

Ballroom

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Baryshnikov once spent an entire evening there, although he'd only intended to stay a short while.

"After Mrs. Botsford passed away in 1984, this house no longer served that purpose," said Leonard during a recent interview in her cherry-paneled library/billiard room. "In 1957, I worked with her and (Botsford School architect S. Roger Sheppard of New York City) on designing the school ... In April of 1959, we had a fire of unknown origin in the school. Through the generosity of the now deceased Father Charles Lavery, we were offered any and all facilities that were necessary to continue our classes at St. John Fisher, until the school was rebuilt."

During the mid-'40s, Leonard was offered a chance to teach Botsford's children's ballet classes at the Hillside Children's Center, and felt it would be a wonderful opportunity to decide if this would be her future life's work. "Mrs. Botsford had a wonderful flair for making each student feel like somebody very important," Leonard recalls. "One of the things she would say to me is, 'You have wonderful bearing. Just make sure you carry that throughout your entire life.'"

Claire Leonard never forgot her mentor's advice, and the resulting confidence it inspired carried her through her early teaching career, as well as brief forays into the study of physical education and a summer job at a veterinarian's office. "You're not cut out for things like that," Mrs. Botsford would tell me," says Leonard. "You have a style as a dancer. I'll help you if you want to go to New York and pursue it as a career."

Shortly after her arrival in Manhattan in 1947, Leonard was one of 250 young dancers to receive a call informing them that Fred Astaire was in town, auditioning dancers. For five to six months, Leonard returned to Astaire's new Park Avenue studio day after day to train, primarily in the distinctly American genres of the foxtrot, the swing trot, and the waltz, interspersed with Latin rhythms. Leonard took a part-time job at Lord and Taylor's, and worked as a professional model at the School of American

Photography, where she was once photographed with the infamous chimpanzee, J. Fred Muggs.

At long last, after meeting or working with many noted Hollywood personalities, including Mae Murray and Gordon MacRae, Leonard was one of five or six finalists hired to teach at one of Fred Astaire's studios. While in the process of training two promising young men who had already won gold medals in the first phase of ballroom competition, Leonard was injured when a man stepped on her heel during class and tore her Achilles tendon.

"So the dancing came to kind of an abrupt halt," Leonard relates. Shortly thereafter, she married Robert Farnsworth DeVoye, who arranged a great deal on early television during the late '40s and early '50s, once performed with his trio in Ladies' Night for Eastman Kodak Company, and also did a command performance for the Queen of England with Liberace, who remains a friend of Leonard's. Claire found herself in an advantageous position during one of her husband's tours, when the female lead singer in "Hold Everything," a show appearing at Chicago's Palmer House, failed to show up one night. DeVoye pointed out to director Rod Alexander that Leonard was quite a talented singer and dancer, and she found herself onstage within 20 minutes.

"I'd seen the show for so many nights in a row that I'd memorized the lines," Leonard recalls. "It was very funny, when I got the applause. I was looking out the corner of my eye, and my husband was so nervous, he was taking bows for me." Leonard was promptly asked to understudy for the part, and when the lead singer didn't show again, found herself signing a contract. She toured with the show for a little more than a year, appearing at Hilton hotels in Houston, Los Angeles and New Orleans, which she unfortunately visited during one of the city's notorious heat waves, and roundly detested because of it.

Poised on the brink of bigger things (an offer to do "As the Girls Go" at the Winter Garden under the direction of Elizabeth Taylor's future husband, Michael Todd, and having just completed a screen test for Columbia Pictures), Leonard discussed the future with her husband, from whom she was soon to separate. "When we were in

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— Claire Leonard

Houston with 'Hold Everything,' Mrs. Botsford came out to see the show. She asked if I'd be interested in coming back to Rochester to assist with her ballroom classes," says Leonard. "You know, you can be a star one day and a forgotten idol the next. Rochester was my home; my family was here and my husband was going to be traveling even more. Even as a ballet dancer, you end up as a director, a choreographer or a teacher. And isn't it better to do it when you're young than to wait until you're so decrepit you can't move any more?"

Fed up with train and bus travel and hotel living, Claire Leonard returned to Rochester in 1953, and says she's never lamented the decision. "I don't miss the theater; I just wish I had been a little older and wiser at the time all those great opportunities came to me." Her only true regret is having taken her husband's advice to forgo signing the proffered movie contract. Yet rearward glances have never been a reigning influence in the direction of Claire Leonard's life, and teaching ballroom dance quickly became her abiding passion.

"I think one of the hardest things in life is to do something and not know how to go about it," she observes. "Ballroom dancing, for me, is one of the greatest tools in giving children the confidence of good social forms and behaviors. Mrs. Botsford and I were great supporters of having balance. Our children came in white gloves and party dresses; boys came with white shirt and tie and polished shoes. They went down a receiving line, and learned how to treat a young lady properly, going to a punch table and making introductions."

Leonard is also a firm believer in proper diction, a skill she practices as a lector at St. Thomas More. "The only way to get to know

the people in your parish is to say, for example, 'Good morning, I'm Claire Leonard,'" declares this avid proponent of correct introductions. "Someone has to take that important first step."

When the 150 junior high school students she teaches at three separate schools pool their forces to attend the combined Seton Junior High School next fall, Leonard has fond hopes that she'll be able to continue what she began this past year with her impressionable pupils. "That's why I'm saying to the principals of these schools, 'We have just started something now.' We are not giving these children the illusion of a ballroom, with crystal chandeliers; they come in dungarees and sneakers. If we could only put that ballroom class on an early Friday evening, change the lighting and specify a dress code. Children are going to behave as well as they're dressed," she concluded, although she hardly had to drive the point home to this erstwhile Southern wallflower who never wore pants to school until well into her second year of college, and still feels more comfortable in the type of gracefully swinging skirts you can waltz in.

This Friday night at the St. Thomas More gymnasium, Claire Leonard's pupils will have the opportunity to put their rigorous training into practice, at "Swing Into Spring," a 7 p.m. ballroom performance for the benefit of their parents, many of whom will serve in the receiving along with the principals of St. Thomas More, Our Lady of Lourdes and St. Jerome's.

The basketball hoops will undoubtedly do a poor imitation of crystal chandeliers, but if you squint your eyes just so in the early evening light, you're sure to see a star or two come out, if admittedly not in your partner's eyes. Claire Leonard will remain right up there with the brightest of them.

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