

Alyssa:

The lion tamer. It was sort of ironic in a way. Here I was with young students, very much my junior, but acting in plays on a college level and I had never graduated from high school. There was an irony in that. Later on, after the [laugh clown lab 00:00:36], I did have Deborah, and for awhile I was just teaching. I did not do too much acting. Then much later, in fact I'm getting ahead of myself a little but I will recount this. Much later, the little theater moved into new digs and got a new director and as fate wielded, someone from my past reappeared. *play*

I had mentioned the name Edward Levy that I had gone to several balls with to dance, as a date. Edward changed his name to Lee Edwards, went to New York, was there at the same time I was, and had quite a nice career in musical comedy. He could sing very well and he was a good actor. Then I sort of lost track of him. Then all of a sudden, the little theater had a new home and a new director, Lee Edwards. He was having nice success. He was, at the time I'm talking about, he was doing a play. It was then late into the 50's. Deborah was growing up, my school was advancing, I had plenty of pupils, several other studios, and was [inaudible 00:02:45] won that I kept for quite awhile. Then suddenly, I got a call from Lee. We had socialized a little bit, he was married, I introduced him to Peter, and we saw each other occasionally but we were always in touch.

I got a call from Lee. "Alyssa, I have a problem." "What is the problem?" "I am doing the play Anastasia and it's almost ready for production." In fact, I think he said it was about a week away. He said, "My problem is my leading lady." "She's wonderful, her name is Gladys Edwards." She was a professional, a small lady with red hair, and a very good actress. He said, "She is not well." "She keeps getting flu and even pneumonia, and has had at least one relapse." He said, "I think I should get someone to cover her and I would like you to try to do the part." "If it comes to that it would be just about a week of rehearsal."

Well, I was well into my teaching and of course I had a little girl. My little girl was not too little at the time. I said, "Lee, do you really think I can do this?" He said, "I can't think of anyone else that might be qualified." "You're the type, although you're very different from Gladys, you have the experience." "I'd like you to come to rehearsal and just watch." "In case something should happen maybe you could take over." I went, I think it was on a Sunday night and the opening was the following weekend. Gladys was very good but she was obviously in trouble speaking and from pneumonia and from the flu. I got a script from Lee and I said, "You know Lee, I don't even know the show."

It had run on Broadway with a very promising, *actress* I think it was Vivian [Linforce 00:05:47], on Broadway. I even went to LSU and spoke to the drama director and said, "What kind of part is this?" "What kind of a play?" He said, "It's an excellent play and it takes an excellent actress." Which of course helped me very little. Anyway, I felt holding to Lee. We knew each other so well and I would like to have helped him out so I started reading the play and learning it. I have a photographic memory so it stood me in very good ~~stand~~ *shape*. I learned the first Act in practically one day. By the time I had learned the first Act, Lee called me and said, "Gladys is out, she is too ill, she cannot do the role." "Can you help me out?" It was then four, maybe five days from opening." I said, "Well, I've

learned one Act, I'll do what I can."

I went to rehearsal, tried the first Act without script, just the first Act. Having a photographic memory meant if I needed help from cues, I would say, if I forgot a line I would say, "It's in the middle of page 40." Or, "The end of page 60." That's the way a photographic memory works. Then I went home and learned the second Act. It was a three Act show. I got it pretty much under my belt. Went back to rehearsal, it went okay. I was terribly nervous. Everybody else was very encouraging. Then I started on the third Act but it took me two days to get the third Act in my memory. I was in the end of the fourth day, I'm into serious dress rehearsal. All the costumes had to be altered because I was a great deal taller than Gladys. Also, she was a redhead, I was at that time, distinctly a brunette. I even had publicity pictures taken of me having my hair done in the style of the Russian.

It was a story of the daughter of the deposed Russian czar who supposedly had survived the annihilation of the royal family of Russia in 1917. It was based on fact but no one was really sure if this daughter had survived but the play surmises that she did and that she is practically dragged from the river by some Russians who then feel that she looks like the Duchess. The Duchess that is supposed to be the one who survived and they bring her back to their boss who is a very politically ambitious person and wants to put this girl forward as the Duchess survivor of the royal family of Russia. That is the story.

The first Act she has been dragged out of the River, the River Seine, it is set in Paris. She is bedraggled and she is sitting in a chair. When they tell her what they want her to do she laughs almost hysterically. She has no money, no memory, she is not sure she is whom they want her to be and so she submits to being coached. The head of this triumvirate, a fairly young man, takes her over, dresses her, gets her a tutor, puts all these thoughts into her mind as the history of this daughter of the Russian czar. What she was like, what her life was like as a child, whom her sisters and her brother, she had one brother was, and just generally coached. Then she is passed off as the missing Duchess. She makes it happen. The reason is they have a Prince who is heir to the throne of Russia and they want this girl to marry him. He is introduced, she's supposed to be very beautiful, he's intrigued and he wants to believe that she is the real thing. At the very end, she has been coached and nurtured back to life by a doctor. At the very end, when she almost ~~disappears~~ ^{00:13:04} ~~and~~ becomes the wife of the heir to the throne, she throws it all away to run away with the doctor with whom she's in love. This is the story.

