

Barbara Mettler, Larita Institute Interview, Tucson, AZ, 1963

This is the Larita Living History Project, Arizona segment, interviewing team of Bob and Betty McGillis... Now, a dance teacher, Barbara Mettler.

BOB: This is one of the most unusually shaped buildings that we have seen in Tucson which is why when we saw it in its finished state the other day we just had to come by and find out what was going on. I suspect that what is going on in this building is even more interesting than the shape of the building and of course you will hear the noises of traffic outside because this building is located on the corner of Cherry and Fort Lowell which is, oh one would say a mixture of commercial and residential areas in Tucson. This, this is kind of fitting as far as location, isn't it?

BM: This is a good location, yes, for a dance studio. It has all kinds of people in it and its very mellifluous voice which fascinates me.

BETTY: I'd like to find out what sort of training made it possible for you to have that singing quality in your speaking voice. I'll check in, go ahead.

BM: A dance teacher usually teaches in a big room because dance needs space and has to use her voice accordingly. I've taught in very big rooms, I've taught as many as two hundred people at a time in huge gymnasiums, and that's probably made me work on my voice a little bit.

BOB: You have the inflection of one who comes from a different part of the country.

BM: No!

BOB: Where do you come from?

BM: Well, I'm sad that I've lost my middle western accent. I'm from Illinois. I was really brought up in the cornfields, but I have lived in different parts of the world. I did my professional training in Germany and spoke German for three years and that really influenced my local speech, and then I happened, just happened to have done all my professional work on the East Coast, first in New York City and then in summer school in New Hampshire, and then in Boston. And I don't think I have a Boston accent!

BOB: No, I don't think so!

BETTY: It's just an unusually delightful voice. We're talking with Barbara Mettler, who has the most unusual building and we're about to find out about her very unusual occupation. This is the building that, when you drive by on Fort Lowell, everybody in the car turns around and says, "What is that?" It's so unique and unusual, aesthetically pleasing. Let's start there, but what is it?

BM: It's a studio of creative dance and it's a round studio. I've always felt the need of a round studio of dance and for these reasons. We approach dance as a three dimensional experience.

BETTY: What are the three dimensions?

BM: (Laughing) Length, breadth, height.

BETTY: Oh, you use the same old dimensions!

BM: I mean just not... so much dance is just shown in the two-dimensional frame of the stage, the picture..

BETTY: Like theater in the round is doing?

BM: Yes, yes! I think for exactly the same reasons, so that we can move out in all directions.

BETTY: Well, we're sitting in this rounded studio and it has... I don't know if it's Roman or Greek or Egyptian, but a feeling of something I have seen in a movie perhaps of ancient days where activities were going on in a kind of a arena approach.

BM: Oh, yes, I think it's a very basic architectural form. It's an arena, we have a round floor with two tiers of steps going up. I think perhaps it doesn't have to be related to any specific older form, it's just a form which you might find in any century because it's very useful.

BOB: The things that I'm impressed with is there's almost no sound deadening material unless perhaps the roof is sound deadening. But the floor is hard wood floor, the walls are of brick which are hard and there are a lot of windows around. The front wave sound bounces. I don't get that hollow feeling that you would get –

BETTY: Which is amazing, we're in an empty room, you'd think you would. This glass enclosure over here..

BM: That is a film projection room. We do show films here because we make educational dance films.

BETTY: You actually film them here?

BM: Yes, we do. We haven't yet, we have films now which we're renting which were made in the east, and here the building was constructed partly so that we could make films. We rent them to the other dance teachers in schools and colleges, we take them of our students and show different kinds of dance.

BETTY: Well I've a lot of questions here and I know you and I are gonna run over each other, but what brought you from the east to Tucson?

BM: Oh, I think two things. One, I felt that it was time my studio had its own building and we wanted to build one. And dance needs such a big space that building a building in a northern climate is almost impossible so I really chose Tucson for the mild climate for easy building construction and maintenance. And of course, in the background is my own love of the West with the space and the atmosphere which seemed a wonderful environment for dance and for my personal life.

BOB: Well, Barbara, dancing is somewhat universal and is somewhat restricted. Who comes to your classes?

BM: Yes, well, we emphasize dance – creative dance expression – as a recreational, educational art activity. We're not training for entertainment business, for the theater, and consequently our doors are wide open to all kinds of people. We have all ages, from six until well over 70, we have both sexes –

BETTY: Seventy?

BM: Yes, well over 70.

BETTY: That's wonderful!

BM: We have handicapped, as well as healthy, and they all come for the general joy and health and physical and mental and emotional satisfaction.

