
EVERY STEP YOU TAKE

A Memoir

Jock Soto
with Leslie Marshall



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*For Mama Jo and Papa Joe,
for my family all across this beautiful country,
to the love of my life, Luis Fuentes,
and to our two ever-faithful dogs, Tristan and Bandit,
woof and arf back at ya.*

CHAPTER ONE

Prelude

*The past is part of the present, just as the
future is. We exist in time.*

—GEORGE BALANCHINE

I will never forget that hot summer day in 2004 when Peter Martins, ballet master in chief for the New York City Ballet, asked me if I would come talk with him about something important. We were in the Saratoga Performing Arts Center, where the NYCB has a visiting performance schedule every summer, and I had just danced a matinee performance of Balanchine's ballet *Stravinsky Violin Concerto*. I was sweaty and tired and had only a few hours before I had to get ready for an evening performance of Balanchine's *Agon*, but I dragged myself upstairs to find Peter in the stuffy little room he uses as his temporary office when the company is in Saratoga Springs.

When I entered the room, Peter—a tall, blond, and very noble Dane—jumped up to greet me with a great big bear hug, as he always does when we meet. For close to a quarter

of a century I had been having meetings of this kind with Peter to discuss upcoming performances, and in recent years our respective roles in these meetings had evolved. For the first two decades of my career, Peter had done almost all the talking, strategizing about how I could expand my repertoire and what ballets I might dance, while I listened quietly. But in the last five years I had found myself doing more and more of the talking when we met, updating Peter on the current status of my injuries and ailments and strategizing about what I therefore could *not* dance. I didn't know exactly what Peter wanted to talk about on that particular day, but as I stepped back to take a seat on a sofa in the corner, I could see that Peter was unusually excited about something. As soon as I was seated he delivered his news.

"I have decided on the program for your farewell performance," Peter announced. "You will dance Balanchine, Robbins, Wheeldon, Martins, and Taylor-Corbett. Five ballets. It will be a first in the history of the NYCB!" he added, waving a finger in the air. "Nobody has ever done this." My eyes just sort of bulged, and I gave an uneasy giggle. Five ballets? That evening I called my mother in Santa Fe and said, "Mom, I believe Peter wants to kill me when I retire."

The physical challenges of the program Peter described to me on that summer day in Saratoga were definitely daunting. But what probably hit me harder was the emotional shock of hearing him pronounce the actual ballets and confirm the exact date—June 19, 2005—for the program that would be my very last performance as a principal dancer with the New York City Ballet. The decision to retire had been mine, and I was confident that the time was right. But dancing was all

I had ever done in life. I had started at age three when I performed ceremonial dances with my Native American mother on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona, where my family lived. At age five I began my formal ballet training in Phoenix; at age thirteen I moved to New York to attend the School of American Ballet, the famous ballet institution founded in 1934 by the philanthropist Lincoln Kirstein and the legendary dancer and choreographer George Balanchine; when I was sixteen Balanchine invited me to join the New York City Ballet, and I had been dancing there ever since. I was closing in on forty, and the only thing I had ever done—literally for as much as eleven or twelve hours a day, six days a week, for my entire life—was about to end. Just like that, after one last performance, on June 19, 2005.

At some point every professional dancer has to make the difficult decision to stop performing, and for me this decision had come after nearly a decade of the escalating injuries and joint pain that inevitably come with advancing age. A few months before my meeting with Peter in Saratoga Springs, I had plunked myself down on the red leather sofa in Peter's office at Lincoln Center and announced my decision to retire. I wanted to step offstage voluntarily while I was still strong, with a positive plan for the next phase of my life. I didn't want someone to have to tell me it was time to go—or, even worse, read about it in the newspaper, or overhear someone whispering about it in the hallways. I had picked the age of forty as my deadline, and I was going to stick to it. I knew it was time. But as Peter rattled off those names on that hot summer day—Balanchine, Robbins, Wheeldon, Martins, and Taylor-Corbett—everything suddenly seemed so real

and so final. Five beautiful ballets—and then nothing. The process seemed as sudden and irreversible as a violent death.

The good news was that I had almost a full year to get used to the idea of retirement and to condition and strengthen my body for the marathon dance feat Peter had described. The bad news was that this gave me a nice long time to be anxious and worried about everything. What if an injury knocked me out and there was no farewell performance? What if I collapsed halfway through? What if nobody came?

Something else had begun weighing heavily on me that same year. In 2003 my mother had been diagnosed with colon cancer, and her treatment was not going well. She had had two operations already, and new tumors kept being discovered. The realization that she might not necessarily live forever had shocked me, and for the first time I was thinking back over the choices I had made thus far in my life, wondering if I might have made some mistakes.

I started life on the same reservation in Arizona where my mother—a full-blooded Native American—had been born and raised, and I spent the first twelve years of my life in the Southwest with my parents and my older brother, Kiko. But by the age of fourteen I was living on my own in New York City, pursuing my dream to become a great dancer. I had a full scholarship as a student at the School of American Ballet (SAB)—and nothing else. Housing, food, education—the basic foundations of a normal teenager’s life—had not been put in place for me, but I didn’t care. I was happy to improvise on these fronts. All I wanted in life was to dance.

