

DEE DEE WOOD

(June 7, 1927 – April 26, 2023)



Note: Of all the interviews initially conducted for the project focusing on honoring Marc Breaux, it is this interview with Dee Dee DDW: that is the most extensive and perhaps most valuable for aspiring young performing artists. Both Marc and Dee Dee's careers were ever-evolving as they constantly challenged themselves and developed as artists with a variety of skills. Working in the academic world, my students often wonder: How does one know if they are cut out to work in the entertainment industry? What does it take to work in the industry? How does one work for forty or fifty years in the entertainment industry? To answer such questions, a good place to start is to read this interview as Dee Dee WOOD provides a glimpse into her life and career with passion, joy, and laughter.

(L: Dee Dee DDW: at her home in Cave Creek, Arizona – July 1999)

July 1999, Cave Creek, Arizona

"Wow" . . . is perhaps the best word that describes a reaction to meeting Dee Dee Wood. Energetic and passionate regarding her love for dance, Dee Dee Wood is an inspiration and an example for many young performers. A choreographer, dancer and actress, Dee Dee has performed on Broadway and choreographed for stage, television, film and more. After a stellar career with husband and co-choreographer, Marc Breaux, Dee Dee became known in the 1980's and 90's as the choreographer of the "Spectacular." An Olympics, an Emmy and three Super Bowls later, we discussed her career, Marc Breaux, and dance.

ST: Let's begin by providing a bit of background on where you were born and raised?

DDW: I was born in Boston, Massachusetts and I lived in Boston until I was about twelve. I didn't get into dance when I lived in Massachusetts because my mother worked every day. I did not know my father and I just went to school. She said, "Maybe you should go to girl scouts." And I said, "All right." So, I went to girl scouts and came home and I said, "I'm not going back there!" And she said, "Why not?" And I said, "Because they stood in a circle and started dancing!" We then moved to Westport, Connecticut where I started my dance training. I didn't start until my second or third year in high school. Like Marc didn't start until college, I started in high school. I was very athletic. I had a girlfriend that was taking a ballet class. A lot of dancers start out like that. They have a friend that is taking a dance class. She said. "Why don't you come by?" And I started. And once I started in that ballet class it was like I had been a duck out of water. Nothing could deter me from dancing.

ST: What happened when you told your mother you wanted to dance?

DDW: I use to take two ballet classes a week and I use to have crying jags. She'd say, "What's the matter Dee Dee?" I couldn't tell her I wanted to take classes every day. We couldn't afford it. I was crying because I couldn't dance more. It took a long time. Finally, I started teaching for my Russian ballet teacher and that paid for my classes and I took classes as often as I could. There were a lot of artists that lived in Westport, Connecticut. I used to model for these artists and one of them was a friend of the dance teacher that was from Russia, George Volodine who was a friend of George Balanchine with the American Ballet Company. They got me a scholarship at Jacob's Pillow which is a big dance organization. I went up there for the summer and helped cook, set tables, clean cabins, and take dance classes all day long. I was up there for eight weeks. Every week they had a different cultural kind of dancer. One week they had a dancer from Haiti, Jean Leon Destine and that's when I was introduced to the Afro-Cuban music and drums and dance. And I adapted to that. Then I went back and I said, "Mom, I got to go to New York and continue my dancing." I was all of nineteen or twenty. From there I studied and studied. After a year of studying I began auditioning for Broadway shows. I auditioned for Michael Kidd for *Guys and Dolls*. I had never been in high heels before. I was a dancer who was very athletic and he didn't choose me because the *Guys and Dolls* female dancers were "nightclub chorus dancers." So, I waited until the end the audition and waited outside of the theatre until five o'clock and I said, "Mr. Kidd, why didn't you hire me?" I thought I was the best dancer in New York. And he said, "You know what? You go and get a pair of high heels and practice and come back when I have auditions for the National Company." Which I did. I remember I had to borrow the high heels from one of my dance teachers. I wore white ankle socks with these black high heels and I thought I looked spiffy. Anyway, I got hired for the job and that's how I started my professional career.

ST: What were your dreams as a young girl?

DDW: I was just having fun in high school. I was the head cheerleader and playing basketball and softball and having a ball. I had no dreams. I knew I wasn't going to college because we couldn't afford it. I didn't know what I was going to do until I took that dance class. Once I started going to dance class I said to my mother and myself, "I don't care if I ever eat again. I don't care what life I have. I am going to dance for the rest of my life! That's all I am going to do for the rest of my life. I'll live on tuna fish, peanut butter, and Campbell's Soup. I can live on that." I think that determination and loving to dance so much led me to being a successful person.

ST: You've had formal ballet training, you've trained with Katherine Dunham, why the calling to Broadway opposed to a traditional ballet company?

