

# MARC BREAUX

June 1999



L-R: Dean Gordon Brooks, Dr. Stephen Taft, Dr. Paulette Hebert and Marc Breaux.

The following interview took place in June of 1999 at the home of Marc Breaux in Cathedral City, California. The team of Gordon Brooks, Dean of the College of the Arts (at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette), Dr. Steve ST, Head of the ULL Performing Arts Department and Dr. Paulette Hebert, Assistant Dean of the College of the Arts (archives researcher) traveled to Cathedral City to research Mr. Breaux's archives. During the interview, Mr. Breaux recalled humorous anecdotes with a glint in his eye, a chuckle in his voice, and warmth in his heart regarding his friends and experiences.

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ST: Describe your first dance experience.

MB: I had a little experience with Dot Olivier, ballroom dancing, and we would get together and dance at her house in Lafayette. In addition, we both studied with Evelyn Lockman at SLI (Southwestern Louisiana Institute now known as The University of Southwestern Louisiana). Also, I was in World War II, and after the war I came from the Philippines to San Francisco and I was awaiting orders for what I would do next. I went to the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in San Francisco and I thought, that's what I want to do. I just fell in love with it and just thought one of these days I was just going to do that.

ST: Tell us about your first dance experience in New York.

MB: A friend of mine went to New York to take a summer dance course with Charles Weidman and Doris Humphrey and I went up for an interview with Bell Laboratories to be a chemical lab assistant (because I was a pre-med major at the time and pursuing a minor in music). I got there about four or five days early for my interview and she had to start her summer course so I went with her. Doris (Humphrey) and Charles (Weidman) were teaching and I was observing. At the end of the class Doris and Charles came and said, "Did you enjoy it?" And I said, "Yes." They said, "Do you think you can do that?" And I said, "Oh yes. No problem." I was very cocky as far as that was concerned. I could really do anything, I thought. So, they said, "If you want to take

class tomorrow it'll be free." So, I said, "OK. Thank you." The next day I went back and took the class and did everything they could dish out. It was modern dance and I sort of had a knack for it. So, after class they asked me if I wanted to join the company? I could stay in the basement of the studio if I could wash the windows and mop the floor after class. I was also under the GI Bill. I did that with my best friend at the time, Nick Vanoff, who stayed in the light booth and who later became a very famous television producer in California. About two months later we toured the country for about six months.

ST: You appeared to have no fear of trying new things. Where do you think this confidence came from?

MB: I haven't the slightest idea. Looking in retrospect, I'm thinking, "My goodness, that's really kind of pushy of me to think I can do everything." But I really thought I could. I auditioned for Jerry Robbins after I had about three months of dance class in New York and he picked me for *Look Ma, I'm Dancing*. He then asked everybody how long they have been taking ballet? He got to me and I said, "Never." He couldn't believe it and put me from the "A" group to the "B" group and he said, "If someone leaves we'll put you in." But by that time, I had done some good parts.

ST: Describe the influence that your family has had on your work and your approach to life.

MB: My oldest sister, Billie, an SLI graduate in Education, use to pay for my piano lessons with Mrs. Boutte. The lessons cost five dollars per week or something like that and she noticed I had talent. I don't know if I did or not. When I went to New York, I told my other sister, Georgie and her husband, Fernand Picou (who was going to Princeton at the time) that Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman had offered me a scholarship. and I didn't know if I should take it as I didn't have enough money to do that. Anyway, they loaned me money and Georgie said, "Just do it. You just came out of the war and it's the best offer you've had." They were behind me one-hundred percent and always have been.

ST: You have worked as an actor, dancer, choreographer, and director. Describe your transition from choreographer to director.

MB: The transition I had from my acting and dancing career came through Nick Vanoff. He was a producer at this point and he called me after I had done *Mary Poppins* and *The Sound of Music* and he said, "I need a director for *The King Family*," and I said, "Get somebody else because I don't know a thing about it." He said, "I'll teach you." So, it's through him that I became a director. After that I did *The Hollywood Palace* for a year and then I started doing television specials all over the place.