I never did live with my parents and older brother again. In fact, for almost three decades I rarely saw them. After

learning about my mother's illness in 2003, haunted by the thought of the many years I had missed being with my family, I began spending any vacation time I had with my parents. At the time, they were living outside Santa Fe, in a trailer situated on the grounds of the fenced-in A-1 Self Storage facility that they were managing. Whenever I was visiting we would close the gates at 5:00 p.m., locking ourselves inside the storage facility for the night, and then our evening ritual would begin. My father, who is a full-blooded, *muy* macho Puerto Rican, would watch his television (at very high volume, almost always tuned to either a war movie or a news segment about war); I would make myself an evening cocktail and begin to cook our dinner; and my beautiful Navajo princess of a mother would regale me with stories about my Native American heritage.

“The most important thing in life is family,” Mom kept saying to me, over and over during the course of my visits. I would nod, and do my best to listen and absorb what she was saying as I continued to cook. At a certain point—and in large part to reassure my mother that I was doing my best to preserve these stories about our heritage—I began working with a filmmaker named Gwendolen Cates on a documentary that would trace our family background and my career in dance.

Making the documentary proved to be engaging in ways I hadn't expected—for the first time I was pausing to look backward at my childhood and my family history. But the project also added to my anxieties during the final days with the NYCB in ways I hadn't anticipated. For starters, making a film is time-consuming, complicated, and expensive. And then there was this other troubling obstacle the process of making

the film had unearthed: a huge wall of resistance inside me. The truth was, I wasn't sure I really wanted to examine my Navajo *or* my Puerto Rican "roots." I had worked so hard to leave those worlds behind, and I didn't want to go back. I wanted to move forward into a future for which I was already making very specific plans. In 2003 I had met a dashing sommelier and chef, Luis Fuentes, and I was excited about our life together. I have always loved to cook, and Luis and I had dreams of starting a catering business or a restaurant someday. I was determined to hit the ground running when I retired, and at Luis's suggestion I enrolled at the Institute of Culinary Education for classes that started the day after my final performance. I wasn't going to miss a beat. I was going to orchestrate every detail of my retirement methodically, as I might rehearse the intricate movements of the most complex ballet, reviewing every step, over and over, until the process of transition from principal dancer to ex-dancer had been loaded right into my flesh and bones—a fluid series of movements internalized by my body, no longer thought about but simply performed. One day dancer, next day not. No big deal. Pass the salt.

Despite all my calm and deliberate planning, when the last week before my final performance finally arrived I was a wreck—anxious and confused, and overwhelmed by a variety of feelings. Several of my family members had traveled east early for the event, and while their presence strengthened the sense of support I felt, it also compounded my anxiety about performing well. For several of them the long trip to New York was the first travel of this kind they had ever made, and I wanted to make sure they felt it had been worthwhile. A longtime ballet patron and friend, Anne Bass, incredibly

generous as always, had offered to host a party in my honor after the performance, so she and I were busy coordinating details for a Mexican feast for 450 to be held downtown in a party space called Industria. I was working night and day with the physical therapists and my trainer to hold my exhausted and vulnerable body together, and at the same time rehearsing not just for my farewell performance but also for the regular ballet program pieces I was dancing in the days leading up to my performance. Everything felt pretty crazy.

When June 19 finally arrived I was numb. Luis very kindly took me out for brunch before the performance, which was scheduled as a 3:00 p.m. matinee, but I couldn't even touch my food. As the hour approached, I sat in my dressing room and stared in the mirror, looking for evidence of something new in my face that might reflect the extreme change my life was about to take. I applied my stage makeup for the last time—a little eyeliner and a little blush—and dressed and headed down to the stage earlier than usual. Standing in the wings, looking out into the theater, I realized it seemed surreal to me that today would be the last time that I would throw my whole heart and soul out across this familiar platform where I had danced so many amazing stories. A wave of panic swept through me as I considered the possibility that I wouldn't make it through the program—I had rehearsed the steps of all five ballets over and over, but never back-to-back while dancing full out in the real-time performance framework. (Dancers my age rarely rehearse a ballet dancing full out—if you do, you would have nothing left by performance time.) What if my legs just gave out halfway through? The possibility was horrifying.

Finally the moment came for the program to begin. As I stood in the wings, it was strange to think that at the end of this evening the person I had been for thirty-five years—the obsessed and driven ballet dancer—would just disappear. Where would that person go? And what would be left in the space he had once occupied? I looked out to find my family in the third-row orchestra seats below, and caught my mother's eye. She was beautiful in the red shirt and black pants and jacket she had made for herself for the occasion, and she was wearing one of the wigs—the short, spiky one that was my favorite—she had started using since chemotherapy. As our eyes met she sent me the huge smile that had warmed and brightened my life for as long as I could remember, and I felt a familiar calmness spreading through me. It was time to dance.