DDW: Once I started with the Katherine Dunham school, the Afro-Cuban music and dance gets into "jazz" dance (which has nothing to do with the jazz music of the twenties). It's just something that evolved called jazz dance. Now it's hip-hop, soul and all that. I was balletic, which meant I had a lot of training in ballet so I had the strength, but I loved the other. Modern, I never studied. I couldn't understand modern at all. Tap, I can do a time step and a shuffle-off-to-Buffalo but I cannot tap dance. Marc and I are great fakers in tap. You'd think we were tap dancers. So, I just started auditioning for Broadway shows.

ST: The first time you went out on tour with *Guys and Dolls* and you experienced immediate audience response, what was that like?

DDW: I remember backstage and the people I was working with more than what I performed onstage. You get so into your character that whether they like it or not you are having the best time of your life up on stage. There's no other world. So, I can't remember having a reaction

from an audience until I started to be a choreographer and then got the audience reaction to what I had on stage. But as a performer, I just had the best time on stage reacting to people and scenes.

ST: Did you enjoy the touring experience?

DDW: Very much. I stayed with that show almost a year-and-a-half before I went back to New York and said, "It's time to spread my wings now."

ST: What are the personal qualities that have led to your success?

DDW: As you can tell, I get excited about things. I'm energetic. I love working with people. I love relating to people. I learned a lot of that from being an assistant choreographer with Michael Kidd because at first when I started working with him I was a little bit shy of telling Edie Adams (who was the star of *Lil' Abner*) what to do. But eventually I got too, so when I worked with all the different people (shown here in the photos on my wall), was very polite but very straight-forward. We also had a lot of laughs. I love to joke and have a lot of laughs while we are getting the work done. And when I choreograph I work with an assistant. Everything is laid out. I have a plan. So, I can have a connection with people I work with. There's a lot of organization before I even get out in the rehearsal hall with the cast, with my assistant, the music people, the director, the scenic designer and costume designer so I know what I am trying to work for.



(Dee Dee DDW: as Appassionata Von Climax in *Lil' Abner*)

ST: Describe how you and Marc (Breux) met and how that relationship developed personally and professionally.

DDW: Marc and I met doing a summer music television show with Stan Kenton. Stan Kenton was a fabulous big band. I think it was 1955. That's when we got married, six weeks after we met. That's why he lives there (in Cathedral City, California) and I live here. (*laughter*) Anyway, we worked on this summer show and just clicked right away. He started doing a Broadway show and I started to assist Michael Kidd on another show and while we were doing those two shows we got married. We didn't even have time to send out invitations. We knew everybody on Broadway. I didn't even have anything to carry down the aisle.

ST: Describe the wedding.

DDW: Marc's mother and family came up and I ran out and got a dress. I didn't even have a veil. The little guy that did our makeup in *Lil' Abner* did my hair and hand-made a little veil. Marc's family got me some flowers. While we were in rehearsals for different shows we just invited all of our friends. The church was packed. People were standing at St. Malachy's. I'm not Catholic, but I went to a lot of instruction beforehand. However, I don't know why, but there was a little bell that rang before the ceremony and someone yelled, "Half hour!" (*laughter*) After the wedding we came out on the steps and they took a wonderful picture that was on a big picture page in the New York City paper the next day.

ST: What was it about you that made Marc fall in love with you?

DDW: I made him fall in love with me! Well, first of all we got along so great on that Stan Kenton Show. I mean we laughed and had the best time. I remember one time, there was a restaurant in show business that we used all the time on 8th Avenue and 46th Street and I knew he was going to go there and have dinner with a couple of friends. So, I just walked in and said, "Oh, can I sit here for a minute?" Of course, they had to invite me to dinner. So, I think it went on like that for a little bit and then he started rehearsing his show (*Catch A Star*) and I started rehearsing my show. We'd see each other every minute that we could. But I remember I did do that and it was like, "Hi there. Here I am!"

ST: How difficult was it to balance motherhood and career?

DDW: We were so lucky to have a nanny help with our adopted children. We found out about Michael, during the filming of *Mary Poppins*. Marc had an early call and I had a late call. I got to the studio and there were mirrors in the rehearsal hall and painted on the mirror was this huge stork carrying a bundle and it said, "It's a Boy!" That's how we found out. We knew he was going to be born around that time (in April) and so everybody was applauding and it was so neat. We always had someone to help to take care of Michael in L.A. After we did *Mary Poppins* we got *The Sound of Music* and Michael came with us and *The Sound of Music* people in Salzburg, Austria got Julie Andrews a nanny and got us a nanny. Julie had a little girl about the same age as Michael and they would be playing together. So, the two nannies would meet while we were working. I had help so I could continue working and Marc and I took care of the kids all the time and they were never without us. Michael and Adam came with us to London and the London people got us another nanny while we did *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. It just worked out really easy, so there was never really a problem.

