



The Unmaking of a Dancer

by JOAN BRADY

Chapter One

Until I was almost twelve, the only child in our neighbourhood who took ballet lessons was Susan; her back yard and ours were separated by a wooden fence. I was supposed to be learning the piano. Susan's father could whistle scales through his hands. He cupped his stubby fingers over his mouth, puffed out his cheeks, and the notes came out like ascending raspberries. I used to go home, not as sure as I had been that the piano was as awful as it seemed. My mother said Susan's father didn't know anything about real music. He played the saxophone on the Breakfast Club, a radio program broadcast each morning in San Francisco at six-thirty. That sort of music, my mother said -- well, it wasn't real music at all.

He was a sandy-haired man, prematurely bald, with round, pink cheeks. In the afternoons, when Susan and I got home from school, we used to feed spools into the player piano that stood in her living room and dance to that while he pumped the pedals. It seemed to me a wonderful thing to have a piano that played itself all by itself, but my mother said it wasn't a real piano. On Tuesdays and Saturdays he drove Susan to her ballet lessons; I went along once or twice.

The girls in her class wore fluffy white skirts, as I remember it; they must have been practicing for some sort of recital. I took an immediate fancy to the shoes they had on. I could stand on my hands better than anyone in the neighbourhood -- Susan included --

and I bet myself that I could stand on my toes pretty well too. Besides, ballet lessons looked like fun, and whatever else piano lessons were, they weren't that. Music -- real music, that is -- was a touchy subject in our house. When Beethoven boomed out from the record player, my sister Judy and I knew our father was depressed; he sat silent and brooding at the dinner table, and God help us if we upset our milk. Sometimes he was depressed for days. Sometimes, especially if the Archduke Trio played during the afternoon, he had to have his Spam and baked potato delivered to the door of his study on a tray. When he was angry, Stravinsky took over from Beethoven; when he had a headache, Mahler. Our piano teacher was his best friend.

Our piano teacher was an elegant Irishman, a graduate of Stanford's music school, who had found out the hard way that being Stanford's prize pianist cut little ice in New York. He trembled and twisted his hands when he went to concerts. He didn't have as much money as we did. My mother and father were bringing us up by what they called the Open Door Policy, which meant that we saw them without their clothes on, listened to their frequent fights and heard a selection of adult sorrows -- not excluding the tightness of Patrick McKuan's budget. We had the vague notion, Judy and I, that we stood between him and starvation.

Judy did well. Patrick wrote 'Good' and 'Excellent' at the top of her music sheets and pasted silver and gold stars there. My lessons started some months after hers, and when I got back home from the first one, my father was playing Stravinsky at full volume. He shouted over the heavy percussion -- and half in time to it -- that I was to go upstairs and sit down at the goddamned piano and practice a whole goddamned hour and be goddamned glad of it. He'd never had a chance like that. There'd been no goddamned piano in his house. He'd been too poor. And I ought to be goddamned grateful. In the year that followed, there were lectures, pleadings, scoldings, but the only time I could work up

any interest in the piano at all was when Susan's father whistled scales of raspberries through his cupped hands.

One day when Susan got home from school, she found her father dead on his bed. The newspaper said an empty bottle of barbiturates stood on the table beside him. It also said he'd been discovered by his daughter, 'Susanne'. Susan was angry that they'd misspelled her name, and she said there were red pills scattered on the carpet and a water glass broken to pieces. She said her father's face was blue and his eyes were rolled back white; there was stuff coming out of his mouth, she said, and she'd gone screaming from the room.

From then on I hid as best I could on Saturday mornings from nine onward, the hour appointed for my piano lesson. I wasn't a very successful hider, though, and when Patrick finally asked me, as I thumped dispiritedly at the keys of the old brown piano in his studio, why I bothered to come at all, I said, 'Because Daddy says you need the money.'

I didn't have to go back after that, but when I told my parents I wanted to take ballet lessons instead, my father said no. My mother, eyebrow lifted, said that if I continued to ask for them for two years, then perhaps -- just perhaps -- I might be able to take some. That would have been that, I'm sure, if I'd had strong feet. But like so many others who end up in dance, I didn't. I'd started wearing corrective shoes the year before, and corrective shoes are expensive. My mother complained to the doctor who'd prescribed them, and he suggested a few dancing lessons instead. So my mother took me to Miss Wanda Wenninger's ballet school in nearby Albany.

Miss Wanda charged only seven dollars a month for two lessons a week. I could get to her easily on the bus, and ballet was, after all, as my mother said with a sigh, a cultural activity of sorts.

Wanda Wenninger had pendulous lips, bulbous cheeks and protruding eyes, like a gargoyle on a French cathedral. Her reddish-blond hair waved thickly and tightly over her

head, and she pulled it into a massed net of curls at the nape of her neck. Demonstrating to her class of gangly little girls in shorts and socks and ponytails, she placed one hand on the barre, buried the other somewhere in the folds of bright cloth beneath her enormous bosom, and told us to express ourselves all the way from our diaphragms. Her legs were surprisingly delicate; when she posed in front of the mirror, she lifted her flowing circular skirt to expose, ever so daintily, one dimpled knee, and it was always a matter of wonder to me that such a thing could disappear into such a skirt to marry up in some devious way with the matronly figure that emerged from the waistband.

