

The VW Years

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FOR SEVENTY dollars a week (fifty-seven take-home), new members of the corps de ballet danced four shows a day, seven days a week, three weeks out of four, and along with that performance schedule, they rehearsed up to an additional six hours when preparing for a new show, plus attending the obligatory costume, shoe, and wig fittings! Working at Radio City Music Hall pretty much meant living there. For many of the old-timers who'd persevered ten, fifteen, even twenty years, it was more like being part of an institution than holding down a job, and they suffered the conflicting feelings of passionate loyalty and carping disgruntlement that such situations spawn. The loyalty was from pride in the place itself: who isn't impressed by the Music Hall, that Art Deco marvel? Not only the auditorium, but the lobbies, the restrooms, and the staircases that connect them are astonishing. The auditorium—6,200 seats!—is awe-inspiring, with vast, gilded arches framing the stage and the boxes. In the theater's heyday, a heroic organ materialized out of the wall, and the orchestra seemed to levitate by magic as it floated into view on an elevator platform. This was everything a movie theater ought to be. It made moviegoing a real event, embodying the Hollywood world of luxury, elegance, and glamour that people could only read or dream about. At the Music Hall it was all theirs for three hours. "The 1950's were a golden age for the Music Hall," declared the *New York Times* (January 6, 1968), when "the stage was filled with dazzling pageants produced by Leon Leonidoff."

Backstage at the Music Hall was pretty amazing, too. Everything was provided: cafeteria, infirmary, lounges, smoking rooms, an auditorium just for the personnel to view the latest movies, a roof deck for sunning (although it was absolutely verboten for the dancers to get a tan), a dormitory for sleepovers or catnaps, administrative offices, scene shops, costume shops, music and dance rehearsal rooms, even places for live animals to be housed. The stage was a vast expanse 144 feet wide and 60 feet high. But the stage floor, at least from a dancer's point of view, was terrible—a cruel infliction of cement, sectioned off

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(with treacherous metal edges) so that each section could be raised or lowered at any time. Running along the entire front edge of the stage was a double metal rail that provided a wall of steam—a “steam curtain”—at the flick of a switch. Looking up into the flies, out to the wings, or into the auditorium at the thousands of lighting instruments was like trying to count the stars in the Milky Way. Had the Music Hall given Merce every light he might *ever* have needed, I’m sure no one would have missed even one of them. I couldn’t stop wondering what Merce and John might have done with only a fraction of those fabulous resources. And hardly a day went by that summer that I didn’t question the inequity represented by those two organizations: the one a lavish monument to popular culture, and the other a little modern-dance company struggling to exist on the most meager of terms. Obviously, I had no crystal ball to tell me that by the eighties the Music Hall’s golden age would be over and the former marvel would become a white elephant fighting to survive while the little modern-dance company, grown a little larger, would be thriving, operating with a budget in the millions of dollars, its creator nationally recognized at the 1985 Kennedy Center Honors as “an individual who throughout his lifetime has made a significant contribution to American culture through the performing arts.”

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Although it was the *crème de la crème* of first-run Hollywood movies that kept the Music Hall so popular for so long, the stage shows were what gave it its unique prestige, enticing thousands of people to line up around the block for several hours to gain entrance. Along with the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building, Radio City Music Hall was a tourist “must.” The main attraction, unquestionably, was the Rockettes—all-American, tap-dancing women, all 5’5” to 5’8”, most of them pretty, whose thirty-six pairs of shapely legs were trained to execute routines beyond any military drill-sergeant’s wildest dreams. The dancers in the ballet couldn’t help feeling like second-class citizens, knowing full well that it wasn’t the corps de ballet that the audience lined up to see. Even so, the ballet added a certain cachet to the extravaganza of each pageant, a cut above the jugglers and acrobats, dog acts, barbershop quartets, and bareback riders.