Came opening night, I can tell you I was ^{nervous} but the first step over from the wings to the stage always works miracles, or at least it should. I got through quite well. In fact, the reviews were excellent. One said, "Mrs. ^{hooks} ~~hooks~~," which they should not have called me Mrs. ~~hooks~~. They should've called me my professional name, Alyssa ^[inaudible] ~~[inaudible]~~ ^{00:14:03}, but in Baton Rouge they don't know the difference. "Mrs. Hooks," he quotes, "We had our doubts that she could deliver after such a short time of rehearsals but within five or 10 minutes our doubts were erased and we set back to enjoy the show." It was really good praise. I enjoyed it, I have pictures and I really, it was a very ^{lucrative} ~~lucrative~~ time of my life.

My studios. I finally had a pretty good studio and my enrollment had tripled and I found myself very busy teaching. Around that time also, I was asked to choreograph for the New Orleans Pops. My former teacher, [inaudible 00:15:27] asked me to do a piece which I did with great success. Following that, [inaudible 00:15:29] decided to resign. She was getting up ~~there~~ and she decided to give up her job as choreographer of New Orleans Opera and recommended me so I took over. It lasted five or six years, I think. The first years were very auspicious.

I did several ballet, Sampson, Aida, Lakme, and it resulted in one of the columnists from the Times [inaudible 00:16:20] in New Orleans to give me a whole couple of paragraphs quoting that, "Whatever you would say about the New Orleans Opera this year, you can certainly say that the ballet is absolutely the best they've ever had." He went on to cite different performances and really raved. One of the operas that I did and received raves for was Orpheus Eurydice. Remember, I had consulted [Balentine 00:17:08] about that. He had given me such good advice and that resulted in some of the best reviews I ever had.

Meanwhile, things were also looking up for Peter. He had completed his first three years, had been asked to sign another contract for even longer because he was then made a full professor. That denoted tenure. Also, at the end of a few years of his second contract, Barrett Stout resigned, he was getting on in years. The conductor of the LSU orchestra had taken over for Barrett Stout so that left the LSU orchestra free so it was also given to Peter. Now you had the full ~~opera~~ and LSU opera. Soon, when we were a few years in Baton Rouge, the Baton Rouge symphony was taken over by Emile Cooper. Remember we had worked with Emile Cooper, Peter at the Met and also in Central City. I had done many ballets under him. He suddenly was the conductor of the Baton Rouge Symphony.

After a year or so, right in the midst of the season, he took ill. All eyes went to Peter. Peter took over the performance with good success and was ultimately offered the Baton Rouge Symphony. Now he had not only the work at the school but the Baton Rouge Symphony which opened vistas because as a symphony conductor, not a school orchestra conductor, he had the advantages of inviting guest conductors to take to play for his orchestra and in turn he would be offered guest engagements. He was already working in Birmingham, in the Birmingham Opera with great success. Then, maybe a few months later, something opened up in Beaumont through one of his pupils. She recommended Peter and he ended up as a permanent conductor of the Beaumont Opera in Beaumont, Texas. That lasted many years, many happy years.

Now, he could function like a real professional. Fortunately, [Everitt Tim 00:20:43] who was now his boss, had taken Stout's place, was very compatible as to letting him go for guest engagements. Through the years of end of 60, end of 50, through 60, into 70's, Peter was guest conductor in many places in Europe. In [Auchin 00:21:15], in other places in Holland, in Portugal, in Germany, in quite a few places in Germany, in also Romania.

Now, Romania was a particularly interesting because it was at a time I could go with him. He had been invited to take over the opera in the ~~main city~~ of Romania. We'd never been there before, Peter hadn't either so it was sort of an adventure for us. We went there, were met at the ~~play~~ and treated like VIP's and celebrities. Peter found there was no union so he could rehearse as long as he wanted. His debut was in the opera house was Traviata. When we went to leave our hotel, we could not find a cab and the streets were crowded because Mao Zedong was in town and of course, Romania was communist at that time. Everything was made to greet him. We did make it but very nervous, but we did make his performance. I sat in a box and it went very well.

