

Carmen De Lavallade described in the words “*If graces has a vocabulary, she is a dictiontinary*” embarked on a successful acting career after being lauded as one of dance’s finest interpreters.. People tend to remember de Lavallade not only because she’s a superb actress and dancer but because she can’t be strictly classified as one or the other. “She can’t even be classified within dance or theater”, wrote Christain Temin in the Boston Globe. By setting no limits and choosing projects which broke new ground. Carmen’s career includes acting credits from Shakespeare to Lorca and dance performances from Alvin Ailey to American Ballet Theater.

Having been born and grown up in Los Angeles always had a strong desire to become an actress and was influenced, as well as by the example of her cousin Janet Collins, the first black prima ballerina at the Metropolitan Opera. At 16 Miss De Lavallade won a scholarship to study with Lester Horton who, like Martha Graham, was a pioneer of Modern Dance. She became a member of his company and one of his principal teachers.

Like Joyce Trisler, De Lavallade first came to New York with Horton’s company to perform at the 92nd Street “Y” and Jacob’s Pillow dancing the principal role in Lester’s productions of “Salome” and “Yerma”. As a result of this exposure she was offered several movie dance roles. She appeared in “Carmen Jones”, choreographed by Herbert Ross and danced a duet with Jack Cole in “Lydia Bailey”. Subsequently, Ross selected Carmen to dance in the Broadway production of “House of Flowers”. It was at that time she met her future husband Geoffrey Holder and later birthed their son Leo Holder.

De Lavallade was soon a well-known dance presence in New York. She made her debut as principal dancer with the Metropolitan Opera and two seasons as a guest artist with the American Ballet Theater dancing the lead in “Four Mary’s” choreographed by Agnes DeMille. She was the principal dancer in John Butler’s New York City Center productions of “Carmina Burana” and “Catulli Carmina”. Under the auspices of the State Department she toured the Far East with the “De Lavallade-Ailey Dance Company”. Following the tour Ms. de Lavallade received the Dance Magazine Award for that year.

Carmen did not align herself with any one company and became a sought after artist specializing in contemporary pieces which had a dramatic core. She was a principal dancer with John Butler Dance Company, in the “Festival of Two Worlds” in Spoleto Italy. Such choreographers as Geoffrey Holder, Glenn Tetley and Mr. Butler created roles for her. In fact, Butler’s “A Portrait of Billie” set to four songs of Billie Holiday became one of Carmen’s signature pieces.

Lester Horton once said to Carmen, “there is going to come to a time when you can’t just be a dancer, but you will have to act, dance and sing”. An invitation from Robert Brustein to teach movement to actors at Yale University was the perfect opportunity to fulfill this vision. The late sixties was an exciting period at Yale and among Carmen’s students were Henry Winkler, Sigourney Weaver, Joe Grifasi and Meryl Streep. Training as an actress she soon became a leading member of the famed Yale Repertory performing major roles in “Story Theater”, “Crimes and Crimes”, “Don Juan”, Julius Caesar”, “Macbeth”, “The

Tempest” and as “Titania” in “A Midsummer Nights Dream” to name a few. Carmen’s performances as Titania had the critics reaching for adjectives.

While at Yale, Carmen increased her range to encompass not only acting, but also choreography and even singing. She staged movement for “A Midsummer Nights Dream, directed by Alvin Epstein as well as many other Yale productions and performed at the Yale cabaret in special tributes to Noel Coward, Harold Arlon and Duke Ellington, whom she met and Lester Horton collaborated with during her Horton years.

De Lavallade found time to accept dance and choreography assignments outside Yale. She staged the movement for the Tyrone Guthrie Theater’s production of a “Beggars Opera” directed by Alvin Epstein and choreographed the world premiere of “Sensemaya” for Dance Theater of Harlem. She performed with Benny Goodman at Carnegie Hall and with the Bill Evans Trio in Detroit.