Backstage, the hierarchy was absolute: at the very top (*and how*

well they knew it) were the Rockettes. Somewhere close to the bottom was the corps de ballet. Even the animals (via their trainers) had more clout. After my very first show, I was chagrined to receive a note from the corps de ballet dance captain, who'd received a note from the Rockettes' dance captain to the effect that one of the senior members of the Rockettes (fifty if she was a day, but—despite a haggard face and too many inches around the middle—still the possessor of a gorgeous pair of legs) had complained bitterly that I had put too much pressure on her shoulder in the “figure-eight bourrée section.” My god. She couldn't turn around and tell me so herself? Ah! I had to remember, queens do not speak directly to parlor maids! The distance between us was that great; not imagined, terribly real.

I had the rotten misfortune of going into the current show one week before the new one was to open. So, having barely assimilated the material and the spacing for the show that I was performing four times a day, I had also to learn the material for the upcoming show. This meant starting rehearsals at eight in the morning and rehearsing constantly between shows, except during the dinner break. There were moments during that first week when I didn't think I'd make it. I wasn't used to doing that much pointe work, and especially not on such an immense bone-crushing cement floor, the hardest surface I can remember working on. It was a week of exquisite torture. My left leg, knee, calf, foot, and groin felt nearly paralyzed with pain. I had to spend every free second I had in the hospital-infirmery soaking my muscles, joints, and tendons and fighting back tears. There might have been some consolation (I felt none) in knowing that several other new girls and even a couple of the old-timers were in similar straits. If a dancer had made it through the audition, it was assumed that she could dance sufficiently well to do the choreography correctly. I never received a single note about my dancing, only about being on my mark. The vast reaches of stage and auditorium meant that for most of the 6,200 people in the audience the things clearly visible were pattern and spacing, not steps, not facial expression, and, heaven forbid, not quality. Being in the right place at the right time—i.e., “on your mark”—was *all*. For that amazingly streamlined race of beings called the Rockettes, the unforgivable breach of conduct was getting even the faintest blush of a sunburn, a sin punishable by a fine, and if it happened very often, it could mean getting sacked. The same rule

applied to us in the ballet, but, since we were second-class citizens, the rule was less zealously enforced.

Within the well-appointed dressing room there was also a pecking order. We were ranked according to unwritten laws established by the senior members. Where one sat, which row and beside whom, was dictated to and accepted by the newest of us without question. There were always twenty-eight dancers working in the corps at any one time. We were a crazy mix: from sixteen to thirty years old, from the most eager, fresh, and starry-eyed would-be ballerinas to the most cynical, tough, lazy and disillusioned regulars who aspired to nothing beyond the weekly paycheck that came with the job. Those of us who looked upon the job as a training ground and a road to something better worked hard and took advantage of the available studio space to give ourselves class, practice, even choreograph a little. The cynical members never bothered even to warm up. What amazed me was that they rarely seemed to hurt themselves. There were also a dozen or so very talented, hardworking young dancers in both the Rockettes and the ballet who honestly believed they'd reached the zenith of their careers. They'd come from little dance studios in tiny provincial towns in far-off states where, in the fifties, dancing in the stage show at Radio City Music Hall meant one had gone as far as one could go, one had attained the very pinnacle of success.

I worked at the Music Hall for nine weeks, and in that time I did three different stage shows. The first, which I performed for only one week, had a rather sappy romantic ballet, set to Chopin. We wore long tutus, rhinestones around wrists and neck, and wigs with coronets of artificial flowers. The guest ballerina was New York City Ballet's Melissa Hayden, who, thirteen years earlier, had been a member of the corps there. That gave a number of us hope. But otherwise Melissa Hayden was more dismaying than she was impressive—at least for me. After having witnessed the regal courtesy of Margot Fonteyn, watching Hayden strut around like a little tough off the streets of Brooklyn and curse in language that might make a longshoreman shudder was a shocker. When we went on to the next show and Conrad Ludlow (then a soloist with the San Francisco Ballet, later a principal dancer with NYCB) replaced her as the main attraction, his manner couldn't have been more different. He was shy, soft-spoken, self-effacing, and very much a gentleman.