ST: Three adjectives or phrases that describe Dee Dee Wood.

DDW: Well...energetic, love to laugh. I love, with a certain few friends, to gossip because that's where you get all the laughs. I mean, not evil gossip - just anything. I love people and love to meet and talk with people. And although I live out here in the desert, I am not a hermit. But when I go to Los Angeles or New York City and visit with my show business friends and come back and get off the plane in Phoenix and drive out here, I say, "Yes, this is nice." I can reflect here and relax. I still have my artist friends who live out here and then I'm ready for another trip and show biz stuff.

ST: Three words or phrases that describe Marc.

DDW: Marc is very serious. Although I'm very energetic and like to laugh, I am very organized. Marc is a little bit more...spontaneous. He doesn't like to plan a lot of stuff where as I say, "Wait a minute. Let's think about this." He says, "No. Let's not think about this. Let's just do it." I'll do that when I think it's right and I've done a lot of homework. I'll say, "OK, I got my homework in back of me, now we can go back and experiment." He is very emotional - very

emotional. He'll get tears in his eyes. We go to movies and he'll be crying before I will. He was just so much fun to be with. It was just very natural. We were just silly. We'd go and buy ice cream and eat it real fast to see who would get the first headache. It was just very comfortable.

ST: How did the professional relationship begin?

DDW: First of all, I danced for Michael Kidd on *Guys and Dolls*, *Can Can* and *Lil' Abner*. We both assisted Michael Kidd on *Lil' Abner*. I assisted Michael on two commercial projects that toured and then we worked together on *Destry Rides Again*. So, Michael Kidd is where we learned our choreographic approach. Which is very acrobatic, very energetic and very character. We always embellished and accentuated all of the styles, except when we worked with stars. We would simply do what they could do. We first worked with Dick Van Dyke on *The Jack Benny Show*. We were going to stage a number for Dick (I don't know how they found out about us) and we went and met with Dick in a rehearsal hall just to see what he could do. I do that mostly with any star I work with. I don't make them dance if they can't dance. If they can't move, then I move dancers around them. There was a show that Michael Kidd could not do and he recommended us. I think it was a Hallmark Hall of Fame and I think Carol Lawrence was in it. From then on we started to get calls. After the Dick Van Dyke number, we did on *The Jack Benny Show*, Dick was in talks with Walt Disney about *Mary Poppins*. So, he mentioned us to Uncle Walt (that's what we called him) and we went up and met him and he hired us based on Dick's camaraderie with us. I think he also liked the idea of working with a husband and wife team, a family. Once we did *Mary Poppins*, things just took off for both of us. Marc went into directing and I continued with choreography.

ST: How did you and Marc incorporate your individual styles into your work as a choreographic team?

DDW: First we did a lot of homework before we even got to the studio. Let's take *The Sound of Music*. The Laendler dance, which is a folk dance. It was so intricate. We formulated it with our assistants and with the music people into something that we knew that Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer could perform. As far as our working styles with a group of dancers, (I still do this), we would first meet in a rehearsal hall with our pianist and our assistants and we'd work things out. I would do something and Marc would do something, "Oh, let's put that together." And it would evolve into a production. And of course, Michael Kidd had a great influence on everything we did.

ST: Michael Kidd recommended you and Marc for your first Broadway project, *Do Re Mi* with Phil Silvers and Nancy Walker. It was directed by Garson Kanin who also wrote the book. This was also Kanin's directorial debut of a musical.

DDW: I didn't know that.

ST: Tell me about that experience.

DDW: I didn't like it.

ST: Why?

DDW: It was hard working with Garson Kanin and it was the first thing Marc and I had done. I don't think we were ready. As a matter of fact, it was right after that that we moved to Arizona. Marc sort of gave up. He was ready to give up everything and that was when we got a call from William Morris to stage something for Dick Van Dyke. It was that Broadway musical, *Do Re Mi* episode that was very trying and hard for us. There was a lot of re-choreographing, the writer saying, "No, that number doesn't work like that." To rework something, to get another idea is very scary. It was very difficult for Marc and I.

ST: One of the difficulties on the project was that Kanin approached the rehearsal process in the same manner that one directs a non-musical. Discuss your process and preference when working on a musical project.