ST: You have directed so many of the legends of television and film. Are there any particular thoughts you have regarding those particular experiences?

MB: Well, Dick Van Dyke was the best. He worked twenty-four hours-a-day. He'd work twenty-five hours-a-day I believe. He's a great worker and I loved working with him. I did a couple of specials with him before *Mary Poppins* and of course Jack Benny was sensational to work with. Those "takes" are just classic and he was a classy man. And so is Dick.

ST: Bing Crosby.

MB: An idol. The coolest man in whole world. If you said go from A to B, he would ask, "Fast

or slow?" and I would say, "Anyway you want." Well, it was always slow. Just (*Marc sings*) Ba...ba...boo all the time. Just very, very cool.

ST: Fred Astaire.

MB: My idol. Style. Nobody had style like him - ever. I did direct him in one special. *Fred Astaire Salutes the FOX Musicals*. At one point I said, "Fred, can you just do a few little dance steps as we introduce you as you're walking towards the camera?" And he said, "Oh, I just don't do that anymore." So, he didn't do it coming in, but as he left he did a couple steps and turns and I said, "Thank you."

ST: Danny Thomas.

MB: St. Jude. Just terrific. We did a number with a lot of clowns. He wasn't really a dancer. It seems like they always have stars that are not dancers and they always ask the choreographers to make them look good. We did a clown number and it worked out pretty good. It was for a benefit for St. Jude's Hospital in Memphis.

ST: To follow-up on working with non-dancers. In dance, there is a dance vocabulary. Non-dancers may not have that vocabulary. The challenge is, of course, to make them look good. What was the communication process working with non-dancers?

MB: First of all, you try to put them with good dancers who can haul them around if you had too. Which we had too a lot of times. So, you would just say, "Do you know what your left foot is?" And they would usually say "yes." And I would say, "Well, we're going to stamp the left foot twice and then we're going to stamp the right foot once. So that's 1, 2, 1, that's 3. That's 2 + 1." You had to be very specific with what you told them.

ST: Continuing with our walk down legend lane - Carol Burnett.

MB: We did the *Carol plus Two Special* starring Lucille Ball and Zero Mostel. I'm not really a comedian, but we did a number called "Chutzpah", which I think in Yiddish means, "you've gotta have guts." And they were scrub ladies cleaning up in a tall building after everyone has gone home and they just broke me up. Carol Burnett is sensational and so was Lucille Ball.

ST: Dinah Shore.

MB: The sweetest lady. I keep saying "the sweetest woman or sweetest man," but Dinah shore was just . . . heaven. And what a voice! At the end of her career her voice was a little flat. Unfortunately, I have a very good ear and I can usually tell when a voice is flat or sharp. But the quality of her voice was so good all the time and she was always right on in a scene. Even if she was singing, "My momma done told me" she actually played that part while she was singing. It was just wonderful.

ST: Andy Williams.

MB: Another favorite. He was the first one that I did a special for and I also did a series with him. A very, very nice man. He has a house here in the valley and lives in Branson, Missouri. He comes here sometimes in the winter and spends some time here. I did a show at the Annenberg Theater, Rogers and Hart, and I had to sing. He called me the next day and said, "Marc, you know, I've sung that song over 150 times and you sung it better than me. I can't stand you." He was being kind, of course. Just giving me a compliment, undeservedly.

ST: Judy Garland.

MB: We did a couple of specials with her and a couple of her regular shows. She's a heroine. She really was from Oz. One particular show I did with her we did with Zina Bethune. I don't know why I remember her. I can't remember anyone else's name. She was a nurse on a television show (*The Nurses*) and she use to be a ballet dancer, but not tip top. Of course, I had four boys with her and made her look good. Judy could out do her in a second and Judy was not really a ballet dancer. But Judy was very gracious and made Zina look good and of course, making her look good made herself look good.

ST: Describe the Marc MB style of choreography.

MB: I was more athletic than most choreographers. I actually stole from Michael Kidd. He's very athletic as well. I hired people who could do flip-flops which you don't really learn in ballet school or in modern dance and so if they could do a somersault or a cartwheel I'd say, "I think I can use you." They also had to have a dance background of some kind.