The stage show ran only as long as the motion picture it accompanied drew a house. As soon as audience attendance began to dwindle, a new film and a totally new show went on. The changeover happened on Thursdays, but we never knew which Thursday, and no one backstage ever seemed quite prepared for it. The week before each show opened was known as “Hell Week.” As I’ve said, my first “hell week” was also my first week on the job, which made it hell and purgatory all rolled into one. The new show, “Blue Yonder,” was one of those “dazzling pageants produced by Leon Leonidoff.” It was advertised as “a gloriously exciting celebration of the golden anniversary of the United States Air Force.” The Rockettes appeared as dancing WAFs. The corps danced in a “unique ‘Space’ spectacle.” There were comedy acts, the Radio City Music Hall Glee Club singing patriotic Air Force songs, the full Radio City Music Hall Symphony Orchestra and “Special Added Attraction—the thrilling Air Force Drum and Bugle Corps and crack precision Air Force Ceremonial Drill Team.” At the end, *everyone* appeared onstage in a humongous flag-waving finale, with huge projections of planes flashing across a giant screen. Posed a bit like the Statue of Liberty in a lipstick-red, sequined, strapless gown, I and two of my compatriots from the corps (one in silver, the other in blue) ascended out of the orchestra pit. The whole glee club, in Air Force uniforms, singing “Off we go, into the wild blue yonder” ascended with us—a stirring scene in which I felt utterly ridiculous. On the opening day of “Blue Yonder,” we were up at 5:15 a.m., in makeup and onstage at 7 a.m. for a lighting rehearsal, which was followed by a studio rehearsal of the ballet, which was followed by the first performance of the usual four per day. At every rehearsal, including final dress, the dance was changed. Except when dancing for Antony Tudor (at his most quixotic) I’d never worked this way, certainly not with Merce, who rarely changed anything once he’d set a sequence of movement. The first performance was a mess. In the second, I came close to breaking a leg when someone let go of her wooden-paddle-with-two-yard-streamer-attached (all twenty-eight of us had them!) and the streamer wound twice around my leg while the paddle banged noisily on the floor behind me. I had to hobble off the stage to avert catastrophe.

But these trifling discomforts were nothing compared to my last Hell Week, which was rated by corps de ballet regulars who had been

employed at the Music Hall six years or more as the very worst Hell Week in memory. On opening morning, after two weeks of rehearsals that had begun at seven or eight in the morning and gone on between performances, we still had no ballet. Poor Margaret Sande. We'd been told that she was unable to work well unless under pressure. Instead of creating a new ballet during the run of the current show, it was tradition for her to wait until the very last hours and hope for a heaven-sent ray of inspiration. But on this occasion, heaven—apparently—withheld its beneficence. The ballet was “The Dance of the Hours” from Ponchielli’s opera *La Gioconda*. The previous April I’d been suddenly thrown into two performances of Zachary Solov’s choreography for *La Gioconda* at the Met, replacing a badly injured company member who’d been shoved into an oncoming subway train at rush hour. At the time, I’d thought his choreography quite nice; four months later it seemed a work of genius! Running out of time, backed into a corner and desperate for inspiration that never came, Miss Sande got it into her head to have all twenty-eight of her dancers execute thirty-two *fouettés*, *in unison*! Now, it is rare to see even the most technically accomplished dancer perform thirty-two *fouettés en place*, without moving some slight degree to the side or forward. To expect twenty-eight Music Hall dancers to stay on their marks throughout thirty-two *fouettés* was lunacy. Of course she knew this, but, obviously desperate, she was adamant and kept us practicing them until our toes were bruised and bloody; only after the disastrous dress rehearsal, when it was abundantly clear that we would never get it right, were those accursed *fouettés* scrapped. We continued to rehearse between shows even after the opening, and *still* the steps were changed and we were threatened with still *more* rehearsals (into the wee hours of the morning, if necessary) if we didn’t do well.

