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What a beloved ballet teacher gets for her 100th birthday: A drive-by party, of course



Surrounded by balloons, Joan Bayley waves to a drive-by parade of relatives and friends celebrating her 100th birthday. (Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times)

By MAKEDA EASTER



The two lines of cars — about 50 in all, decorated with posters, streamers and balloons — were parked near the home in L.A.'s Mar Vista neighborhood as family and neighbors congregated outdoors in masks for a birthday celebration, the kind that's come to be a national ritual during the coronavirus outbreak.

At 2 p.m. the parade began, with drivers honking and shouting birthday wishes to the woman of the hour: Joan Bayley, a former ballet instructor who worked in Hollywood musicals alongside Judy Garland, Bing Crosby and Marilyn Monroe.

Among the well-wishers were her former students, who sent their regards to Bayley as she waved and blew kisses from her porch. A barrier of pink balloons marked proper social distancing.

Bayley said she was “feeling great” about the milestone celebration: On this day, she turned 100 years old.

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Neighbors sing “Happy Birthday” to kick off a car parade of relatives and friends celebrating Joan Bayley’s 100th birthday in Mar Vista. (Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times)

Over the course of a century, [Bayley](#) took part in Hollywood’s golden age, taught generations of ballet dancers and, along the way, witnessed the dramatic rise of her city’s arts scene.

“For so long, we were just out in the sticks; we had no culture when I was growing up here,” Bayley said before her celebration.

“But all of a sudden, we’re starting to get culture. We’ve got an opera company, several ballet companies, and we’ve matured artistically, and that’s wonderful.”

Born in Canada, Bayley moved to Los Angeles at age 6 and began dancing at a

neighborhood school when she was 7 or 8 years old.

Her first experience on stage was performing in a 1934 production of “A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream” at the [Hollywood Bowl](#). As a teenager, she trained and performed with noted choreographer [Carmelita Maracci](#), who blended ballet with Spanish dance.

Bayley moved to New York to continue dancing with Maracci and later worked in nightclubs, performing flamenco solos for dinner guests. She returned to L.A. to pursue film work during World War II because “there was no touring, so companies disappeared.”

In her early years as a studio dancer, Bayley performed in ballet scenes and worked with modern choreographer Lester Horton on films including 1943’s “Phantom of the Opera” and 1945’s “Salome, Where She Danced.”



Joan Bayley, center, on the set of the 1944 movie “The Climax.” (Universal Pictures Co.)

While working on the 1939 film adaptation of “On Your Toes,” choreographed by George Balanchine, Bayley met the man who would become her husband, Ray Weamer.

In the 1950s, Bayley began working with commercial choreographer Robert Alton — known for his discovery of Gene Kelly and his collaborations with Fred Astaire — and later became his assistant. She then worked as a choreographer herself, creating

dances for television series.



Dance coach Joan Bayley, center left, on the set of the Danny Kaye-Bing Crosby film “White Christmas.” (Paramount Pictures (1953 & 1954))

Teaching dance, which she started doing full time in the 1970s, happened by chance. She spent a month filling in for a teacher who was sick.

“I enjoyed it,” Bayley said. “I thought, this is rather nice. By now, my daughter had grown up.”

Bayley first taught children but transitioned to teaching adults because “we didn’t

have any adult classes anywhere in the city at that time.”

She said she wanted her birthday festivities to raise awareness for the Westside School of Ballet in Santa Monica, where she taught for more than 30 years — until last year.



Relatives and friends celebrate a socially distanced birthday for Mar Vista resident Joan Bayley. (Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times)

Founded by New York City Ballet principal dancer [Yvonne Mounsey](#) and Royal Ballet soloist Rosemary Valaire in 1967, Westside is one of Southern California’s most prominent ballet schools. Bayley started the school’s adult ballet program, and “it became so popular that now we have an adult class every day of the week, morning and night,” she said.

Bayley is “that legacy of what makes Westside so special,” said Allegra Clegg, Mounsey’s daughter, who took over the studio after Mounsey died in 2012. “She has such a huge following, and they’re so loyal to her, but it’s because she’s such a good teacher.”

The school is fighting for survival in the pandemic and has launched a [community fundraiser](#) to stay afloat.

“We’ve had economic downturns. We’ve had loss of business due to massive construction around us, but we’ve never had anything like this,” Clegg said, holding back tears.

Now in self-isolation, Bayley says she hasn’t left the house in two months except to visit her daughter, who lives across the street, and her daughter’s family, who lives two doors down.



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She’s also tutoring her 13-year-old great-granddaughter Ezra Galambos, who trains at Westside. Bayley typically sits in an office chair while Galambos works on her technique at a makeshift ballet barre in her parents’ office space.

“It’s good to have someone who’s correcting me and holding me accountable for all the mistakes that I’m doing while dancing and helping me improve while in quarantine,” Ezra said.

Teaching Ezra is a joy, Bayley said.

“I’m so grateful that somebody in the family is following in our footsteps. My husband was a dancer too, and she has a passion for it, which is thrilling to see.”

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