I made the sign of the cross—something I had done before every ballet I ever performed—and took a deep breath. As the music began I stepped onto the stage and into the role of Bernardo of the Sharks in the “Dance at the Gym” scene from Jerome Robbins's *West Side Story Suite*. I turned to my fellow Sharks as we advanced upon Riff and his gang of Jets. “Mambo, mambo, mambo!” I shouted. In a matter of seconds, the combination of music and movement gathered me up and carried me to a new place. Any concerns I had had about a dancer named Jock Soto and the possible pitfalls of his retirement performance evaporated. I was a Shark, and I was at war.

TO MY GREAT relief my entire retirement program unfolded as it was meant to, and in the months that followed

I congratulated myself for having executed the whole transition successfully, more or less as I had planned it. I was really enjoying teaching full-time at the SAB and taking courses at the Institute for Culinary Education. The last pieces of the documentary about me, titled *Water Flowing Together*, seemed to be finally falling into place, and Luis and I loved getting to spend more time with each other and with Tristan, the adorable baby basset hound my fellow dancers had given me as a retirement present. In fact, other people seemed to be more traumatized by my retirement than I was.

“Don’t you miss performing?” they would ask me incredulously when I bumped into them on the street. “Yes, I do miss performing. It’s all the other hours I don’t miss,” I would say, trying to brush it off lightly. “I’m tired. I’m so ready to do something else.” And I believed this to be true.

But deep inside, I know part of me must have been in shock. There is no greater feeling than the one that comes after a performance when everything has gone incredibly well. In the last decade of my career, when I was dancing so much with Wendy Whelan, I often felt that our dancing must be the closest thing there was to flying. Our beings and our bodies merged and we went soaring through the ballet on a cloud. Every time we danced together it felt like a new story was unfolding. Of course I missed it, and knowing I was letting go of this experience forever had been like watching a part of myself die. In so many ways, on so many levels it seemed unthinkable—so I did my best not to think about it.

At the same time that I was keeping myself in studied denial about the death of my professional identity, I was trying to face a much more serious and upsetting loss. My

mother's health had continued to disintegrate, and she was getting weaker and weaker. Even though she was often living as much as three thousand miles away, I had always remained aware of my mother as a powerful and vital force in my life and in the world. It was not just her physical presence—her beautiful skin and hair, elegant face and carriage—or her warm and embracing manner that struck everyone who met her. Mom had certain ways about her—ways of seeing and ways of speaking and ways of teaching and loving and living—that were unique. Born and raised on her clan's ancestral lands on the Navajo tribal reservation near Chinle, Arizona, she was both humble and proud, and filled with an innate courage and dignity. She had often talked about how her elders on the reservation had taught her to “walk in beauty and in harmony,” and I knew she had a grand scheme for how life—whether on or off the reservation—should be led by all of us. And now this amazingly intense and vibrant woman was fading, beaten down by rounds and rounds of chemotherapy and all its nasty side effects.

I was grateful that my retirement allowed me to spend more time with Mom, but I found that the more I saw her the more I dreaded losing her. Over the months, another potential loss began to haunt me. My mother had always been the bookkeeper and historian in our family. I was afraid that if she died there would be much—about my parents and grandparents and their families, about my own early childhood, about my mother's Navajo heritage and my father's life in Puerto Rico—that would go to the grave with her. I had promised Mom that I would try to remember what she had told me about our heritage, and do my best to pass it

along. But what if I wanted to learn more about my past at some point? Who would I turn to?

Recognizing how much I didn't know about my parents' backgrounds and my own early years brought me face-to-face with an even more alarming question: Did I even know my own life, the one I had supposedly lived for the past thirty years here in New York? Luis and I had begun to talk about getting married someday, and maybe even having a family. If I ever had children of my own, would I be able to tell them about this life I had lived, what I had done and what I had learned from it? Or had I danced right over three decades of precious time, pouring everything into the stories I was creating onstage and ignoring the overall arc of how everything, onstage and offstage, fits together? This raised another troubling question, especially for someone facing the challenge of inventing a whole new life: Can you figure out where you are going if you have never paused to consider where you came from or where you have been?

I had been so determined to channel all my energies forward into a productive future after retiring—yet now I found myself possessed by a curiosity about my past. I kept thinking about the months and months that had piled up into years and years, during which my only focus had been a near maniacal pursuit of the art of dance. Balanchine's famous quote about ballet came to mind: "The past is part of the present, just as the future is. We exist in time." Could I apply his comment on dance to life in general? Could I keep moving through the present and planning for the future, and at the same time be able to rewind the tape and sift through my past, looking for any information and insights that might be embedded in all

those days and weeks and months and years during which I had just floated through life—happily adrift in a universe that was all about dancing, dancing, dancing?

For a long time I wrestled with these questions, wondering if I had the courage and stamina and honesty—not to mention intellectual depth—to actually harvest anything from a more probing look at my life. But on the sad day in March 2008 when my brave mother finally lost her battle with cancer and died, something shifted inside me. I didn't recognize the change instantly, but over the next few weeks it became obvious that I had been asking myself certain questions for long enough. The time had come to try to find some answers.