

# Theresa Lee Crawford

PROFESSIONAL BALLET INSTRUCTOR



“If you become a teacher, by your pupils you'll be taught.”

—Oscar Hammerstein II

Interviewed by: Jane DeNight

### What about your young adulthood?

I have to say I was really naive as a young adult. I was completely entrenched in the ballet world. My life was all ballet and I was focused. I had no practical life experience due to this intense involvement with studying ballet. I was also very sensitive. I went to college on scholarship to Western Michigan University and majored in dance. In the end, I wasn't impressed with the program and left after one year. I opened my own ballet school in Waterford, Michigan, and began my ballet teaching career.



### Who has had the most influence on your life?

Of course my Aunt Marcia Dale Weary definitely had a powerful impact on my life. My career in teaching ballet evolved from her influence and the teaching techniques she developed. She knew from the beginning my body was not suited for ballet and instinctually started training me to teach. Car ride games consisted of quizzes of classical music and ballet history. Birthday and Christmas presents were practice records, pieces of choreography and eventually trips to set full length ballets for my students. My aunt was slightly older than my mother and although they were exceptionally close, my mother had her on a pedestal. Aunt Marcia was the authoritative, not exactly the "touchy-feely" type, and I always felt self-generated pressure to make her proud of me. At times, I have felt that I've disappointed her because I got married and had a child instead of following her single minded focus in life. My aunt choose to make ballet the center of her life excluding everything else, I wanted to experience the normalcy of a marriage and children like my mother. I wanted to travel like my Aunt Sandra. I haven't regretted these decisions, I know they have enriched my life and my teaching. Becoming a parent is the most difficult, daunting, selfless, and rewarding job you can undertake. I know it enhanced my teaching by understanding child development and child-parent relationships.



### How would you describe your childhood?

I was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, November 16, 1957. We moved to Carlisle, Pennsylvania, when I was 7 months old. I am the oldest of three children; I have one younger sister and brother. I was always at "the Barn", The Marcia Dale School of Dance, later called Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet or "CPYB". My aunt, Marcia Dale Weary founded this well-known ballet school in 1957, and it was housed in a red barn in rural Pennsylvania. As a young child, I used to think that every red barn contained a ballet school. I was the "baby of the Barn", I began studying ballet at age seven in Michigan, but I spent the summers taking ballet at the Barn with my Aunt Marcia. My mother and my aunt were best friends so we were always together for vacations and holidays. I definitely was a feminine "girly-girl". I was a Girl Scout; loved paper dolls, cats, and wore flowers in my hair. I was extremely neat and organized. I did well in school, especially math and science. I even considered becoming an archeologist.



### What shaped your school-age years?

Unfortunately, my family moved quite frequently when I was growing up due to my father's job. He was a pilot and flew cargo and private airplanes. I was allowed to go on special trips with him as the "co-pilot". In Michigan I was dancing almost every day,



but I was nervous that I wasn't getting the quality of training that I was used to receiving from my aunt. At age 14 I even opened my own ballet school with the encouragement of my aunt and the help of my mother. When my own son turned 14, I looked back and realized how extraordinary this experience was, you could not duplicate it today. I was teaching 15 classes a week and had 20 students enrolled. I made enough money to pay for my trip back to Carlisle. Summers at the Barn were magical! There was a swimming pool, a big yard and serious ballet students everywhere. My family was awfully strict. The majority of teenagers were listening to the Beatles at that time. We were only allowed to listen to classical music. My family prohibited us from listening to rock and roll and playing with mainstream things like Barbie dolls. We did have numerous pet cats whom I loved dearly. My cats' names were: Hollybell, Tinkerbelle, Toots, and Gomer. We also had a beautiful high-strung Burmese cat named Lady Anson. I am still a cat person to this day. By age 15 it was obvious I didn't have the ideal ballet body, too short and too many 'curves'. There was also a male teacher that blatantly told me: "You'll never become a ballet dancer." It was humiliating, horrible, and I felt

so depressed. My aunt tried to console me and said I could become a teacher like she did, in fact I was already teaching for her in the summer and had my little school in Michigan. She promised to help me and she did.

### **What do you love about teaching ballet?**

I love watching my students develop into unique individuals. I have found over the years that children who study ballet seriously, even if they don't continue it professionally, develop a work ethic that is unparalleled. My students flower into amazing, interesting and exceptional adults, achieving success in many different fields.



### **What is challenging about teaching ballet?**

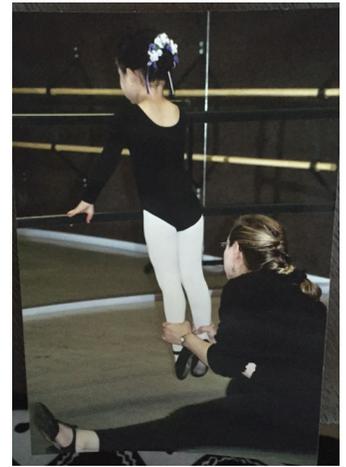
The teaching techniques I learned from my aunt are basic, but each student is different. Adapting my teaching to each student's individual needs can be challenging with a class of 15 or more. But the experience over 40 years of teaching and thousands of students makes that manageable. Interestingly, it is the parents that can be a real challenge. They can be extremely demanding. Some can be unsupportive or harsh with their children, and even though few are educated about ballet, they have no qualms about telling the teacher what their child needs. At times I have been treated like a servant. Parents can be overly competitive with class levels, getting parts in productions, and pushing their child ahead. I really believe this is ruining the artistic experience for their children. When I studied, I was a tiny child and appeared much younger than I was. I would be under tables, around corners and quietly observing the duplicitous manipulations of parents in my aunt's school from a young age. Fortunately, due to this exposure I am adept at spotting trouble before it begins.