To add to our distress, Russell Markert, the founder of the Rockettes, had made an additional tap number just for the corps de ballet. Actually, most of us were thrilled to be working with him. My tap experience consisted of not-very-serious lessons in my mother’s studio (not taught by my mother) when I was about ten years old. All I’d retained from those lessons was the basic time step, and that was exceedingly rusty. But working for Mr. Markert was really fun, even though his choreography seemed to me a bit tacky. He taught us our whole routine in three hours and never changed a step of it. We all

wanted to do well for him, and on our own we practiced his routine assiduously right up until showtime. To our huge disappointment, the number was cut after the dress rehearsal. Mr. Markert assured us that he hadn't been displeased with our efforts; quite the contrary, but the whole show was too long, and our tap number was the only thing that could be cut. Rumor circulated that we'd shown up the Rockettes (if not in clarity, certainly in enthusiasm), and of course we wanted to believe it. We still had a short tap sequence with the Rockettes in the finale—vulgar, corny stuff standing on a staircase, Busby Berkeley style, costumed in tiny black velveteen bathing suits, cut low in the bust and high in the leg, a blue sequined strip from crotch to bust, and a black velveteen, blue-sequined tail attached to our bottoms and one wrist, black elastic mesh hose, and blue feathers in our hair. We did a series of bumps and grinds, high leg-kicks, plus a couple of rudimentary tap steps. In the front row center on opening morning were Jimmy Waring (who made almost a fetish of attending *every* Music Hall Thursday-morning opening) and Remy Charlip. I fully expected them to hoot with laughter, but Remy told me afterward that when he saw me in the finale, bumping and grinding and flicking my sequined tail, he cried. Backstage, I cried, too. And a couple of motherly corps senior members embraced me, patted me sympathetically on the back, and then proceeded to scold me for caring so much. "It's just a job, honey! It's not art. It's not worth crying about!" I knew they were right, but nevertheless, I wrote to my parents, "I don't think I'll ever forget the sense of frustration and shame of that week."

In any case, my days at Radio City Music Hall were numbered. On September 3, Merce—back from California—was to come after the show to take me to dinner. By this time, the choreography had finally been set, and I was beginning to relax and enjoy it, at least to enjoy dancing to Ponchielli's music played by the huge Music Hall orchestra. Perhaps I was enjoying it too much, because while executing my favorite step in the ballet (it was straight out of Cecchetti's manual) I tripped on one of the warped boards on the apron in front of the steam curtain's metal rail and fell sprawling. As I tripped I heard a terrible, ominous crunch. Fortunately I was close to the wings and could hop offstage quickly. Once off, I collapsed on the floor and wept. All I could think about was Merce witnessing my clumsy fall. Within seconds, stagehands and stage managers surrounded me, gently placed

me in a wheelchair, and whisked me by elevator to the in-house hospital, where a flustered nurse put ice on my ankle and tried to give me a glass of Bromo-Seltzer; I suppose the bromo was to quiet my seemingly inconsolable weeping. I felt like an idiot and even more so when a lovely bouquet of miniature roses arrived for me. They'd been sent up from Merce, who was waiting for me at the stage door. Oh, God! He *had* seen my ignominious fall! I began to laugh and cry at once. Later on, he said he hadn't seen the performance. But if not, why the roses? I didn't dare ask him that. Still, I've never been quite sure whether he told me the truth or whether he was simply sparing me further embarrassment. Later I learned that I wasn't the only casualty from that Hell Week—there were at least a half-dozen others.

How wonderful Merce was. He took me in a cab to Roosevelt Hospital for X-rays (no broken bones; a severe sprain, that was all); then in another cab back to the Music Hall so I could collect my belongings; yet another cab to meet Remy at a favorite Italian restaurant in the East Village, and still another cab to take me home. So ended my Radio City Music Hall "career"—a month earlier than planned, but not a moment too soon as far as I was concerned. I had earned enough money to pay off my entire debt at the Metropolitan Opera Ballet School—a year's worth of classes!—and, thanks to my sprained ankle, I collected enough money through workman's compensation to be ahead of the game for the next year, and maybe, just maybe, if the opportunity ever presented itself, to go to Europe someday. I had no regrets about working at the Music Hall. There had been one lesson worth learning: be in the right space at the right time—be On Your Mark! And one lesson I never wanted to learn: "Don't care so much. It's not worth it." I knew for certain that I wanted to do something I cared about profoundly; then, whatever the difficulties, it *would* be worth it.