She wore rings and loose bracelets, necklaces, brooches and earrings, and all of them glinted in the sunlight and jangled when she moved. With one pretty leg raised to forty-five degrees in front of her, she used to tilt her head a little, while a small, artificially sweet smile inveigled its way into the heavy contours of her face. She always studied it -- the smile, that is -- sometimes adjusting her eyebrows a fraction farther upward, sometimes pulling her large lips fractionally farther away from her teeth, before turning to address her pupils. 'I was a pupil of Muriel Stuart's, you know, dear,' she would say. 'And ballet, dear,' she often said, 'is a good activity for growing girls. The arts mature one.'

'You must admit you've brought her up well. Mildred,' the dinner guest said. 'There aren't many kids who'd sit so quietly while a tableful of adults talk.'

My mother smiled, reaching across to pat me on the shoulder. 'Well, she is a little more grown up than most. That's just the way she is.'

'Come on now, Mildred,' the dinner guest said archly. 'Don't be modest.'

'I take ballet lessons twice a week.' My voice squeaked and I nodded my head two or three times to emphasize the importance of the words.

My mother laughed. 'Well, yes, you do -- but what. . .?'

'The arts mature one, Mother.'

I was a pupil of Miss Wanda's for about eighteen months. I adored her, enjoyed my lessons, and fairly quickly established myself as the fourth-best dancer in the school -- after Miranda and Beverly and a girl with red hair like Miss Wanda's own. I took to pointe shoes every bit as easily as I had hoped. I liked jumping about to the thin quaver of Miss Wanda's soprano -- we had no music -- I liked expressing myself all the way from my diaphragm.

At home I improvised dances to records, and my mother was pleased. My father made it plain that he found the dancing dull though I looked charming while I did it. I performed as a Dutch boy, the partner of Miranda's little Dutch girl, for the Easter meeting of Miss Wanda's ladies' club. My mother got me a pair of black pointe shoes (just like Miranda's) when she was in New York, and Miss Wanda choreographed a piece for me to a Chopin prelude; I performed it for some of my father's students, were very polite. And I became, at last, Miranda's friend.

Miranda was a year younger than I was, pretty if plump, dark-blonde and, I thought, marvellously gifted. Miss Wanda said so. 'Miranda's so expressive,' she said. Miranda's parents were strict. Her father didn't approve of dancing because it showed too much of a girl's body, but Miranda wanted to be a dancer more than anything else in the world, and I, the loyal friend, decided I wanted to be a dancer more than anything else the world too. We talked about it often. Miss Wanda's school held no summer session, and Miranda and I made a dollhouse to keep ourselves occupied while we planned our futures as ballerinas; we papered the miniature walls with wallpaper samples given us by a local store and we made furniture from papier-mâché and match sticks. We talked about poems too. Miranda could recite 'How do I love thee? Let me count the ways,' and I could get through a couple of verses of 'The Highwayman'.

Miranda's father didn't think little girls should know poems like that; he decided we shouldn't see each other anymore. I spent the rest of that summer more or less alone, brooding about being dancer. I stroked the satin surface of my black pointe shoes as though I were Aladdin with his lamp and posed in front of my bedroom mirror, leg raised to forty-five degrees in front of me, head tilted, face fixed in the lines of Miss Wanda's sweet, artificial smile.

That fall I went to the Anna Head School for Girls. I was doing badly in the public school system, and my father said education was the most important thing there was in a child's life. He taught economics at the University of California at Berkeley. He'd worked his way through college and graduate school -- lumberjack, forest ranger, shipyard worker -- and he'd had to fight his way through the public school system first, walking three miles from home and back, doing his homework by candlelight, getting up at four in the morning to take the cows out to pasture. He'd had to wear his father's cast-off clothes to school. The kids called him 'baggy-pants Brady' until he was more than sixteen, but at the end of it he'd entered Reed College and escaped his father's poverty and religious fanaticism. He also put his younger brother through medical school, and wasn't going to do less for his own kids, despite the fact that Berkeley was punishing him financially for the stand he'd taken, almost alone with his friend Max Radin, against the loyalty oath the university was pressing on its faculty then.

'Well,' said Max, a fat man with a moustache and a wet kiss for Judy and me, 'I've thought of a motto to put over Berkeley's new faculty building. You remember The Wind in the Willows? Remember when Mole spends that whole night wandering around in the forest pursued by the dark and its beasts? And the next day, at dawn, the rabbits all come out of their holes and Otter gets hold of one and learns that they knew about the fix Mole was in. "So why didn't any of you do something?" Otter asks. "You could have helped."

