Christensen Brothers

by Sheryl Flatow

"Ballet west of the Mississippi is pretty much the creation of the Christensen brothers – Willam, Harold, and Lew," wrote Arlene Croce in 1980 ("Going to the Dance," p. 311). Separately and together, with passion and ingenuity, tenacity and perseverance, imagination and talent, the Christensen brothers helped ballet take root in this country, and their influence reverberates today.

Willam (1902-2001), as artistic director, choreographer, and teacher, transformed the fledgling **San Francisco Ballet** from an appendage of San Francisco Opera to an independent company, and introduced countless numbers to classical dance in San Francisco and beyond. He then went on to found the ballet department at the University of Utah – the first of its kind in the country – and to establish Ballet West. Harold (1904-1989) was a gifted teacher who directed San Francisco Ballet School for 33 years, and brought it to national prominence. Lew (1909-1984) became the first American *premier danseur* under the guidance of **George Balanchine**, and later succeeded Willam as artistic director of San Francisco Ballet, guiding the company to even greater success.

Early Years

The brothers were born in Utah to a Mormon family, many of whom were musicians and dancers. They received their early training from their uncles, who had studied in New York with the Italian teacher Stefano Mascagno and went on to found schools in Seattle; Portland, Oregon; Salt Lake City; and Ogden, Utah. Willam, Harold, and Lew would also study with Mascagno, first when he visited Utah, and later in New York.

By the time he was in his early twenties, Willam was a highly regarded teacher at the school in Ogden. He really wanted to dance ballet, not teach it, but in the early part of the twentieth century there were no professional ballet companies in the United States. So, in 1927, he and Lew hit the vaudeville circuit, and a year later they were in New York. They swiftly made it to the prestigious Orpheum circuit with an act for two couples; one of the women, Mignon Lee, would become Willam's wife. Despite the inclusion of women, the act was really a showcase for male dancing. "Lew and I had to be virtuosos," Willam said. "We had to turn and leap like sons-of-guns, and dance fast to keep audiences interested. Because at that time not many people knew what we were doing. Were we gymnasts? Were we acrobats? But audiences liked us."[1]

In 1932, Willam and Mignon left the act. She had undiagnosed health problems, she was pregnant, and the couple needed a more stable lifestyle. They moved to Portland, where Willam ran the Christensen School and formed a small company, Portland Ballet. "That's where I really started to choreograph," he said. "I experimented and learned."

Harold, who had originally chosen West Point over a ballet career, replaced Willam in the act. He had left the military academy after a year and begun to study ballet in earnest. He also showed a talent for teaching, and was put to work at both the Ogden and Seattle schools. His teaching would evolve even more after he joined Lew in vaudeville. They remained on the circuit until 1934, when they and their partners were cast to dance in a Broadway operetta, *The Great Waltz*. With their mornings and

afternoons free, the brothers began attending the **School of American Ballet**, founded in January of that year by George Balanchine and **Lincoln Kirstein**. The education they received under Balanchine's tutelage would later transform San Francisco Ballet School and San Francisco Ballet.

Willam visited New York in 1934, and spent a brief time studying and performing on Broadway with Michel Fokine. "I was a little stiff as a dancer when I went to Fokine, because of my Italian training," he said. "Fokine wanted the movement to be more lyrical, more plastic, freer. He changed my whole attitude toward dance, and I taught what I learned from him."

Building San Francisco Ballet

In 1937, Willam was invited to join the four-year-old San Francisco Opera Ballet – as it was known until 1942 – as a dancer. But Willam had bigger plans. He brought with him to the Bay Area several of his students from Portland, and immediately set up the Oakland branch of San Francisco Ballet School. Within weeks of his arrival, San Francisco Ballet presented in Oakland an all-Christensen concert, made up of three ballets by Willam and one by Lew. Among those who appeared on the program were Janet Reed and Jacqueline Martin – two of the dancers who made the move from Portland to San Francisco – and the three brothers Christensen, with Lew and Harold appearing as guest artists. Audiences, dancers, and critics were impressed, and in no time students from the San Francisco branch of the school were flocking to Willam's classes.

"I was a good teacher," Willam said. "My dancers were technically better than the San Francisco dancers, because my training was better. After three or four weeks I was engaged to go to San Francisco, and I dropped Oakland."

In the spring of 1938, Willam became the director of San Francisco Opera Ballet.

Among his many accomplishments, perhaps none is more significant than his insistence on bringing ballet to the people and building audiences. He began giving lecture/demonstrations in San Francisco and all around the Bay Area, and also organized a group to undertake a West Coast tour. "First we went to cities in Northern California, and then we began going to places like Portland, Seattle, Vancouver, and a lot of little towns," he said. "Eventually the San Francisco Opera Ballet came to be quite well known."