BOB: But you said creative dance. Now this is to be contrasted to ballroom dancing, or tap dancing, or ballet dancing, isn't it?

BM: Yes, well there are more contrasts, we have it of course. We have dance as an art, or as a social pastime, or as a theatrical entertainment. Those are three directions right there. But we obviously have the area of dance as an art, but in that direction there are many differences as you say. Ballet is a traditional form, which rests on a technique developed two hundred years ago, and our studio belongs in what is called the modern art direction.

BETTY: Do you have people who begin with you and then become interested in, say, choreography, in the modern field of creative dance?

BM: We specialize in helping the student or dancer create, or make up, as it is, his own dance. That's why we call it creative dance.

BETTY: Well, what he's saying, if a particular student created a dance, and do a dance the next time the same way, would he work out a formula for this particular music with this particular thing he was trying to express so that it would then become set down as a formula?

BM: He might or he might not. We have two kinds of dance experience, we have the one that we call improvisation, which is a one time thing which would just go on and on and he would never repeat it. And then we have what we call a composition, which is held down to a thing that is selected and then arranged in a way you can repeat. We work with both of those. We think that improvisation is the more creative expression of the two and so we stress it a great deal.

BOB: Well now Betty brought up the subject of music, and you have to have music. What kind of music is played that they either extemporize or do to create a form?

BM: They make up their own music. Here in this studio we create everything, we create our own dances, we create our own accompaniment, we create everything. We start our experiences with true movement rhythm, true movement expression.

BETTY: It sounds very exciting.

BM: Then we find that movement is audible and we begin to use our hands and our feet and our voices, instruments, you see some instruments over there, and we make up our own.

BOB: But a dancer can't be creating music while he is dancing, so —

BM: Have you never seen the Indians using their shakers? Have you never heard the Yugoslavian shout and sound? You sing on the dance floor, I know you do!

BOB: I have to confess!

BM: We think of these things as really all one, and that they're all inside of us, that's why we use first of all the motions of our hands and our feet and then simple instruments that we can play like drums, lots of drums and shakers, and any instruments that we can.

BETTY: Well I think that you must have a delightful singing voice. I don't know if you know you do, but your speaking voice has this lyrical quality that makes me feel you must sing!

BM: I think it may be due to the very fact that we don't have music as the background in our classes. I try to think as I teach to create a feeling sometimes with my voice. If we're working with relaxation, sometimes my voice will express relaxation.

BETTY: How did you evolve this?

BM: Well it's been a great need of mine in my experiences, a great need to get people dancing. I have never really been very much interested in dance as a spectator sport, I've been interested in it as something to do, an activity, and my great need has not been to dance for people but to dance with people. And that is why everyone who came across my path I would get them into the studio and get them dancing! And these are the things that I discovered that would get people dancing.

BETTY: Well, do you find that the very young and the very old are the least self conscious?

BM: Oh, uh, the very young I suppose. Yes, at quite young these days they develop some prejudices and inhibitions about dance, it's most everybody has inhibitions about it these days so one of our specialties is getting rid of that fast.

BOB: Well, when do people come here to create their dances?

BM: Well, we have adult dances, we have women who come once or twice in the morning, once or twice a week in the evening, and after work, we have all kinds of people. Housewives, secretaries, nurses, artists, teachers.

BOB: Do they come primarily in classes or as individuals?

BM: Oh they come as individuals, but they come into classes. As I said earlier, I had taught two hundred people at a time. In this sort of group, the larger the group, the better. Each one contributes something, something I don't know if I have said is I put emphasis on individuality, each learns in his own way, and I do like that a lot.

BETTY: It must be very fun to watch as well as participate.

BM: So the more people you have in a class, the better. I mean if you have two hundred people, you have two hundred different...

BETTY: Well do you have the children in a class with the others?

BM: No, we do have age levels. We have the six to eight year olds, nine to twelve year olds, then we have high school girls, and adults. And then of course I have a teacher training course, because this work is... well, we publish books, we make films, and we're in this general direction which is being taught more and more in colleges.

BETTY: And the school... you say the title...

BM: Tucson Creative Dance Center. Not because there are lots and lots of different kinds of dancing here but because people come in, they go out, so it's a place where we want to contribute something.

BETTY: Well this is an exciting place, I'm so glad we discovered you. I'm getting to know this place better and better and getting to know what you do.

BM: Well I enjoyed being with you very much and I appreciate your interest.

BOB: Well, you sound as if you are having the time of your life!

(Laughter)

Barbara Mettler: Bob and Betty McGillis interviewing team and the Larita Living History Project.

Hampshire College Archives

MG7: Barbara Mettler Archive, Carton #22, Tape 1