ST: As one watches *Mary Poppins*, *The Sound of Music*, or *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, one becomes aware of the performer interacting with various props throughout a musical number. Were such props a part of the original directorial or design concept or did they come about as the choreography was created?

MB: The props were always there in my head and so I would use what we had or request a particular prop if we didn't have it. For instance, for the "Chimney Sweep" number in *Mary Poppins* I went to the library and they had pictures of those brooms and so I decided to use them. We used them (the broomsticks) with cartwheels and walkovers and in many other ways. So, the props were an integral part of the choreography.

ST: Let's talk about some of your films. *The Happiest Millionaire*.

MB: *The Happiest Millionaire* with Fred McMurray and Greer Garson. Leslie Ann Warren and John Davidson were also in it. Their first picture. Fred was wonderful. Always on time and he did everything that was good. Of course, that film was for Disney and I loved working with and for Disney.

ST: *The Slipper and the Rose*.

MB: It was the Cinderella story. Disney had the copyright so the London people couldn't use it. The director, Brian Forbes, decided to call it *The Slipper and the Rose*. A good movie. A little long, but a good movie. Richard Chamberlain was very good and a hard worker. One time I told him I needed a double-pirouette and he went home and worked and worked. The next day, he could do that double-pirouette.

ST: *40 Pounds of Trouble*.

MB: *40 Pounds of Trouble* was done in Tahoe with Norman Jewison directing and starring Tony Curtis and Suzanne Pleshette. We had to do a number for Suzanne in the nightclub, like she was a nightclub performer. So, Dee Dee (Wood) and I drove up and we left our little dog in the room that they supplied for us. It was a new little dog and we came back and all the curtains were torn to shreds. There we were, struggling choreographers, trying to make everything right (sewing the curtains). We finally told them and they told us we didn't have to pay for it. That was forty pounds of real trouble.

ST: *The Sound Of Music*.

MB: Well, what can you say? Julie Andrews is beautiful. It really came from the heart. We had done *Mary Poppins* together. Robert Wise, the director of *The Sound of Music* and Saul Chaplin, the associate producer, had come to see a screening of the "Chimney Sweep" number at Disney and right after the screening they came and talked to our agent and we were hired right then for *The Sound of Music*. We went to Salzburg in Austria. They asked what we were going to do for the "Do Re Mi" number? I thought about it for a day or two and said, "As long as she's going to be their nanny let's make it like a travelogue and take them to every part of the city." I don't like to do that many cuts but every 8 bars or 4 bars they (the audience) had a new venue to look at. We showed all of Salzburg during that number. That was wonderful. It was a wonderful experience.

ST: Was there any particular film that the artistic team knew was something special?

MB: Not one of them. The one I thought was special was *Mary Poppins*. I just loved it. Of course, that was our first one and I think I stayed up for twenty-four hours-a-day for six months during that thinking about what to do, how to make it better. I didn't do that for the other movies. I think I stayed up for only four months instead of six (*laughter*).

ST: The film has wrapped up and then goes to the editing room. What was your reaction at the premiere of *Mary Poppins*?

MB: Well, people stood up at the end of the premiere and applauded. They applauded at the end of the "Chimney Sweep" number. And of course, that thrilled me. I practically had tears in my eyes. I had finally been accepted. It was a thrilling experience.

ST: Did you find that most of the dancers you worked with in your career had formal training?

MB: Most of them did have formal training. Most of them were also gymnasts. They all could tumble. Which is why I think I got into that routine in auditions of having them do a couple of cartwheels. My assistant, Phil Laughlin was probably the best dancer I had ever worked with or have ever seen. Better, to me than Baryshnikov or Nureyev. He could do anything.

ST: What special quality do you look for in a dancer?

MB: The qualities are more what the director or choreographer needs. The types might be different. Anyone I ever auditioned I always thanked and tried to convey to them that it wasn't their fault, to continue studying, and understand that in another project they might get the opportunity.