The company's schedule independent of the opera began to grow. The repertory was made up mostly of ballets choreographed by Willam, encompassing everything from folk ballets—dances that relied heavily on steps and character movement from Spain, Hungary, Russia, etc.—to contemporary pieces with American themes. Although he occasionally created abstract ballets, such as *Chopinade* (1935) and *Bach Suite* (1938), he preferred story ballets: mythological pieces such as *Triumph of Hope* (1944) and *Pyramus* and *Thisbe* (1945), and humorous Viennese confections like *In Vienna* (1938) and *Winter Carnival* (1942). The latter piece included elements of vaudeville, as did two other humorous works steeped in Americana, *And Now the Brides* (1940) and *The Nothing Doing Bar* (1950). "I tried to present balanced programs," he said. "A little beauty, a little drama or romance in the middle, and a lot of virtuosity at the end."

Willam was also enthralled by the great full-length classics – although he had never seen them. In 1939, he choreographed San Francisco Ballet's first full-length work, *Coppélia*, in which he played Franz opposite the Swanilda of Janet

Reed, the company's first prima ballerina. The following year he choreographed the first full-length American production of *Swan Lake*, and in 1944 the first complete version of **The Nutcracker** ever seen in this country.

Lacking intimate familiarity with these ballets, he investigated them as best he could. "I was a good reader, and a great student of music and ballet," he said. "And I must have had a little talent, too. I knew the story [of *Coppélia*,], and by reading the score I was able to choreograph *Coppélia*. I also talked to anybody who had knowledge of the ballet. That's the same way I did *Swan Lake* and *Nutcracker*."

Willam had seen the second act of *Swan Lake* performed by the **Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo**, but was unfamiliar with the other three acts. He had no idea that Odette and Odile were played by the same ballerina. So when *Swan Lake* premiered, Odette was danced by Martin and Odile by Reed. (When he later learned of his mistake, he changed it.) Lew made a guest appearance as Siegfried.

Willam had a bit more familiarity with *The Nutcracker*. He had previously choreographed some of the divertissements from the ballet and was familiar with other scenes thanks to a truncated version he'd seen performed by the Ballet Russe. He pieced his production together from several sources and contributed his own choreography. He obtained a copy of the well-notated score from the Library of Congress, and Balanchine and **Alexandra Danilova** shared their recollections of the Petipa-Ivanov production for the Maryinsky Theatre.

The ballet premiered on December 24, 1944, with Gisella Caccialanza as the Sugar Plum Fairy, Willam as her Cavalier, and Jocelyn Vollmar as the Snow Queen. Fewer than 50 dancers took on 126 roles. It was an overwhelming success, and became an annual event in 1949, thus establishing a holiday tradition. Ballet West has danced Willam's production since 1955.

There was never much money during the years that Willam ran the company, but thanks to his dogged persistence, his absolute belief in what he was doing, San Francisco Ballet continued to grow. "If I was concerned about money, there wouldn't have been a San Francisco Ballet," he said. "There might be one now, but there wouldn't have been one then." In 1942, when the war made it impossible for the Opera to financially maintain the company, Willam and Harold bought the school for $900. Harold, who had moved to the West Coast two years earlier, was named director and under his leadership, the school flourished.

Lew Christensen, Dancer and Choreographer

While Willam was guiding San Francisco Ballet through its critical formative years, Lew was 3,000 miles away in New York, working with Balanchine. In 1935, when Balanchine was appointed ballet master of the Metropolitan Opera, he invited Lew, Harold, and Ruby Asquith (Harold's partner and future wife) to join his American Ballet, which had become the Metropolitan Opera's resident ballet company. Also a member of that company was Caccialanza, who would become Lew's wife. He remained with Balanchine through the early years of New York City Ballet and became this country's first homegrown *danseur noble*, setting a standard for future generations of American male dancers.

"Balanchine was happy to say there was no male performer outside Russia who could match him as a *danseur noble*," Kirstein wrote in the book *Thirty Years: Lincoln Kirstein's The New York City Ballet*. He also said, "It was how

Lew danced on stage and behaved off that signified to me a future [for ballet in this country], and within it a potential for American male dancers. . . . In the thirties, he danced the best *Apollon Musagete* both Balanchine and I have ever seen" (pp. 57, 301).

Nancy Johnson, one of San Francisco Ballet's most important dancers in the 1950s, was a teenager when she saw Lew dance in Willam's production of *Swan Lake*. "He was tall and extremely handsome," she said. "He was very American, and that was obvious in his style of dancing, in his elongated lines and a more risky way of moving: jumping higher, spinning faster. His lines were so straight and so long, and the European lines had been sort of Baroque and rounded and curved and softer. He was one of the first Americans to dance in this new way."

