

The Joy of Learning Valuable Lessons as a Dancer

Description

The AutoEthnographer

Through the Eyes of a Dancer: The Joy of Learning Valuable Lessons

I cherish the memories of the theaters, arenas, and performance spaces where I performed as a dancer or presented choreography. Most of these structures still exist today, but others are just a memory found in history books. While dancing in the Teatro Goldoni in Venice, Italy, inaugurated in 1622, the old opera house reminded me of an aging diva who enchants us with her past (even though the theaters in Italy are considered masculine). Unfortunately, the new state-of-the-art buildings lack this charisma. But from New Yorkâ??s Metropolitan Opera to the Cow Palace in San Francisco (used for cattle auctions when there were no performances) every venue taught me valuable lessons.


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Photo of Metropolitan Opera House from Wikimedia Commons

The first time I performed at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York I was a young ballet studentâ??not yet engaged with a company. The Royal Ballet came to town and I was hired to dance in *The Sleeping Beauty* on the same stage with the extraordinary dance partnership of Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev as history was being made.

â??A life lesson came from thisâ??things can go wrong anytime, anywhere, and to anyone. Our lives can change forever in a second. No one is spared from this humbling reality.

A year later, hired again as an extra dancer, I remember standing on the dark stage of the Metropolitan Opera as the curtain opened on Stuttgart Balletâ??s *Romeo and Juliet.* I watched the twenty-one chandeliers with almost fifty thousand crystals in the form of stars in a constellation make their way to the ceilingâ??a magical moment. Though it was totally dark in the theater, I could sense the heartbeat and pulse of hundreds of spectators.

However, two hours later this dream-like place experienced a scenery mishapâ??a rope broke while lowering Juliet into her tomb. She miraculously came back to life to stop her fall and saved herself from a deadly accident. A life lesson came from thisâ??things can go wrong anytime, anywhere, and to anyone. Our lives can change forever in a second. No one is spared from this humbling reality.

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RINGLING BROS
BARNUM & BAILEY
BARNUM & BAILEY



Photo of Ringling Bros Barnum Bailey Circus by Joe Shlabotnik for Flickr

In the spring of 1978, while performing with Ringling Bros. Circus, Madison Square Garden became our home for a couple of months, though we had to share it with other eventsâ??concerts, fights, and sports. I remember the organizers decided that they could jam in a Canadian hockey game and the circus both in one day.

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The ice rink was assembled on the arena floor for the hockey game in the evening, and the rubber track placed over the ice for the circus. But as we opened the show that morning we discovered more than we bargained forâ??the cold rubber became as slippery as the ice under it. As dancers we tried desperately to keep our footing, but we were dancing on ice! The elephants and horses couldnâ??t keep their balance either, so the decision was madeâ??the show didnâ??t go on that day. The experience taught me that the expression *the show must go on* isnâ??t always valid, and prudently letting go of something for now doesnâ??t mean giving up on it forever.





Photo of Teatro Bonci from Wikimedia Commons

Fast forward to the summer of 2005, I brought my students to dance at the beautiful Teatro Bonci in Cesena, Italy. Dancers came from all over the world so they could say laterâ??*I danced on the same stage as Rudolph Nureyev in Italy.* But one thing they didnâ??t anticipate was the heat and humidity inside the theaterâ??there was no air conditioning. This attracted armies of mosquitoes that attacked everyone. One thing performing in Italy taught meâ??bring mosquito repellent if you dance there in the summer!