The theater training gave Carmen the skills to create dance pieces, which “broke the sound barrier”. Choreographed by her and others, these dances included poems and text to be spoken by the dancer. “The Creation” created for her by Geoffrey Holder was an interpretation of Genesis with a reading by James Weldon Johnson, first performed at Carnegie Hall and then with Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops. She choreographed and performed “Les Cjanson’s de Bilitis”, an evocation of the poem of Pierre Louys set to Debussy’s music while a guest with the San Francisco Ballet. At the Pepsico Summerfare Arts Festival, Carmen performed her own choreography in “The Earrings of Madame D,”

Concentrating her energies on acting and choreography she made her acting debut in New York as Emilia in the 1978 Roundabout Production of “Othello” with Earle Hyman. For this role she received the Clarence Bayfield Award presented by Actors Equity for outstanding classical performance Off Broadway. The following summer de Lavallade starred as Linda Loman in the Trinity Square Players production of “Death of a Salesman” in Providence Rhode Island.

In 1980 Robert Brustein left Yale to bring his American Repertory Theatre (ART) to Cambridge and Carmen joined the company, ART’s first production was a reprise of “A Midsummer Nights Dream and again critics found delight in Carmen’s Titania. Mel Gussows wrote in the New York Times, “ She remains the fairest Titania within my memory”. The production moved to the Wilbur Theater in Boston and was filmed for television at WGBH TV. At ART, Carmen appeared in “Happy Ending”, “Lulu” and “The Seven Deadly Sins”. While at Boston Carmen acted in a featured role in WGHB’s dramatic television series, “The New Voice”.

In 1982 Carmen worked at the Boston Opera with Sarah Caldwell, choreographing and dancing in the American premiere of Zimmerman’s “Die Soldaten”. She returned to the Guthrie Theater in 1984 where she was featured in a new musical “Hang On To Me” directed by Peter Sellars. This unusual production paired 16 songs by George and Ira Gershwin with the script from Maxim Gorky’s 1904 play “Summerfolk”. Another acting assignment followed directly with the Intiman Theater in Seattle Washington, where she

starred as the mother in their production of Garcia Lorca's symbolic drama "Blood Wedding".

Carmen often performs her one woman show "Journey", and her children's show "The Enchanted Isle of Yew", based on the book by L. Frank Baum. She has been seen on PBS in "The Trial Of Standing Bear", based upon a landmark case in Nebraska, on NBC TV's "Orleans" and on the "Bill Cosby Show". She choreographed the landmark "Porgy and Bess" at the Metropolitan Opera in New York directed by Arvin Brown. For the Metropolitan's 1992-93 season Carmen choreographed "Lucia Di Lammermoon" directed by Francesca Zambello, "Die Meistersinger" and "Rusalka", directed by Otto Shenk. She also choreographed the children's Opera, "Romulus Hunt" by Carly Simon, and Oscar Wilde's "Salome" starring Al Pacino at the Richard Forum in Stamford, Connecticut.

In 1994, Carmen an Honorary Doctorates of Fine Arts from Boston Conservatory of Music and in 2000 Honorary Doctorate of Performing Arts from Adelphi University where she held the Dance Program Director position with assistant, Regina Larkin for three years. Presently she teaches "Elements of Performance" at the Juilliard School of Dance where she mentors emerging artists. She can be seen in cameo roles in the John Sayles Film "Lone Star" and "Big Daddy" starring Adam Sandler.