DDW: I can only talk now about television, big arenas and commercials because I never went back to Broadway after that episode. We usually have a meeting with the director and talk over the whole project. This musical number, that musical number, etc. The lead-in from the scene to the musical number is very important. How, why are they doing the musical number? Not just “bam,” start dancing. I always like to lead-in by underlining the character from the scene so there is a smooth transition into the musical number. After that’s squared away with the director, the music people, the set and costume designers, then I will go away and do my thing in the rehearsal hall with my assistants. Then after it’s laid out we’ll meet again. For instance, when I did *Beaches* with Bette Midler, Bette was one of the producers. Well, we’d come to a decision and the next day Bette would come into the rehearsal hall (I’d be rehearsing the number) and she’d say, “Hey, I thought of this last night. It’s not going to be like this. It’s going to be like that.” The dancers would moan and I’d say, “Take a break. Take a break.” And we would go through a new concept. She is just so vibrant and has all of these ideas all the time and they keep changing. It was difficult because you couldn’t stay with one thing. Sometimes you have to completely change everything because somebody’s going to go in another direction. So, you have things like that where you have to do that. Most often, the director comes and looks at the musical numbers with his cameraperson and they discuss this and that. If I have an idea how it should be shot, then I approach that at that point.

ST: One of the aspects of the Marc Breau/Dee Dee Wood style of choreography I admire is that actors remain in character during dialogue, song, and dance. In addition, the use of props often is a unique factor.

DDW: Props are very helpful. I don’t think it’s a cop out, but when you see a chimney sweep, they’re going to have a broom. When we did “Me Ole Bamboo” in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, we used the bamboo sticks because that was the name of the number. Oh, I have to tell you a story! We honored Dick Van Dyke at the Professional Dancers Society this past spring. Marc and I were there and Carl Reiner introduced Dick. They’re very close friends. He directed and wrote a lot of Dick’s shows (*The Dick Van Dyke Show*). So, he’s introducing Dick and he says, “I’m happy to be here. Dancers give the best parties. I’m so honored to be here to honor my Dick ...” And we started laughing. He didn’t know what he had said. He looked at us and finally realized what he had said. We laughed and laughed and laughed. So anyway, he went on and on about Dick and they showed Dick’s clips and then they had a dance troupe of dancers from eight to fourteen years old, girls and boys. They did “Me Ole Bamboo” just like we had seen it on the screen (during the clips), except for a few tricky parts. They came out and did this dance with these bamboo sticks. After they had finished and Dick had been introduced, they handed a big bamboo stick down the line to Dick. Dick had called me before the show, “I don’t know what I’m going to do, but I want to do something. I can’t dance anymore Dee Dee.” And I said, “Well, I can’t anymore either.” He said, “So what are we going to do?” Well, at the end of “Me Ole Bamboo” in the film, Dick jumps over the bamboo stick. I had suggested to the editor of the clips that they end the clips with that moment. Dick said, “Don’t ask me to jump over the stick!” And I said, “No, you make believe that you are going to jump over it, then lay the stick down and step over it!” He said, “Perfect.” So, he did that and it got a few laughs. He then picks up the stick and says, “Carl’s here’s celebrating his Dick and I’m here celebrating me ole bamboo!”

ST: At what point in your careers did you and Marc decide to focus on activities behind the camera or off-stage opposed to careers as performers?

DDW: Getting from performer, to assistant choreographer, to choreographer, to director was not a decision that we made ahead of time. It evolved. Although, when I was dancer, I was interviewed for a magazine and I stated that someday I wanted to be a choreographer. When I said that, I thought to myself, "I'll never be a choreographer. That takes such genius." But, I thought it was a good statement to make. I guess it's true. Sometimes you don't realize what direction you want to go. I mean we were performers, then performers for and assistants to Michael Kidd and that evolved into assistant choreographers and then choreographers, then *Mary Poppins*, then Marc directing, and I've directed some Super Bowl activities and stuff.

ST: Theatre directors typically have a script as a starting point. What inspires the choreographer regarding their "starting point" when choreographing a musical?

DDW: First of all the music. You listen to the music, instill it in your soul. Then you get into the rehearsal hall with your dance arranger/pianist. Not just a pianist, who is going to just read the music, but a dance arranger/pianist. Nat Farber, was the dance arranger/pianist on *Mary Poppins* and he took that simple phrase of music (regarding the "Chimney Sweep" dance), (*Dee Dee singing*) "Step in time, Step in time, kick your knees up step in time, never need a reason, never need a rhyme, kick your knees up step in time...around the circle step in time..." He made that music happen. We said, "What else can we do with that?" "Flap like a birdie" and all that. He would arrange that music just like a composer. Put "ins and outs" and all that kind of stuff. That's how that evolved. You just keep doing it and doing it. You put the stars in and do what they can do. That is the most fun creatively when you're in that rehearsal hall, before you have any dancers and the assistants are there, working with the music and you just keep doing it and doing it. You put your stars in and see what they can do and the scene just keeps evolving. I keep referring to *Mary Poppins* because that's the epitome of our work. The animators come down and draw the storyboards and exactly how we should shoot the scene and then you do it and you got it. Of course, that's after lots of rehearsal on the back lot of Disney which is as hot as it is here today or in your hometown of Lafayette (Louisiana) in July. We'd rehearse on the back lot with dancers in shorts and tee shirts. Walt would come out and visit us in his golf cart after lunch almost every day, so we never could rest after lunch. We always had to be very busy.