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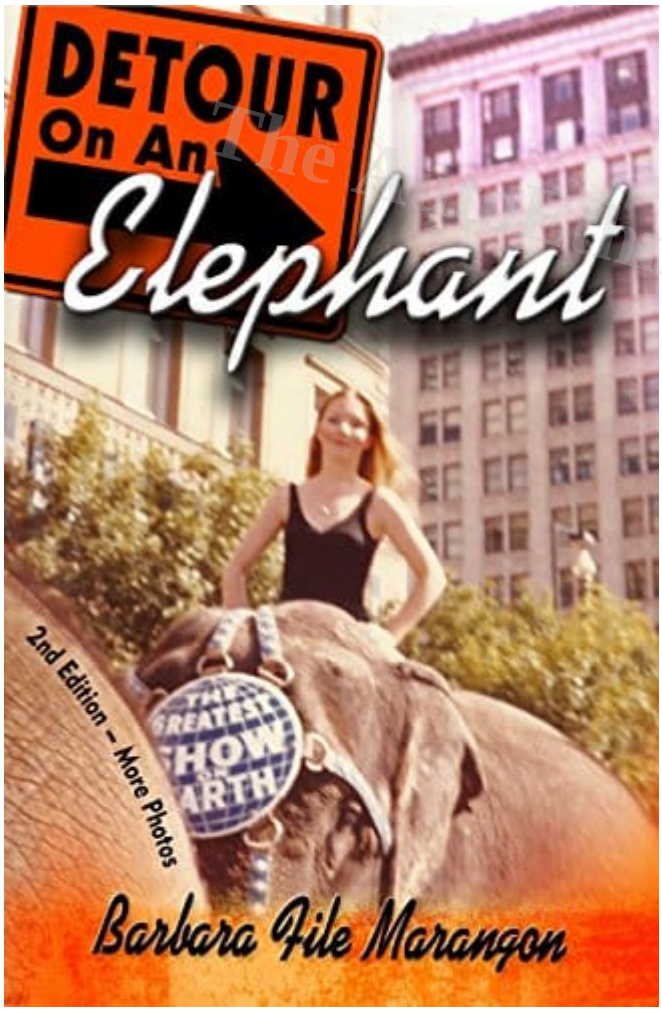
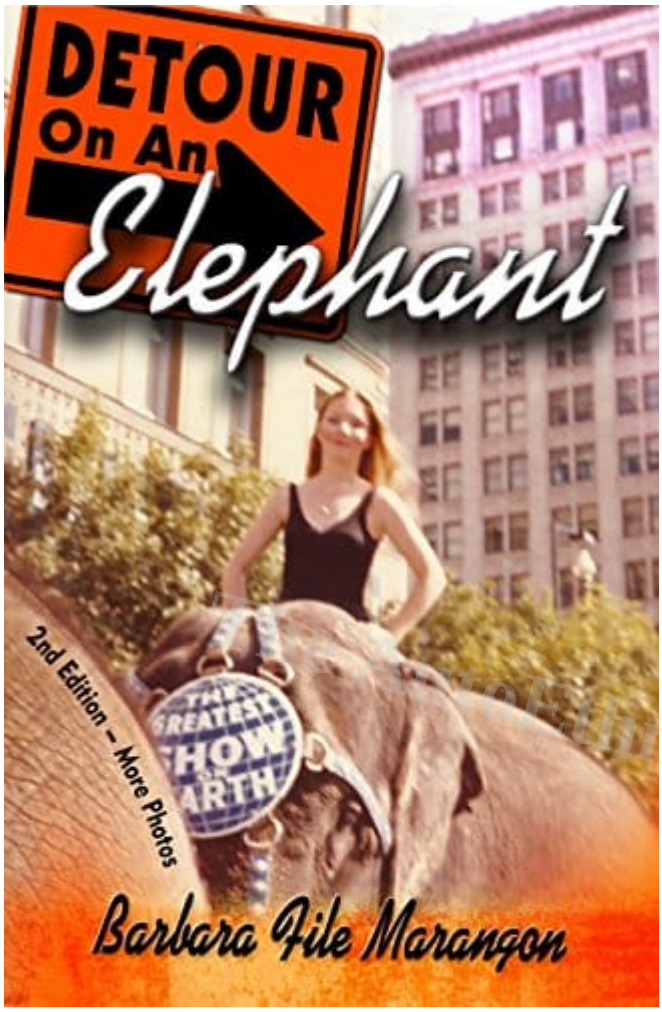
Another important lesson I learned in Italian theaters is to always have a plan B for the stage and life. Long before the problem becomes apparent ask the question *what ifâ?¦? How do I dance on a small stage when a grand piano occupies half the space?* Or *what if I lose my job?* Always prepare yourself for a possible change in plans.

Thirteen years later, I took my husband to see the Oklahoma State Fair Arena where I performed with Ringling in 1978. Memories flooded back to that time. I remember the dark shadowy forms of moving elephants outside the arena as they pushed forward through the dust and tumbleweed. Inside the venue I battled flies and the heat with everyone else. The place was smallâ??only nine thousand seatsâ??and mainly used for the rodeo.





Detour on an Elephant
by Barbara File Marangon

As I rode my elephant Peggy around the arena back then, I saw the faces of thousands of spectators, many of them were Native Americans. Their expression was one of sadness rather than curiosity or enthusiasm. It was though they could see that the tradition of the circus would come to an end one day. At that moment I thought, maybe someday performing with elephants would be a thing of the past as their way of life hunting buffaloes on the Great Plains. Thirty-eight years later this prophecy came true in 2016 when elephants were permanently retired, and the year after, Ringling Bros. Circus closed permanentlyâ?¦

â??Angry faces told us we were not welcome at this manifestation and we were asked to leave. The venue sent me a message that dayâ??one of division and hate.

Now I stood in the arena and said goodbye, because it would soon be demolished. The building overflowed with people gathered for a huge religious rally. I looked around for the last time. The once bright arena looked dark with age. It appeared as though it had never been painted since the colorful days of the circus. The lights emanating from sequins and rhinestones were extinguished forever. Animals and performers would never again bring joy to an audience. Angry faces told us we were not welcome at this manifestation and that we should leave. The venue sent me a message that dayâ??one of division and hate.

Memories donâ??t follow chronological order but a thought can trigger them. The Stadttheater of Klagenfurt Austria became my home in 1974 when I signed a contract with their ballet company. Full-length operas, ballets, and dramatic plays performed by their acting company, rotated every evening. These were often accompanied by the theaterâ??s symphony orchestra. Once a year all four entities collaborated in a musical and *Can-Can* was our show that year. In a town where no cinema existed, the theater fed its population entertainment for all tastes.

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Photo of can-can dancers by Audrey Penven for Flickr

The tiny Austrian city was a hostile, cold, unfriendly place. In Klagenfurt the theater patrons received us well, but outside the same local people shunned us. However, the theater not only gave a livelihood to its dancers, singers, musicians, and actors. It was a source of life for the townspeople. The lights, magic, and excitement of the evenings at the Stadttheater overshadowed the gray snowy days. Here I learned the most important lesson of allâ??the performing arts bring us together. We leave hate, bigotry, and division at the door. Theaters, arenas, and entertainment venues are great temples to the muses, where everyone can worship and celebrate. So buy a ticket, relax, and enjoy the show.

Credits

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