### What are your favorite ballet steps to teach?

I love to teach rond de jamb en l'air and jumps like entrechat quatre. My favorite class to teach is beginning pointe, especially the first day. To watch their faces on this special day is such a joy. When I danced I loved to turn, jump and move quickly. I was good at pirouettes, fouettés turns, and brisé. I agonized over adagios, développé en croix, especially devant (front). Emboité turns are my least favorite step to teach, they are so difficult to perform correctly.

As French is the language of Ballet, I know that to the untrained, the above was unintelligible. So let me put it differently, Ballet is stylized movement like all other forms of dance, but it is movement through and to precise positions in precise ways. The culmination of years of training is to allow the dancer to move gracefully, to float, to fly, without obvious focus on the precise details of the steps. That is technique and that is why these underlying 'steps' must be learned, done with precision and mastered to the point that they merge into and become secondary to the movement itself.



### How has your ballet teaching changed over the years?

Children are so much of part of the new electronic age, it is difficult to compete with the speed they are accustomed to. I have to be more of an entertainer to keep the students' attention. I have to go faster and make sure there is no "down time" during the class. I have to use fast, upbeat music to keep them engaged. I have to be repetitive and use humor to get points across. Being funny while making corrections is useful and engaging. As a teacher today, you feel the pressure to "amuse" the students because of their shorter attention spans. Ballet is a slow process as it involves the body and muscle memory. Many younger children have to be taught to skip now. They come into ballet classes with less coordination and less muscle tone due to the change in our more sedentary lifestyle. Children are not outside playing, all activities are scheduled and children are driven to and from. I have seen a decrease in general coordination and muscle tone in the 40 years I have taught.



### **What are your best qualities as a teacher? What works?**



Photo by Rosalie O'Conner

My best qualities are my diligence and patience. Even though I have to teach somewhat faster as explained above, I don't let my students move ahead until they perform the steps technically correct. The development of correct muscle memory is critical. I have found that it takes three times longer to unlearn incorrect training than it takes to learn it. Patience is required so I keep going over the steps with my students and try make learning fun. I am also good at breaking the steps down into digestible pieces so even young students can master advanced technique. I find teaching this way builds a solid foundation and has been proven successful in creating professional artists, confident non-professional dancers and ballet teachers.

### **What do you believe are the most important steps to teach in ballet?**

In the beginning levels, demi pliés, tendues, soutenués, and dégagés are what I teach first. They allow the new student to start developing the proper body, turnout and foot positions. The articulation of the metatarsals should be stressed for relevés and jumping. For the more advanced levels, fondués, turns á la seconde, fouettés, pirouettes in all positions, and jumps with beats.

### **How do you inspire and motivate students?**

Sometimes I use games in class to motivate students. For example, I will divide the class in half and challenge them to see which group performs the exercise better. The children love it. I also use a game like "Simon Says" but change it to "Theresa Says" do this, do that, etc.... to practice memorization and vocabulary. It works! Children love games. I also use a little friendly competition in class, I stand the students in order of ability. Who focused the best today? OK, then you stand in the front line! They like to be at the top, so they work harder. I award stickers for trivia questions on ballet history and classical music. I also hand out little awards for perfect attendance. I have also found that when properly taught, the students see and appreciate their own advancement, that visible success in mastering some step or aspect of training provides the internal motivation they need and will need in their future dance training and in life in general.



### **What are some of the most important things ballet teachers need to know?**

Ballet teachers need to have PATIENCE!!! That is key in teaching ballet. Many teachers get bored and think their students must be bored as well so they teach at too fast a pace. Some also think that the students will get bored unless the teacher comes up with new combinations for every class. Although that is helpful in the higher levels to prompt the skill needed to remember new choreography, it is counterproductive at the lower levels. Young children crave repetition and will even tell you if you have forgotten something. Exercises should be perfected then carefully morphed to the next in the series. The student's focus on doing the step correctly is far more important at that lower level. This lack of focus on the correctness of the movement or position results in sloppy technique. You can't rush proper technique, it is an excruciatingly slow process. As mentioned above, the students will take pride in their accomplishments if you take the time to point out what steps look like when they are perfected. Help them to build a critical eye and understand what correct ballet should look like.

### **Favorite composers?**

I love Frederic Chopin, the Polish composer and virtuoso pianist. I also love the great Russian composer Alexander Glazunov. Of course Mozart, Tchaikovsky, the three B's, there are just too many.

### **What's your favorite piece of music?**

Oh, it's The Classical Symphony by Sergei Prokofiev, composed in 1917. The piece has such effervescent energy.

### **Who is your favorite choreographer?**

I know that this makes me somewhat 'old fashioned', but I especially love Marius Petipa. He was a French ballet dancer, teacher, and choreographer in the 1800's. He spent most of his career in St. Petersburg, Russia. Petipa is considered to be the most influential ballet master and choreographer in ballet history.

### **What do you do to get away from the stress?**

I enjoy reading historical fiction, color and play solitaire on my phone. I also knit scarves, and I've made over 40 for my students and family members. I have been fortunate to travel abroad to Portugal, England and China with my husband. We have formed amazing memories and take smaller trips to visit family or just get away to the beach or somewhere different. When I need to unwind I'll put on my pajamas, relax and watch a movie in a big chair with my husband, cat nearby.