In addition to his talent as a dancer, Lew was also proving to be a choreographer of considerable gifts; Kirstein wrote that he was "a dance designer of taste, ingenuity, and humor" (p. 301). Those qualities are apparent in *Filling Station* (1938), one of his most popular and durable works. *Filling Station* was commissioned and written by Kirstein for Ballet Caravan, and is the oldest surviving American folk ballet. Danced to an amusing score by Virgil Thomson, *Filling Station* chronicles a day in the life of Mac, a gas station attendant, originally portrayed by Lew. The ballet is an amiable mixture of classical movements and vaudevillian antics, and is a milestone in American ballet. When *Filling Station* premiered, ballet audiences were not accustomed to seeing ordinary Americans behaving in familiar – if cartoonish – fashion, in such recognizable surroundings as a gas station.

Lew had numerous opportunities to choreograph while in New York, and he also began taking on increasing responsibilities as a ballet master. His career was interrupted in 1942, when he was drafted into the army; when he got out, he became ballet master of the newly established Ballet Society, forerunner to **New York City Ballet**. But he realized that he would never be in a position of great authority in a Balanchine company and, looking for more challenging artistic opportunities, he joined Willam as co-director of San Francisco Ballet in 1951.

Changing of the Guard

Following the 1951 season, Willam left San Francisco for Salt Lake City, where he had the opportunity to establish the ballet department at the University of Utah. Mignon's health had deteriorated – she had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis – and they were in need of less stress, more permanence, and more money; money would remain in short supply at San Francisco Ballet for years to come. Harold stayed on as head of San Francisco Ballet School, which he ran until his retirement in 1975. Lew retained the directorship until his death in 1984, although beginning in 1976 he shared the title with Michael Smuin. (During that period, Smuin's aesthetic began to dominate the company, and Lew's influence diminished.) Under Lew's leadership, San Francisco Ballet began to receive national and international recognition.

When Lew took charge of San Francisco Ballet, he was one of the most prominent figures in classical dance in America. His years with Balanchine and Kirstein, and his exposure to the best art and artists – in ballet and beyond – gave him very different ideas from Willam's about what dance could and should be. Even before he had any notion that he would one day direct San Francisco Ballet, Lew began

working with about eight students in the advanced class at the school, training them in what was essentially Balanchine technique. "[The brothers] were completely different," said Johnson. "Mr. C, as we called Bill, was very theatrical, far more theatrical in his approach to teaching a dance. With him the expression came first and the steps came after. With Lew, we were all of a sudden exposed to what at that moment was being called abstract dancing, which, of course, was not abstract. They were theoretically dances without stories. But the technique, the style, the clarity, the musicality, and the line came before any kind of programmatic material was layered on it. You had to learn the steps first. But he was not devoid of expression. He told me once that every ballet he choreographed he did to teach us something. Each one would be a little more difficult than the last one."

The fact that Christensen's ballets were often a means of teaching his dancers does not mean that his choreography was simple. "The Christensen ballets hold a provocative secret. They ought to be much better known than they are," Croce wrote in 1978 ("Going to the Dance," p. 135).

Anita Paciotti, who began her career with San Francisco Ballet in 1968 and remains there today as a principal character dancer and ballet mistress, said of Lew, "He wanted something extreme. It wasn't about being delicate. It was about being strong, it was about speed. And it was extremes of movement, from high to low. He wanted straight lines, long-reaching lines, not old-fashioned romantic lines. And it was really important to Lew that his dancers move. He experimented with technique, and did a lot of quirky things. He'd have you turn in and then turn out, and do combinations of jazzy things in a classical or neo-classical ballet. There were all kinds of juxtapositions."

Lew choreographed over 100 ballets in all. Standouts include such plotless pieces as the charming *Four Norwegian Moods* (1976); the witty *Il Distratto* (1967), in which he played with light to create some wonderfully imaginative effects; and the marvelously fluid *Vivaldi Concerto Grosso* (1981), his final work. Among his most acclaimed story ballets are *Filling Station*; *Jinx* (1942), the tale of a clown who is blamed for the misfortunes befalling a circus; *Beauty and the Beast* (1958); *Original Sin* (1961), inspired by the story of Adam and Eve; and the comic *Con Amore* (1953), in which, among other things, a short male thief finds himself in a camp of Amazon women. He also choreographed the first pop art ballet: *Life: A Do it Yourself Disaster*, premiered in 1965, two years before **Robert Joffrey**'s *Astarte*, the ballet generally cited as the first of that genre.

"Each of his ballets was different from the one before," said Johnson. "But they were very American in approach. He was very interested in American composers and designers. He liked simplicity and bold movement and bold actions. And, of course, he was extremely humorous."