ST: What are some of the rewards or challenges regarding the process of working with children, non-dancers, and animated characters?

DDW: A lot of times in productions we have a chorus of singers that are non-dancers. I love doing background movement with singers. Because you get to just do it to the rhythm of the beat. You can't do all the knee slides and turns and you can make anyone look like a dancer. With animation, such as the penguins in *Mary Poppins*, (first, I was a penguin for Michael Kidd in *Can Can* in the "Garden of Eden Ballet" so I am a wonderful penguin) ...so, we designed the penguin dance with three other dancers and they filmed us doing this dance. They then sent that film up to the animators. If you see that sequence you'll hear one of the penguins exuberantly yelling, "Wee!" Well, I was the voice of that penguin and Marc was the voice of the cow. Besides being choreographers to some of the best dance numbers ever, you'll hear us say, "That was me going, 'Wee'" or Marc saying, "Oh, I was the cow, 'That's Moooaarryy Poppins!"

Children are...oh...that's a tough one, because their attention span is so short. And you have to make it feel like it's fun. Actually, the two youngest children on *The Sound of Music* were the most difficult because their attention span was so short. The others, the "professional" children, it's OK. But brand-new kids you have to make believe it's a game. It takes more time, but it gets done.

ST: How long did it take to rehearse the “Chimney Sweep” number?

DDW: Oh, Marc might remember...I think we were in rehearsal for about eight weeks before we started to shoot that number.

ST: I would assume that one of the more enjoyable aspects of such an experience is the freedom to create almost anything you imagine.

DDW: We didn't realize how free they let us be until the movie came out and then we started working on other projects where we were much more restricted. I guess they had a great deal of faith in us. I didn't know the movie was going to be so successful.

ST: As a choreographer, are you involved with the ballads such as “Hush-a-bye Mountain” in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*?

DDW: Yes. We're involved in all the musical staging. There might be a scene where the character is seated the entire scene and then it's mostly direction. For example, in *Mary Poppins*, when the Bird Woman (portrayed by Jane Darwell and a wonderful character actress) is feeding the birds, we didn't have anything to do with that. That was completely a mood thing. But most musical stuff we'll have something to do with.

ST: You have worked with so many “stars.” Let's have your thoughts on a few of them. Let's begin with Dick Van Dyke.

DDW: What a joy! Can you imagine having a non-dancer come into the studio, try out some steps and make them better? He made them better. Dick is not a trained dancer and he got so into that “Chimney Sweep” dance and whatever else we needed him to do in *Mary Poppins* and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. In addition, he's such a wonderful comedian. We would explore a lot of things in the rehearsal hall that would capitalize on that talent. It was the best. The best time ever.

ST: Julie Andrews.

DDW: Julie is the most professional actress. She would be very careful about things, but we loosened her up a bit. Also, she knew how to approach both *Mary Poppins* and *The Sound of Music*. She didn't want to make Maria saccharin or a sweetie-pie. She had a bite to both characters and it worked. Julie still does the warm-up exercises Marc and I gave her.

ST: Andy Williams.

DDW: Andy is so sweet and so nice. He's not a dancer but he will try anything. We did not give him any “dance” numbers. We staged his songs. We did a wonderful number for Andy with twelve or sixteen rocking chairs. He was in the central rocking chair and you saw only him. As the song evolved the camera pulled back to reveal dancers in all the rocking chairs. They would get up, walk around the chairs, sit down and turn around in them. So, that's the kind of numbers we did with Andy. We did eight weeks with him on the show and some specials.

ST: Bette Midler.

DDW: The first time I met Bette Midler was with the director of *Beaches*, Garry Marshall. Garret Lewis, a dancer who is now an art director, told them about me. So, they called and said they'd like to meet me. So, I went in and met Bette and we started singing songs from *Guys and Dolls*. She loves the movie *Guys and Dolls*. We had the best time. I went home and got a phone call. “You got the gig!” She is so inventive. She dreams up stuff in the middle of the night and you better be ready the next morning at rehearsal.

ST: Robin Williams and Billy Crystal.

DDW: Oh, they just keep getting better and better! I did the second *Laugh-In*, not the original show, and that was the first show that Robin Williams did. That was before *Mork and Mindy*. Robin Williams is the only person in all of my choreography rehearsals I let disrupt my rehearsals and stop everything because you knew you saw a genius at work. I mean, he would ad-lib and he would grab things around the rehearsal hall and start doing things. I didn't want to stop him but I knew we had to get other things done for the show. We had six or seven comedians and I had an opening number. I just didn't want to stop him. Billy Crystal is so musical, and funny, and charming. I went to talk with Billy, as I was to do his eight-week television show. I said, "You know, I like classical music too." He liked that. "And blues." He liked that too. He does a black blues character that's wonderful. He also does Satchmo. He's just wonderful, wonderful to work with. Robin came on Billy's show and we did a comic number where Billy played a choreographer's assistant and Robin was a new guy in a Las Vegas act and they had a rehearsal. It was a number where the "star" couldn't come to rehearsal and so Billy's character had to teach Robin. So, I had these different styles of dance and these two guys just took off with the number and it was so funny. They've done it on their Comic Relief shows. It is so funny. Can you imagine what fun I had doing that?

