

For Janet

How could the high school beauty, second daughter of the school's dynamic director and his wife, the radiant English teacher, be so perfect? Maybe because her parents were, or so they seemed from the perspective of this 15-year-old Detroit kid newly arrived at Interlochen Arts Academy in 1966. I first saw Janet Eilber on stage from my position as second violins section leader in the orchestra pit. It could have been that December's production of *The Nutcracker*, or perhaps in one of dance director Bill Hug's works to Copland, Berg or Corelli.

Interlochen Arts Academy, nestled in Michigan's north woods between Lakes Wahbeganetta and Wahbeganess, was our home away from home, an island of "gifted youth", where we were sold the belief that "In the arts, there are no enemies." As a mecca for talented kids who didn't necessarily fit in to their hometown cultures, Interlochen taught us quickly that we were not alone, but also that there were always those more gifted than ourselves, and that we had to work without ceasing to make it to the top of our form. By our eleventh-grade year, Janet was already the jewel in the crown of our class. Little did I know that a year later, I'd be dancing alongside her on stage as a full-fledged dance major, having abandoned my position in the orchestra for my newfound love of dance. Long before I really knew what I was doing, I followed Janet's lead, fed off her cues, her confident body language, her grace and grandeur. She really was the perfect creation of her parents and had inherited a generous dose of their intelligence and charm. I was smitten both by Janet and by the Dance, practicing my craft among my elite peers, entering into a hard-won legacy of modern dancers, and when a handful of us Interlochen seniors flew to New York in early 1969 to audition for the Juilliard School and were all accepted, my fate was sealed.

Janet and I became joined at the hip at Juilliard, often cast together in works by Doris Humphrey, José Limon and Martha Graham or dancing each other's works in our own quartet Dance Mobile, made up of Interlochen alums. We were privileged to learn from the modern masters' direct disciples: Helen McGehee, Ethel Winter, Bertram Ross, Kazuko Hirabayashi, Betty Jones, or we worked under the masters themselves: Anna Sokolow, José Limon, and Antony Tudor.

I recall vividly a moment in the 4th floor corridors leading to the Dance Division office: Janet sits on the floor at her locker, legs stretched out in 2nd position sorting through papers, a few days after she had wowed audiences and her classmates dancing the "Sphinx" solo in Jose's "The Winged". Mr. Tudor walks by, peers down at her, and with arched eyebrow and clipped British accent, says: "I see you are resting on your laurels." He had caught her at a very rare moment. Because Janet rarely rested on her laurels; rather, she continued to challenge herself and go for the gritty, deeply felt truth beneath the ease and grace. Martha made sure of that when Janet joined her company a few years later, and Janet attacked every challenge with a fierce intelligence, discovering an inherent visceral power to match her luminous beauty.

What I didn't know was that Janet had flown to NYC while still in high school to dance for Martha Graham herself. Interlochen's then president, Carl Haas had arranged for the private audience to happen. What I'd give to be a witness to that moment... and to think that almost 50 years later Janet would have inherited Martha's mantle to be the Artistic Director of her company! My knowledge of the event must be confirmed by Janet herself, but I recall a story that Martha watched Janet perform a solo and told her to return to her when she'd had more experience. Did Martha remember her when 5 years later Janet was part of her newly formed company? I'm sure she did. And, true to my style of following in Janet's footsteps, I signed up for the Graham experience at that same moment, further sealing our parallel fates.

None of us had a meteoric rise to the top; we paid our dues while scrutinizing and idolizing our elders and waiting for our names to be posted on the casting sheet. Janet was one of the "tall girls" while assuming roles such as Lilith in "Embattled Garden" and Woman in White in "Diversion of Angels". With radical turnovers in the company during the next few years and a burst of touring sponsored by the NEA Dance Touring Program and State Department, our generation began to assume lead roles, often being unfavorably compared by the critics to our predecessors. To mention a few of our fledgling crew: Peggy Lyman, Susan McGuire, Elisa Monte, Tim Wengerd, Mario Delamo, and Bonny Oda Homsey. But we would have none of the critics' skepticism and became even more determined to prove ourselves to them, to Martha and to the world. Janet was radiant as Joan in "Seraphic Dialogue", stalwart yet compassionate as the Pioneer Woman in "Appalachian Spring", and shockingly wild and deranged as Cassandra in "Clytemnestra" to name just a few of the roles she began to grow into under Martha's watchful eye. Martha trusted Janet implicitly in the creative process as well, spending hours in the studio working closely with her and sharing the daunting labor of forging new dances, of originating roles that Margot Fonteyn or Liza Minelli would premiere for opening nights then pass on to Janet if the works were merited worthy of entering the repertoire.

Among my many memories of the era: breaking Janet's toe in a rehearsal of "Deaths and Entrances", dancing with her decked in mylar jumpsuits for runway fashion spectacles staged by Halston, benefits at Roseland Ballroom or the newly installed Temple of Dendur at the MET, and in my own works at the Riverside Dance Festival. Martha seemed to know that the further she allowed us out on the tether to pursue our own interests, the closer we became to asserting our own identities and our freedom and confidence as interpretive artists. And as long as we kept returning to the fold, she would reap the glories. I think Janet and I shared this trust with Martha, even when we left New York and the company to pursue our own lives. We were never exiled, excommunicated, or accused of betrayal by Martha. The doors remained open.

By the early to mid- 80's, Janet and I went our separate paths: I ended up in Ann Arbor teaching at a research university while Janet migrated to the West coast to appear in films after having made quite a splash on Broadway. She and her husband John began to raise a family there, and she and Bonnie started Los Angeles Dance Theater, reviving important legacy works. She became an eloquent spokesperson and consultant for dance and dance education and joined the boards and staffs of distinguished arts organizations and foundations. Years passed, and we would share holiday greetings and follow from afar the often rocky progress of the Graham

company as it struggled to reimagine its life after Martha. I was overjoyed and relieved to learn that Janet had agreed to return to lead the company back to its former glory... or better, to lead it into a new era with a new vision for a rapidly changing world.

During our careers, Modern Dance had come of age, and it was up to us to make something of that legacy and pass it on while making it newly relevant to the 21st century dancers, audiences, presenters and funding sources. Janet had the vision and authority, the gravitas and majesty, to lead the organization into a new era. This did not come without its risks. Janet understood that Martha's radicalism could best be translated to this new era by radically recontextualizing Martha's work alongside new works by new collaborators. She knew her curatorial skills would be essential to please the knowledgeable audiences, the skeptical critics and newer audience members who had never experienced Graham. How to bring a legacy to life without embalming it in a museum, how to fight for legitimacy and authenticity of the school, the technique and the repertoire without succumbing to orthodoxy, how to attract new students to the school—not necessarily to make them into Graham dancers but to provide new generations with the opportunity to experience the most comprehensive modern dance technique ever invented, to provide them with the strongest core training available and prepare them to better understand any technique or style demanded of them.

This brings us to tonight's celebration to honor Janet's 50 years with Martha. Endowed scholarships for students help to ensure that this ever-evolving legacy continues. Embodied in the technique, the over 181 works in the company repertoire and in the body memories of all dancers who have ever taken a class, this legacy finds new life and new possibilities in every student who passes through the school's doors.

Congratulations, Janet, on this honor. On behalf of all of us dancers whose lives have been so deeply touched by Martha and her work, thank you for your ongoing commitment to the company and school. The organization is fortunate to have you and very smart to recognize your 50 years of your service, your artistry and guiding intelligence.

Peter Sparling