Lew's strong relationship with Balanchine and Kirstein would prove to be especially valuable. In his inaugural year as sole artistic director of San Francisco Ballet, the company danced its first Balanchine ballet, *Serenade*. Balanchine continued to be extremely generous to San Francisco Ballet throughout his life, and the fact that he entrusted his ballets to Lew from the start gave the company a certain cachet. Beyond that, these masterworks challenged the dancers in new ways, strengthening and improving their technical skills.

In 1956, Lew led San Francisco Ballet to its first engagement at **Jacob's Pillow**. *Newsweek* declared that the company had "matured into a national asset." Between 1957 and 1959, San Francisco Ballet was sent by the State Department on three international tours that took the company to the Far East, Central and South America, and the Middle East and Africa. In 1963, there was a national tour that played forty-two cities. At the end of the year, the company was among the first recipients of a Ford Foundation grant. New York City Ballet and the School of American Ballet received the bulk of the initial grant money, close to $6 million; San Francisco Ballet was next with $644,000. There is little doubt that Lew's association with Balanchine and Kirstein worked in the company's favor.

Ballet Takes Root in Salt Lake City

When Willam joined the faculty of the University of Utah as an associate professor (he became a full professor in 1953), it was with the stipulation that the ballet program would not be part of the physical education department, which was commonly where modern dance programs were placed. He wanted ballet to be recognized as an art form, not a sport. So ballet joined musical theater as part of the speech department, and Willam set about developing a "conservatory-style program modeled upon European ballet academies," wrote Debra Hickenlooper Sowell in *The Christensen Brothers* (p. 291). By the end of the second year, he had also created a student performing group. Over the next decade, Utah Theatre Ballet grew more and more polished and proficient. Major guest artists appeared with the company, and all performances were accompanied by the Utah Symphony.

Willam was now eager to take his dancers to the next level: he wanted the company to become professional. He was aware that the Ford Foundation was going to begin funding the arts in 1963, and knew that companies affiliated with a school would not be eligible for consideration. Although Willam remained on the faculty of the University until 1971, his company became independent from the school. The newly named Utah Civic Ballet received a Ford Foundation grant of $175,000. In 1968, when the Federation for Rocky Mountain States chose Utah Civic Ballet to represent the region, the company took on a more inclusive name, Ballet West. In 1971, Willam led Ballet West on its first European tour. He remained artistic director of the company until his retirement in 1978 (co-directing during his final two years with Bruce Marks, his successor). But he never stopped teaching around Salt Lake City, and in 1991, when he was 89, he joined the faculty of Ballet West Conservatory, where he taught well into his nineties.

Legacy

"More than anything else, these guys were great teachers," said Johnson. "And they not only developed great dancers, but great teachers. I think that's largely gone unrecognized. All over the country today, there are people who are carrying on the Christensens' work, or who have learned from people that have carried on their work. They have had a dramatic effect on American dance."

A short list of the dancers who received all or part of their training from Willam, Harold and/or Lew includes Ruby Asquith, Sally Bailey, Richard Carter, Betsy Erickson, Carolyn George, Cynthia Gregory, Finis Jhung, Nancy Johnson, Virginia Johnson, Harold Lang, Conrad Ludlow, John McFall, Victoria Morgan, Terry Orr, Janet

Reed, Suki Schorer, Michael Smuin, Kent Stowell, Jocelyn Vollmar, and Onna White. Many of those who began their careers with San Francisco Ballet left to dance in New York. While some were seeking greater opportunities, others left not because they were unhappy on the West Coast, but because they could barely eke out a living there.

It is not an exaggeration to suggest that Willam, Lew, and Harold willed the survival of San Francisco Ballet, keeping it going through some very tough financial times. Had it not been for their uncompromising commitment to and belief in San Francisco Ballet, it is unlikely that the company would have had the opportunity to mature into the world-class institution it has become.

"More than once the company was on the verge of bankruptcy," Vollmar said, "and Lew and Harold somehow pulled it through even though they were very poorly paid. Willam once said that he and Lew didn't have sense enough to quit. They didn't realize they were making history."

NOTES

1. All quotes not accompanied by citations in the text are drawn from interviews conducted by the author:

   Willam Christensen, 1994 and 1996
   Nancy Johnson, 1997
   Anita Paciotti, 1997
   Jocelyn Vollmar, 1997

For full citations to works referenced in this essay, see Selected Resources for Further Research.

Sheryl Flatow has written about dance and theater for more than 30 years for numerous national publications. From 1992-2002, she was the program annotator for San Francisco Ballet. At the Museum of Performance & Design in San Francisco (then known as the San Francisco Performing Arts Library & Museum), she curated major exhibitions on George Balanchine, George Gershwin, Richard Rodgers and several others. Under the aegis of MPD, she curated exhibitions on *Giselle* and Rudolf Nureyev for San Francisco Ballet, and Paul Taylor for Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. She currently lectures at Florida Atlantic University's Lifelong Learning Society, presenting programs on musical theatre, movie musicals, and dance.