PHONE

Chinese
premier

Bucharest

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He also was asked to conduct in a second city in Romania, that was Yash. He didn't conduct opera, he conducted concerts. It was the first time that he as a male had received flowers at the end of the concert. Now it is very common for males to receive flowers, they do it all the time at the Met. At that time it was not. Also, in Yash, when we got there, part of our committee knew that I had been a dancer so he introduced me to the head of the Yash Ballet, Independent Ballet, and the opera ballet. He was delightful. We had him, also I met his lead ballerina and principle male dancer. We became very friendly. The end of one of Peter's concerts in Yash, we all went out to celebrate and at the end. It was quite late, ~~12~~, 1 o'clock in the morning and streets were empty. As we went down the streets, the ballet master started with bravado from some of the wine, he started pirouetting in the middle of the street joined by his dancers and by me. We had a wonderful time.

Later on in the year, Peter was invited to conduct in Vienna in the Pops, in Vienna. That of course was a very sentimental journey. I also went with him for that. It was attended by quite a few of his classmates. At the end of the concert, we all went out to have supper and of course there was great reminiscence. Later on, we did continue our friendship with these people because there was a 50th anniversary of the graduation from the ~~[inaudible 00:26:15]~~. That's high school in Europe. We went back there and some of these same people ... Through the years, when we would go to Vienna, especially in the summer, we would meet up with them and it was very nice hiatus. I even learned to follow the conversation and enter a little in German myself.

gymnasium
high school

again met

Peter's first performance as conductor of the ~~[inaudible 00:26:55]~~ Symphony was quite auspicious. He chose, as one of the selections, the Aria and The Dance of the Seven Veils from the Opera, Salome. He had worked with a soprano in Birmingham that had made her fame doing the role, and especially during the dance. He pulled strings, quite a few of them, to get her to come and sing in this particular piece, Salome, and do the dance. ~~As~~ the dance of The Dance of The Seven Veils is a strip. She pulls off one veil at a time. This beautiful soprano did just that. At the end of the seventh veil, there were all kinds of binoculars raised, particularly by the gentlemen in the ~~orchestra~~. It was a very auspicious debut.

Greenboro

audience

Meanwhile, my career was not standing still either. As they say, there were no flies on me also. Besides working with the opera for four or five years, my ballet school grew and I was doing performances, especially at the end of the season in April or May, and

was getting quite good attention. My enrollment was burgeoning. By 1961, I had already finished with New Orleans Opera. I decided to create the Baton Rouge Ballet Theater. That was 1961. It endured until I left in 1976. I turned it over to two of my students and one of course was my beloved Sharon Walker who had studied with me all these years. In fact, a lot of my students had stuck with me and appeared with the [inaudible 00:29:50] Little Theater that I will go into detail more about.

Sharon and Molly Buckman, another student, took over and just a year or so ago they celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Baton Rouge Ballet Theater. I was there at that time and they treated me like a queen. I'd also been down a few years before, I was invited to come down as a special guest for the Nutcracker which they set in the Bayou. They call it the Bayou Nutcracker. At the time, again, I was treated royally, made honorary mayor, given the keys to the city, etc., etc. *and my poor old sister came with me*

PERCOPHIA 1961, I started the ballet and we started giving performances. I was aided embedded with luck by a young married lady who had been a professional dancer with the American Ballet Theater. Her name was Helen Greenburg, she was married to David Greenburg who was a professor at LSU. She stayed there for a few years and helped me greatly. I remember one of the performances was Anthony Tutor's "Gala Performance" done to the music of [Percophia 00:31:34]. Briefly, it's an amusing ballet telling what happens when three guest ballerinas come together to perform in the same performance. A little like the ballet that Alicia Alonso made very famous. This was Anthony Tutor's gala performance and it had three ballerinas, a Russian, a French, and an Italian. Of course, what ensues is one-upmanship. *GALA Performance*

Helen was still dancing at the time and was my French ballerina and did a wonderful job. She also helped me very much in getting ideas and choreographing, etc. At first, we did the performances with tape and then my backers got together, a woman's ballet guild. They raised enough money, the president was a Mrs. Thompson, very ambitious, and she raised enough money to get the orchestra to accompany us. The last few years, I would say almost 10 years, Peter conducted. We did some really fine performances. One of them was to [inaudible 00:33:42] music from Siegfried, ~~Swane~~ *RAINE* Journey, only the ballet was set beneath the sea.

It was an undersea ballet with a diver coming down and walking as a through water, through the dense, the bottom of the ocean. The fish, and the different kinds of fish, and octopus, and all the wonderful sea things you see at the bottom of the sea. At the very end he was extended on a rope and came down from the wings from the top of the stage. Came down and then proceeded to walk through with the various fish and happenings below. Then when the music ended, the diver disappeared and the rope came down and dangled empty as the curtain came down. It was a very beautiful ballet, we did several: The last one was Gershwin's, we did American in Paris in the middle of my tenure. Then, Rhapsody in Blue was last. For the last almost 10 years we had the ballet conducted by Peter and his orchestra. My dream of collaborating was absolutely realized.