ST: Sammy Davis Jr.

DDW: I've known Sammy since I was on Broadway. He came backstage during *Lil' Abner*. He loves dancing. He loves dancers. I went to Vegas and he came backstage and talked to us. I've also staged a couple of things for him. We always had the best of times together. I staged one of the last shows he was a guest on in Vegas. I had showgirls lined up on these stairs and he came down the stairs with that strut. We got to be very close. He married a dancer that was one of my students at the Katherine Dunham School and that was kind of wonderful.

ST: Chita Rivera.

DDW: Ahhh! My best friend, my sister, my buddy, my Chita. What else can I say? I stood up for her at her wedding. I was there when she had her baby. I went to Mexico with her to get her divorce. And I just spent four days with her in Las Vegas. She's up there doing *Chicago* and soon will be doing it in London. I've known Chita since 1953. We were in *Can Can* together. She's also Godmother to my son, Michael, who is named after Michael Kidd.

ST: During the 1980's and 1990's you became known for choreographing the Spectacular. Examples include: the *XXIII Olympics* in L.A., three Super Bowls, the Fiesta Bowl, various award shows and more. Describe how such opportunities evolved and the process of dealing with so many people.

DDW: Well, I first got into such spectaculars during the 1984 Olympics. They were already in rehearsal and they had just one choreographer. The director, Tommy Walker, was connected to Disney and he knew that I had been connected to Disney. I did the Opening of Disney World in Orlando and I've done some stuff at Disneyland. So, he called me and said, "We need help. We need help with the Opening and Closing Ceremony numbers." From there, I went on to the *Statue of Liberty Celebration*. I choreographed the Closing Ceremonies (for which I received an Emmy Award). From that I started doing Super Bowls. It's dealing with a whole lot of people. That's when we started to do charts. On the *Statue of Liberty Celebration*, I had six assistants, whereas on a television show you most often have one assistant. But on that project, I had six plus a charter. The charter sits there and each person on the field has a number from 1 to 500 in order that we may know exactly where number 439 is on the field at any given moment. There's just a lot of preparation time before you get the people out on the field to rehearse. Then

it takes time to get everyone checked in. They all have to sign-in and get a number. They wear a huge number that I can see from the stands. You need a lot of help to get it all done.

ST: You work with a lot of volunteers on such events. How do you keep them focused?

DDW: You've got to keep your energy up. You give them the required breaks. You have to keep it fun and lively, keep the music going. As soon as they start to arrive I have the music blasting from the speakers as they're signing in. Tommy Peel, my assistant, really keeps them going. He's like a cheerleader. That's what you need to be when you work with large groups of people.

ST: What was it like the night you won the Emmy for the Liberty Weekend Closing Ceremonies?

DDW: I was very excited. I had such a good feeling about it. Marc was seated on the aisle and I was seated next to him. When it was announced that I had won, I said, "Look out Marc!" I was on-stage before the presenter had finished saying my name. I almost knocked Marc out of his seat getting up there. I was so happy.

ST: What was your mother's reaction when you won the Emmy?

DDW: I don't know whether she was as thrilled as I was. She took everything in great stride. I called three people when I got the Emmy. Marc was with me and I went out into the lobby before they started interviewing us. First, I called mother, then Phyllis Rabb (my manager), and the third was Michael Kidd. And then Michael Kidd said, "I knew you were going to get it." I said, "How did you know I was going to get it?" He said, "I was on the judging board." I will see him in August because I am on the Emmy judging board this year. We have a great time. All of these choreographers from LA, seven to nine of us, they put up in a hotel, we have breakfast together and we watch all of these T.V. shows.

ST: Is it easier or harder for young performers to get into the business today?

DDW: I'm sort of backed away from the business these days so I can't really say. I know that dancers in L.A. are doing more videos with singers today and they're thrilled with it, although many of the dancers are not necessarily trained. Commercials (like the GAP commercials) also offer a lot of opportunity. A lot of the choreographers are dance teachers in L.A. and they'll know whom can do what and then they get into a group, a nucleus. All the dancers in L.A. have an agent. They have a commercial agent, a video agent. They have all kinds of agents. It's a whole new thing that has evolved in the last ten years. So, I would say anyone that wanted to be a professional dancer in L.A. (I'm not talking about Broadway, but video, commercials, and film), I would say to study in L.A. and study at the best places. Commercials will have auditions whereby the director most often makes the decisions regarding which dancers to hire. However, on television shows, the choreographer most often chooses the dancers.