As described by Judith Jamison and felt by others, Carmen De Lavallade, "*She walks with beauty.*" Carmen had the honor of directing "The Children's Defense Fund" and the "Tribute to Lena Horne" at Lincoln Center Avery Fischer Hall. She appeared in Debbie Allen's ballet drama "Soul Possessed" at the Alliance Theater in Atlanta Georgia and again at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC. She is part of the dance trio, "Paradigm", with artists, Gus Solomon Jr. and Dudley Williams. In 2003, she set and presently her duet "Sweet Bitter Love", resides in the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre. On March 8, 2004, Ms. De Lavallade and her husband Geoffrey Holder had the honor of PS 195 Performing Arts Academy naming the institution as "The Geoffrey Holder and Carmen De Lavallade Performing Arts Academy". Carmen returned to her acting career in "Wintertime", at the McCarter Theatre at Princeton and 2Nd Stage in New York seen at the Pearl Theatre in Manhattan in "The House of Bernardo Alba", she received the sixth Annual Women of Strength and Courage from the American Legacy Award. Returning to the Yale Repertory Theatre, she performed the role of Ana in "the Clean House" by Sarah Ruhl. Also she was named Dancer of the Year for Magazine and in 2005 is the host with Gus Solomon's Jr. the "Bessies" the Dance Award Ceremonies held at the Joyce Theater.

Ms. De Lavallade has carried the torch of evolving the Lester Horton modern dance technique with national master classes, lectures and re-staging of both Horton and the late Joyce Trisler's dances. She coaches solo artists and guides with Regina Larkin, Artistic Director, of the Joyce Trisler Danscompany beginning in 1993 where her choreography "Nightscape" resides. She believes and is quoted, "Joyce's works are the closest thing as to what Lester was trying to do".

Written by Carmen de Lavallade and Regina Larkin

6/23/2002 we met at Peridance Center, NYC right before I had to teach. Always a convenient place to share and gather thoughts with dance ,theater and music artists.

CONVERSATIONS WITH AN ARTIST.....CARMEN DE LAVALLADE
with Regina Larkin

Let's begin at the beginning....

My curiosity begins with the Hollywood films choreography. All of you were so young to be on the big screen.

Well that was how Lester was able to make money for the dance theatre.

Lester Horton's relations with movie stars were unique. He just loved movie stars. In particular was Maria Montez. He would choreograph for her films all the time. Yvonne would know. They were great friends. Another was Vera Ellen. She would come to the studios. She was a good dancer and actress, she was very flexible, but then she just disappeared...I always wonder what happened to her.

The films I can remember were “Colbra Women” and “Golden Eagle”, Jimmy and I were in that. I recall Bela dancing on drums in a film. I need to ask my sister. She will remember the name of the films.

Lester choreographed for a lot of “strip dances”. At that time these were tasteful imaginative dances. Not like today when everything is exposed. A lot was alluring and mysterious. The point wasn’t to just take the clothes off but instead to entice the imagination.

I wonder if the influence of Hollywood was the reason for so many of his story ballet’s. It seems as though he was conscious of society and the present political make up of the country.

Not just some, all of his ballet’s were stories with the exception of his little dances that appeared in the 50’s. He loved dancers with facility. Lester was organic. His ideas were innate, he sensed things and explored how far can you take the body. He loved to take something and invent things.

Regina, things are not static or saved. It keeps evolving, it keeps moving. It makes it better for the performing of it. After all if you are static, the energy doesn’t move.... Something I was reading in the Nostic Gospels explains to take the masters creations and continue to explore and evolve their ideas into your own. I must look at that gospel again. You must read these, it would be good for your students.

Is it kind of like knowing the rules in order to break them, would you say?

Yes!

Let’s chat about taking a class with Lester. How did you begin a class?

Myself, I always remember starting class with swings. We would start with arm swings, I guess in order to get the blood going. Again Lester was very organic, he would just try moves. He’d start swinging the arm and would say over and over, “take a bucket of water and toss”. That’s the idea of the swing.

We would feel the weight of the arm it seemed like forever! We would do all kinds. Start side to side, add the elbows and go forward and back. That would then move to the figure eights and then we would add the body. Down and up, in and out, around, always initiated by the swing and the elbow. Carving out the elbow is important. Then the body follows the flow, always doing soft knee plies with the action. I don’t get all of this stiff knee Horton that I see!

Could you say that Lester’s movement was initially motivated by the upper vascular system generating energy for cause of action?