Also at this time, another thing happened in my career. Helen Greenburg had been in

*The main dancer was Betty Buckman
a local dancer - more trained in
modern & jazz but excellent for this
production*

the King and I with Yul Brynner and worked with Jerome Robbins. When they did the King and I for the Little Theater musical, she did it and was choreographer but she was pregnant at the time. After the birth of her baby, her husband got another job in Cincinnati and they left. Lee immediately turned to me and asked me if I would take over the choreography for the summer musicals for the Baton Rouge Little Theater, which I did. We did many of them.

By P
We did Fiddler on the Roof, we did Carousel, ~~we did~~ quite a few. I will probably remember them as we go along. Also, around this time something else came up. At LSU in 1967, they built the LSU Union Building with a beautiful stage. They opened it by performing a musical and the chosen musical was West Side Story which had to be done by following all of Jerome Robbins' notes, certain things had to be done just like when you performed Fiddler on the Roof at The Little Theater, it was the same way. I was asked, not to direct, the direction was done by Hal Phillips from The Little Theater, but I was asked to choreograph.

Now this was a major undertaking. Most of the dancers were male. I mean you had to have good dancers. I accepted the job under the proviso that I could get together a decent amount of male dancers. Well, to make the story short, I did. They came out of the woodwork. I had had a student, young student, in my ballet school, his name was Joey [Pushka 00:38:55]. He was very young when he started taking from me but now he was a freshman at LSU. He showed up a dancer, ~~that I had known about~~, Bobby [Bueka 00:39:16] was also a student. George Strickland whom I'd worked with in The Little Theater and many others. I managed to put together a very impressive group of dancers. *PROBABLE*

I will deviate for one minute. As I said, I had quite a few dancers. As fate would have it, within a year or so three of my dancers, George Strickland, a dancer from California whose name I cannot remember, and Bobby ~~Bueka~~ [Bueka 00:40:07] all died tragically in automobile accidents. It was like a hex.

To get back to my story, we did West Side Story and it was a huge success. They continued, they would have every year, they wanted to do a musical. This time I was asked not only to choreograph but to also direct. For at least seven years, I directed and choreographed the musicals for the LSU Union. My first total performance was Oklahoma. Of course, I used a lot of singers from Peter's opera studio. Then subsequently I did Annie Get Your Gun, Funny Lady, Sweet Charity, How to Succeed in Business. Quite a few others with really very good success. This took me from 1967 to 1975. The last show was How to Succeed in Business. 1976 we left Baton Rouge.

Around 1970, something else happened that was quite important to me as an actress. In fact, two things. One happened when a movie company came into Baton Rouge. It was a small Italian movie company run by two Italians who had made a big hit with sort of a sleeper movie from Italy a few years before called, Mondo Canne. The song also took off. They had made quite a bit of money so they were now doing a movie about the Civil War. That brought them to New Orleans, to Baton Rouge and the surrounding bayou estates and so on. They needed ~~for a scene, they needed one of these~~ after the war *set in*

actors

mansions, antebellum homes. They selected a home not far from Baton Rouge in one of the smaller cities and they would do one scene there but they needed quite a few actors.

They came to Baton Rouge and got in touch with Lee Edwards who of course was established as the director of Baton Rouge Little Theater. Lee was asked to send for auditions two or three, maybe four ^{women} ~~men~~ and about five or six men for a certain scene to be done in this antebellum home on a plantation. Lee got together some of his actors and he called me. He said, "Would you come and audition for this?" I said, "Okay." Also, there was another actress, a little bit older, rehearsing, was Lenore. She was going to also go and audition.

With Lee himself, and a few of the actors from The Little Theater, we ^{went} ~~went~~ to audition for this movie company. In short, I was chosen and Lenore. We were the only two women. I was chosen to play the writer of Uncle Tom's Cabin, Harriett Beecher Stowe.

^{when} We all gathered, we were told what our parts were and we were taken a few miles, about 50 miles away from Baton Rouge to this big plantation home that had been prepared. The dining room had been re-hauled by this Italian company and ready for us to shoot this one scene.

We drove up in cars and were put up in a motel. We were given scripts and told to learn the parts. My part was to just sit through the first part of the scene ^{was} ~~was~~ a reporter ^{who} ~~was~~ ~~coming at the time of the~~ writing of Uncle Tom's Cabin, was of course during slavery time. The reporter was coming to interview these people about their opinions as far as the future of the south and the north. It was right virgin on the Civil War, of course. They wanted the opinion ...