“What, us?” said the rabbit. “Do something? Us rabbits?” Now, that’s what belongs over the new faculty building door. “What, us? Do something? Us rabbits?”

My father laughed, but the hurt of Berkeley’s scourging never healed. He never got to be chairman of the department, although he served under some of his own students, and the trustees never let him march in the front lines of the faculty parade in black gown and mortarboard.

During my first term at Anna Head’s - I was thirteen and a freshman -- my teachers said I hadn’t settled down yet. I was doing as poorly there as I had in the public school, and it was only towards the end of the second term that any improvement took place. It had nothing to do with settling down, though, and everything to do with Suki Schorer, who entered as a freshman halfway through the first term. There had been rumours about her for weeks. Her father was an eminent critic, Mark Schorer, who taught English at Berkeley. He’d been on sabbatical in Italy. He was famous, the kids said. Suki could speak Italian, they said, and she was a ballet dancer. I was somewhat piqued. I was a ballet dancer, as I saw it; it was only that I hadn’t blabbed it all around. And I was studying with Wanda Wenninger, who was a pupil of Muriel Stuart’s. I did not welcome Suki’s appearance in the school.

She was tiny. At that time she hadn’t reached her full height, which when she did, barely touched five feet one, and she was very fragile-looking. The school uniform, worn by girls from the seventh grade upward, wasn’t made in sizes small enough for her; grey sweater and starched regulation blouse hung like deflated tissue balloons from her shoulders, emphasizing the strong outward thrust of her breastless rib cage and the imperial straightness of her back. She wore her blonde hair in an uncompromising bun, pulled starkly away from a face that belonged on a Victorian doll: heart-shaped, small-

mouthed, thin-lipped, large-eyed, round-cheeked. Her skin was almost transparently pale; through it you could see, if you looked closely, the slightest movement of her pulse amongst the network of blue veins at her temples.

She walked with a strange splayfooted walk, which, because she executed it with complete authority, distinguished her instead of making her ridiculous, and she had none of that timidity common to children entering a strange school for the first time in the middle of a term. She seemed as indifferent to her classmates as she was to her badly fitting clothes; this indifference gave her an air of command no one of the rest of us had ever seen before in someone our own age. She was plainly a most remarkable person.

I was some five inches taller than she and very, very thin. I felt like a clumsy giant next to her then, and the feeling stayed with me as long as I knew her. Her interest in me was, or so it seemed, quite impersonal. She asked me a few questions and looked me over a bit.

‘Let’s see your legs. Um. A little weak. Nicely shaped, though. Very pretty, in fact. Point your toe. Don’t sickle. Like this. Um. Good arch. Good body too. Nice and thin. You should stand up straight, you know. Who’d you say you were studying with? Wanda Wenninger? Oh, my God. She’s disastrous. A pupil of Muriel Stuart’s? You don’t say. Well, if she was, Muriel Stuart’s a lousy teacher or she was a lousy pupil. Do you know who Muriel Stuart is, anyway? No? Well, then, what’s so great about studying with a pupil of hers?’

As it turned out, Suki herself had studied with Miss Wanda for a short time before switching to the San Francisco Ballet School. I’d never heard of the San Francisco Ballet School, and Suki smiled wryly. ‘Well, you should have. It’s the only good school in this half of the country. As a matter of fact, you ought to go there. It looks to me like you’ve got talent, even though you’re pretty old. I could probably get you into Basic 4. You’ll never

learn anything anywhere else around here. You can come and watch a class if you want to.'

Suki's mother drove us to San Francisco. On the way, Suki ate a cold and very rare hamburger patty; when she'd finished it, she dipped her fingers in the red juice left in the foil and sucked at them. She was on a protein diet, she told me. She had four more pounds to lose. People in Italy ate too much.

At the time, the San Francisco Ballet shared its studios with a fencing club. Swords in scabbards and pictures of fencers hung from the walls; the barre, cantilevered out to make room for the foils behind, ran around all sides of the huge room Suki led me to. Girls with their hair tied back in tight buns stood at regular intervals along it, feet in first position, athletic bodies sternly erect, faces as serious as those of Bemelmans's Madeline and her schoolmates. There were a few boys too, with groin lumps like wadded-up diapers and muscles etched on nylon-sheathed legs as though in medical relief. A full wall of mirrors reflected them all back upon themselves, row upon row of them, physically powerful, decorous, attentive, intensely quiet. At one end of the room stood a grand piano, top raised, strings exposed. Behind it sat an elderly, cloche-hatted lady with open-fingered gloves in black lace.

The teacher, who turned out to be Harold Christensen, was dressed all in tan -- tan shirt, tan trousers, soft tan shoes. He took a theatrically deep breath, settled his belt into place to show how well pulled-in his thin belly was, told his pupils to execute four pliés in first position, four in second, four in fourth, and four in fifth, demonstrating the movement and the positions as he spoke them, and left the barre. Across the room from me, Suki wore a blue leotard and pink tights. I sat in my grey uniform on a bench to one side. The pianist played an opening chord and the class began.

