockeys" for Julie Styne; Movies: Thank God It's Friday, Eddie & The Cruisers, Once Bitten" for Sam Goldwyn with Jim Carey, Body Rock (one of the first

break dance movies to be released), the “Wired” about the Blues Brothers. Television; “And Life Goes On”, “Coach”, Dance Fever, Specials, MOW’s, TV series and Music Videos.

She was an Emmy Nominee for the Jane Mansfield Story and an American Video Award nominee for Chaka Khan’s, “I Feel For You. ” In 2018, Joanne was rewarded the coveted Professional Dancers Society’s Gypsy Robe; and again in 2018, The Los Angeles Dance Festival and The Brockus Project bestowed the “Service to the Field Award - Rise of the Female” to Joanne along with Renae Williams Niles and Ann Haskins.

Joanne developed her own production company, where she wrote, produced, directed, staged and/or choreographed Industry, Stage and TV shows. Among her many challenges was the half time show for the World Cup, directing over 1,000 performers. Among her Industry clients were Disney, Mazda, Toyota, Apple Computer among others.

While working as an agent for Bobby Ball Agency, she was asked to head the West Coast Office of Career Transition for Dancers, at Screen Actors Guild. Its mission was to help professional dancers bridge their careers to new challenging and fulfilling professions. She created programs, that assisted dancers in connecting, educating and fulfilling a wide range of goals and aspirations. As an example, Joanne brought the LEAP program to Los Angeles, helping dancers get their Bachelors Degrees so they could compete as leaders in the community. She developed the “Dancers Forum” which brought together respected opinion leaders of the dance world, such as Nigel Lythgoe, Debbie Allen, Renae Williams Niles, Tony Basil, Lula Washington, Sasha Anawalt, Jamal Simms, Julie

McDonald, and so many others. She encouraged dancers to get Grants to go back to school and start new businesses, was a passionate leader of the National Outreach program all around the U.S. while working on her own Bachelors Degree. Upon graduating from the LEAP program in 2007 she began working at Cal State Northridge under the leadership of Dr. Paula Thomson. Dance and dancers have always been her passion, and she is so proud to be chosen as a judge for the Music Center’s Spotlight Awards, with Jeri Gaile at its helm. The Spotlight Awards gives recognition to young up-and-coming artists and inspires young people to reach out and be their best brilliant selves. Joanne is now also taking the opportunity to move into her next love, “writing”. She is so proud to join the talented and generous Jeff Slayton and Roger Martin Holman’s in their timely and important L.A. Dance Chronicle, side by side with the gracious and gifted Ann Haskins.

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