ST: As you watch a Broadway show, what is your perception of dance training today?

DDW: Well, first of all, the show that I most recently saw, which has the most fabulous dancers, is the show called, *Fosse*. They are some of the best dancers that I have seen in my entire career. They did a workshop and they took all the dancers up to Toronto and worked with Gwen Verdon and some other people for six months on some Fosse stuff. They can do the Fosse style and any one of those dancers can do any style they want and honey, I know from seeing them what they can do. Fabulous, fabulous, wonderful all-around dancers! Of course, then you get to Savion Glover who does fabulous tap.

ST: In addition to ballet, which you obviously believe you need for a foundation, what other training should be included in a musical theatre program at the university level?

DDW: First of all, I think they have to study ballet to have the technique and strength to do whatever style a choreographer wants. Then they have to study jazz from a good jazz teacher. Singing. They have to sing all the time now. A lot of choreographers will ask you to improvise now. We never did that. We always asked dancers to do a combination we made up - maybe three different combinations. Tap is getting very hot now. So, you should study tap, jazz, ballet, and the vocal stuff and the improvisational dancing which I always found very hard to do. I'm actually taking a dance-drama class now and I'm loving it because I'm doing some fun stuff.

ST: A few comments regarding discipline.

DDW: Once you start taking any kind of dance class the first thing you learn is discipline. It just comes. It's the name of the game - discipline. Even I have to discipline myself. As a performer, you need to have discipline to know when the choreographer is ready to have fun, when the choreographer is ready to work, when the choreographer is thinking about something. Be calm. Don't make waves. That comes from taking dance class, from taking ballet class, from watching your teacher. If you don't pay attention, you usually get admonished. If you don't have discipline, it's perhaps those people that haven't been trained in all facets of dance. For instance, street dancers - they come off the streets and are very exuberant. Sometimes you hire a street dancer for a special thing. That's what you want. But they don't have the discipline. You need a lot of discipline to be a performer, a professional.

ST: What advice do you have for the dancers getting their first professional gig?

DDW: The first thing you do is come into the rehearsal hall and start warming up. A choreographer will not always give you a warm-up. I like to warm-up myself before I start so I'll warm up with my dancers. Just come into the rehearsal hall quietly, look around, make eye contact with the choreographer, "Hi. Good morning." Put your rehearsal bag off to the side of the room. There's usually a designated area and just quietly go off to the part of the room and begin stretching and warming-up. Keep one eye on the assistant choreographer and choreographer so when you see that they are getting ready to work, you are ready to work. You have your shoes on and you are ready to go.

ST: During the rehearsal process, the choreographer may work with a select group of dancers on one side of the stage or rehearsal hall. What should the other dancers be doing at this time?

DDW: When we have a group of maybe sixteen dancers and I'm working with just four or five, if possible, when I know it's going to happen, I'll request a second rehearsal hall in the complex and I'll send my assistant to work with the other dancers so there's never anyone not working or they'll have to sit quietly off to the side or I'll give them a break. "Do your phone calls, come back in fifteen minutes and be ready to go." So that's what I do with those kids.

ST: I'm obviously hoping some of my students may read this interview. With that in mind, where and when does the performer begin building a reputation?

DDW: As soon as they walk into a rehearsal hall. They start building a reputation when they start taking a dance class. I will sometimes listen to other choreographers who have had a bad experience with a dancer and I'll say, "Oh, I have to be careful about that." Now, the first time I worked with Cher, I was told she was difficult. Well, we got along great! So, you can't always listen to someone else because it can be a completely different situation. When I first started with Cher on her show (without Sonny) I told her, "You're going to plie' here." She said, 'Wait. Stop. Don't tell me to plie.' Tell me to squat and then I know what you're saying." She's just very down-to-earth. What's uncomfortable for a choreographer is when a dancer is working on two dance projects and you're ready to work on your project and they're over in the corner working on a combination they just did for the other project. It drives you crazy. Don't do

that. Don't come in and start rehearsing something else. You have to be there for the choreographer. There was a time I hired a dancer from Las Vegas, a wonderful gentlemen. A really, really, really, good, tough dancer. He called me one morning and said, "I have another gig. I can't make it." Well, I told other choreographers, "You can't depend on him." When you get a job, you take it. It's very difficult to go up to a choreographer and ask, "Can I get off early for this other job?" You can't do that. Otherwise, choreographers talk in this business.

ST: Your thoughts regarding being on time.

DDW: I can't stress how important that is. Actually, you should be there early to start warming up early. I love to walk into the rehearsal hall and see dancers warming up and ready to go. I'm normally there early, but sometimes I have a production meeting and it takes me a minute or two to get my music out and stuff and here they are, ready to go. I love to see that. You can't say, "I have a ten-o'clock rehearsal call. I'll be there at ten." I usually say, "Be ready to go at ten." Then it's up to them to be there in dance clothes and doing their warm-up.

