

Jacqueline Schumacher (1920-2019)

By Carol Shults

Jacqueline Martin Schumacher, a ballerina and choreographer of ballet and musical theater, danced the Swan Queen in the first full-length *Swan Lake* in America. For forty years, she was a ballet teacher of the highest standard in Portland, and her legacy endures with the students who remember her for her discipline and her artistry of classical dance.

The Portland Ballet Company, which she established in the 1970s, is the direct precursor to the Oregon Ballet Theatre. When OBT mounted a tribute to Schumacher in 1997, Artistic Director James Canfield said that "without her fire and determination, her inability to tolerate the substandard, and of course her capacity for diligent, disciplined hard work, it's certain that the established institution the ballet has become in Portland would simply not exist."

Born in Walla Walla, Washington, on November 30, 1920, Jacqueline Martin moved to Portland with her parents, Chester and Miriam Martin, when she was three years old. When she was nine, her mother, concerned that her daughter's high energy needed an outlet, enrolled her in dance classes with Katherine Laidlaw, who had danced with the Ruth St. Denis Company, an early modern dance company that toured the country from the 1910s into the 1930s. Martin persisted in her classes and was inspired to become a dancer when the charismatic William Christensen established a ballet school in Portland in 1932.

Christensen's ambition was to create a ballet company, and he developed a coterie of accomplished young dancers who performed with the Portland Junior Symphony. In 1937, discouraged by the difficulties of fulfilling his vision in Depression-era Portland, Christensen took a job as ballet master with the San Francisco Opera. He took his most accomplished students with him, including sixteen-year-old Jacqueline Martin, who danced with the Opera Ballet (now the San Francisco Ballet) and toured with the company. As a lead ballerina, she appeared as Odette the White Swan in Christensen's historic production of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* in 1940, the first evening-length production of the ballet in the United States. Her friend from Portland, fellow Christensen dancer Janet Reed, was the Black Swan. Martin calls herself, laughingly, a "historical marker."

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, changed everything. The ballet company went on hold, and Jacqueline married her childhood sweetheart, Frederick Schumacher, just before he left for three years of military service in the Pacific. When he returned, they moved to Portland and a house on Mount Tabor, where Jacqueline taught ballet classes in her home. Their daughters, Gretchen and Heidi, joined the swelling number of students.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Jacqueline Schumacher choreographed more than twenty shows at the Portland Civic Theater, working with theater director Jim Erickson on such shows as *One Touch of Venus*, *The Pajama Game*, and *Peter Pan*. She also choreographed and directed many shows for the Portland Junior League. In the early 1960s, Schumacher was chosen along with other prominent ballet teachers to attend a seminar on teaching in New York City, held by George Balanchine at the School of American Ballet.

Locally, "Mrs. S," as her students knew her, was teaching in what she considered the perfect dance studio, the Odd Fellows Building on Southwest Tenth Avenue in Portland. In this light-filled, unobstructed space, the quality of the piano accompaniment was a hallmark of her classes. Pat Wong, professor of dance at Reed College (1975-2009), remembered Schumacher as a "woman of elegance and precision; a teacher of deep knowledge and love of ballet. Her wonderful generosity with scholarships made it possible for me and other modern dancers to study with her as we built our company, the Portland Dance Theater." Many of Schumacher's students—including Mattlyn Gavers, Gretchen Schumacher, Kathleen McNerney, Nancy Matschek, Eric Dirk Clopper, and Terry Brock—became professional dancers and teachers in ballet companies and universities. Retired since the mid-1980s, Jacqueline Schumacher passed away on September 22, 2019.

Sources

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