ST: What are the ideal qualities or skills a young performer needs to have a chance to succeed in today's entertainment industry?

MB: I think they definitely have to have a dance background. Of course, I am a little biased. They need a dance background to have the discipline. However, when you go to an audition you may be a Nureyev or a Baryshnikov, but producers and directors have a definite idea of what a character should look like and if you don't look like that character, you could be the best dancer in the world and you'll never get hired. Whatever the character needs to be. So, you can never say, "I'm bad," because you didn't get cast, because the next audition may be a better opportunity.

ST: What advice do you have for the young performer that is not cast?

MB: Don't stop auditioning. Have faith in yourself and just continue doing it because your time will come. The director or choreographer will say "You're exactly what I want." You can't expect the first time out to say, "OK, I'm going to kill the world (with my talent) and this is going to be it." We all fall down once in a while. Just pick yourself up, dust yourself off and keep doing it.

ST: The young performer that doesn't get cast often has the opportunity to work on lights, sound, props, costumes, on a running crew, etc. Do you think such experience is advantageous to their training?

MB: Absolutely. I've done it. Everybody's done it. Painted scenery, mopped floors, washed windows, pushed scenery around. It's all a part of "show business." You have to do it. You should be happy to do it.

ST: Where does work ethic play in the development and ultimate success of the performer?

MB: As a choreographer, my work ethic always included going to the library to get as much background as I could. I would then try to incorporate what I had learned in the library into the movement. I always went to the library.

ST: When it comes to offering a dance curriculum in musical theatre, which dance form or combination thereof (from ballet, modern, jazz, and tap) is most important?

MB: I don't want to cabash any of the other forms, but ballet training is very important. You have to know what your body is about and that is the only one that will really give it to you, the ballet training. Modern is very good as well. Ballet will give you the discipline. Modern you can do almost anything that is intrinsically yours, but ballet you have to do what the old masters taught and what they did and everybody knows the nomenclature so if you do a pas de deux or pas de basque you knew exactly what they were talking about. You do a pirouette you knew exactly what they were talking about. I didn't have that much ballet training. I trained mostly with modern. A little tap and a little jazz as well. Any of those I think anybody can do. But ballet, not anybody can do. So that is the advice I would give if my children wanted to take dance. I would say ballet first and then take anything you want. Bob Fosse was a perfect ballet dancer. Everybody has a style and his style just developed. But he had ballet training to begin with. I just saw *Fosse* on Broadway recently and it's the best dance show I've seen in a long time. And those kids work like crazy and they're all ballet trained.

ST: Marc Breaux and Dee Dee Wood recently received the Life Achievement Award as part of the 5th Annual American Choreography Awards. Your feelings and thoughts?

MB: We received this at the Whilshire Ebell Theatre in Hollywood. I danced with Charles Weidman there many years ago. It was a very special night. Dick Van Dyke and Chita Rivera presented it to us. There have been only four other recipients: Bob Fosse, Jack Cole, Michael Kidd, and Herbert Ross. I did three shows with Michael Kidd. He was a mentor as well.

ST: As you look back at your career and your body of work, what do you feel?

MB: I must say I feel very proud to have been involved with *Mary Poppins*, *The Sound of Music*, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* and others. The first one, (*Mary Poppins*) was due to Dick Van Dyke because we had done a couple of specials together. Michael Kidd and Bill Walsh (Walsh

produced *Mary Poppins*) were also instrumental in such an opportunity. Then I met Walt Disney and what a man! I was very honored to be on that project. And I worked very hard. Walt Disney came every day to watch rehearsals of the "Chimney Sweep" number and one day he was sitting down on the curb and I went and sat next to him and he said, "How are rehearsals going?" and I said, "Oh, fine. Everything's OK." and he said, "There's the car I just bought" (pointing to the car). It was a Mercedes 450SL, a little coupe. And then he said, "Oh, look at this." and he showed me his wristwatch. It was a Mickey Mouse wristwatch and he said, "I got it at the commissary and I got ten-percent off because I'm an employee." I just loved him. He was a child at heart.

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