ST: What advice do you have for the young performer pursuing their dreams of working in the entertainment industry?

DDW: If you're already performing, I cannot stress how important it is to continue your classes even though you got the gig. Take your ballet, your voice lessons, and keep making the contacts. As a performer starting out, try not to get discouraged when you go to an audition and you may not be the right type. Sometimes choreographers are looking for type because a producer or director says, "I want this type or that type." Sometimes we have meetings and we're not sure what types we're looking for. Sometimes we'll get into the audition and I'll say, "Okay, for this particular number, maybe we need a redhead, a brunette, and a blonde for the females. Maybe for the guys, we need them to be dark and Latin-looking for this number." So, there you are as a guy, maybe you're not dark and Latin looking. So, it's not always how good you are. It's just that you might not get the gig because you are not the right type. Or you can do what I did at my first audition (*Guys and Dolls*) and they did not except me. I waited until five-o'clock and asked the choreographer (Michael Kidd), "What can I work on? I want to do this." That's what you have to do. You have to hang around and ask, "Excuse me. I auditioned for you and you didn't accept me. Do you remember me?" If I don't remember, usually my assistants are with me and they'll say, "Oh Dee Dee, don't you remember? That's the one who couldn't do the triple..." ...whatever. So just don't get discouraged. Keep hammering away at your technique and your singing and acting and listening to music and working hard and being exuberant.

ST: The subject of weight and the physical makeup of a dancer are a concern for those of us in education in regards to a performers health - your thoughts?

DDW: Well, in the show *Fosse*, all those dancers looked like they should go out and get a few meals. They're so thin. Now Marc and I did a show for ABC called *The Light Fantastic*. We had a wonderful dancer who was a roly-poly kind of guy. He did acrobatics and was a wonderful character. I remember that Liza Minelli did an act with Tommy Tune, who is like 6'-7". Then she had this other little guy because he was a different type of character. Sometimes when you're doing a television show, the producer, director, and costume designer will want all the girls to have long legs and be glamorous. That's what they want and you have to go with that. But I like character in dance. Otherwise it gets all stereotyped and boring. So, if you are a 5'-2" female, don't wish you were 5'-8". Don't despair. Keep working on your own thing. Your own personality. That will come through.

ST: When dancing, what should dancers be thinking about?

DDW: Pure joy! You should think of pure joy when you are dancing. Even if it's an emotional

thing or it's fast, it's still so wonderful to express that movement in dance. And you should have enough rehearsal where you don't have to think about, "What do I do next? What count am I on?" When you're dancing, it's pure euphoric. It's a high that nobody can get unless you are a dancer and you love it.

ST: Males have traditionally dominated the entertainment industry. Have you ever felt that you were denied opportunities because you are a female?

DDW: Maybe it's because I'm such a forceful person energy wise but I've never had a problem with that. When I worked with all the gentlemen I've worked with over the years it never entered my mind because I worked as such an equal with them and we always had such a good time. Once the guys found out they could say anything they wanted in front of me (as I can get pretty raunchy myself) there was just an equal standing, so I never had that sort of thing happening. I did everything I wanted to do. I made myself a niche. I never thought, "If I was a guy...." That never happened.

ST: As you look back at your career and the marvelous photographs and exhibits around your house, did you ever dream you would be as successful as you have been?

DDW: No. I never did. I guess if I had a mentor when I was studying that said, "Dee Dee, you can do this if you want too." But nobody ever said that to me. All I know, I was going to do it because I loved it. I didn't know how talented I was, or if I had any talent? I just loved doing it so much. So, if you are determined, if you are passionate enough, you can make this happen. I didn't sit and dream too much.

ST: In 1998, you and Marc received the Life Achievement Award at the American Choreography Awards.

DDW: Grover Dale called me and said, "Dee Dee, you have to come to L.A. in October because we are going to honor you and Marc with this Life Achievement Award." And I said, "Oh, that's cute." And he said, "Cute!" I said, "Well, what do you want me to say? I think it's neat." He almost fell out of his chair I'm sure. Then it settled in and I thought, "Wait a minute. We're not dead. This is wonderful, getting it before we die." Then we find out they were getting Chita Rivera and Dick Van Dyke to present the award and I thought, "How wonderful." It was an incredible night. I was on a high for two days. I was an idiot. I acted like I was twelve years old. Marc, of course, was very stately and gentlemanly.

ST: He doesn't get overly excited.

DDW: Oh, he gets excited. But he doesn't let it out as often as I do so it builds up and just explodes. That's probably why he has had a heart attack and a stroke. We've had a lot of laughs - a lot of laughs together. And still do.