You could say that. I believe I was there and it was the swing that propelled the body. After the arm swings we would feel the weight and then add plie, then releve, add elbows and then ease into laterals. Laterals were off the top of the head. Eventually it flew, but only when you knew how to swing. Not how it is being done today.

You see Regina, I like feel good stuff. I don't like hurtsy things. I don't believe it has to hurt.

Me either Carmen! Did Lester work that way as well? Is that what he taught all of you?

Yes. A lot of things were based on yoga. He took basics and played with them. He learned all kinds of dances from varying cultures then evolve ideas organically. Swings led to everything. Everybody was swinging at that time.

Horton had great sweeping moves with air in it.

Now it is all thought out.

All of this stuff takes a great deal of power. It takes a lot of strength. It builds the endurance.

I agree with you there. One needs to be prepared to study Horton with spirit and energy.

Yes!

What about the flat backs, where did you do those in your class?

Everybody believes flat backs were in our warm up and everybody is doing it. Flat backs were for stretching the hamstring. It was another way of getting at them. That's all! We didn't make a big deal about them.

Swings led to everything, the 5/4 swings, turns, swing into the floor, swing onto the angel. Not this positions stuff. The swing is the energy that makes it better for the performing of it.

Well Carmen you certainly are emphatic about the Horton swing. I'll explore this more in my teaching.

Regina, you are the only person that asks me about the Horton technique. The way people act I sometimes wonder whether I was there or not. I pinch myself to remember.

You were there Carmen. Maybe we have done enough today. Goobade is in!

with information, through radios, computers, televisions, taxicabs, department stores, bus stops, even elevators.

Everywhere you look, information! Information is your paint to create your life. How you use the palate of choices is up to you. Watch out for eye and ear garbage.

It is a great power you possess. An awesome responsibility. One tiny choice can change the face of history. Hard times will come. Mistakes will be made, but there is no learning without them. You will spend your lifetime searching for new colors. Like the Creator, you just keep trying things. So relax and take your time to ponder, weigh and judge. "Patience is a virtue". That's why there are so many botched canvases in the world. I have found it is best to make your own mistakes. At least you only have yourself to kick. Resist letting anyone touch your masterpieces unless you have a good mentor. Look to the past for that. There are elders who may have the colors you will need. They have created all their lives and are still creating and searching. The present and future are important but the answers, I believe are in the past. The creator has left us on our own. Gave us all the mental, physical and spiritual tools with which to work and like a great scientist who discovers the cure for a deadly virus, one of you will find the answer to mend the web.

As a fellow artist, I would like to leave you with another quote to ponder.

"The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mystical. It is the power of all true art and science." Albert Einstein

written by:

Carmen de Lavallade

CARMEN THOUGHTS...spoken on June 3rd, 2005...at Peridance Center Workshop...

I know nothing about technique but if your steps have an intention then they will become something. Take for example the "rond de jambe en l'air", if you think of kicking a skirt it becomes something. Otherwise you don't see it.

I was taught by image...Try "petite battement" Regina, just do the action. See it's just action. Now try just thinking about a message with the foot talking. Have a conversation with your foot. See, now all the attention is drawn to the foot.

Maybe I am creative but I know nothing about that other stuff. I have a great imagination and that is how I think. That is how I was taught by Lester Horton and Carmelita Maracchi . But Joyce Trisler was a choreographer the most of all of us. She had that ballet strength and took Lester's work and took it to another plane.

Now "Journey" Regina, what would happen if you knew the answer to the unanswered question? I just think it would do something else so you can take the worry out. If you

know the answer it will open all the paths of the journey. But wait to hear the answer to the question before you move. Don't do it for us but for you. Never-mind the audience.

Lester used to say "put yourself in a very small box so you can get personal with yourself". Don't worry about the audience just think of the intention. That is all you can do.

Work as a whole. If you think a part then there that is where the focus will open. From your center just reach. Pull the legs and arms equally. Let it reach in space. The intention will let the arms and back to open and send the idea.

Answers will come to you.