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CITY CENTER BALLET OF SAN JOSE

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TABLE of CONTENTS

1. Preface	p. i
2. Essay	p. 1
3. Appendix I	p. 17
4. Primary Sources	p. 19
5. Articles in Newspapers	p. 20
6. Other Sources	p. 21

PREFACE

San Jose, in a quest for its own cultural attraction, has seen the rise and fall of a professional ballet company, the City Center Ballet. When reflected upon, it is incomprehensible that two years of work by dozens of dedicated San Jose citizens peaked and failed in one twenty-two minute performance, Silicon 7.

As a dancer for C.C.B., I as well as all of San Jose saw only the superficial, publicity side of the deterioration of the company. Through my close contacts with Georgina and Nejdeh Bahramian, the co-Artistic Directors of C.C.B., I learned that there was more to the story than what the public had been told. In 1986, I tackled the scandal and searched for the truth of the downfall of C.C.B. The findings of my endeavors lie in the following pages - lack of communication, mistrust, and misunderstandings.

It appears as if San Jose will never be capable of supporting its own ballet company. Presently, the Cleveland Ballet is being imported for San Jose audiences, with San Jose's financial backing. This is not truly what can be called a San Jose ballet company. There once was one, and the story of that company is in the following pages.

In the past few years, San Jose has implemented various constructional and cultural programs with the intent of allowing San Jose to truly become a city. The first attempt at enlarging San Jose's arts circle was the forming of the San Jose City Ballet Company.

When the instigators, Nejdeh and Georgina Bahramian, arrived in America, they believed that this was merely a dream which could not be fulfilled for many years. The two former dancers of the Iranian National Ballet (pre-Khomeni)¹ were forced to leave Iran. They made a short stop in London, England to visit Georgina's parents and then arrived in San Jose. Georgina had a distant cousin whom she had never met who vouched for the couple and their daughter, Vivian. They had no intention of building a ballet company at the time because...

"...it's a lot more than it appears in the beginning...to get financial backing would not be all that easy."

Instead of attempting to start a full fledged ballet company, the couple started with an essential basic and opened a ballet school, Saratoga Dance, after being persuaded by family and newly found friends.²

Through Georgina's adult exercise program at the school, she became friends with one of her students, Elaine Houser-Shussett. At a birthday celebration for Georgina in September, 1982, the two began

1. See Appendix I, Occupational Background.

2. Interview with Georgina T. Bahramian, former Artistic Director of City Center Ballet, San Jose, California, March 12, 1986.

discussing a performing arts center that Georgina had wanted to establish, one that would be similar to the Arts Educational Trust in London. This is where Georgina had received her formal dance training. The school also offers drama, vocal, instrumental, and theory classes as well as academics. Hauser-Shussett felt that while a performing arts school would be nice, financial backers of San Jose would be more receptive to a professional company. She suggested that they begin a company also because "...there was nothing of a stimulating nature for the dance world in San Jose."³

The three, the Bahramians and Hauser-Shussett, contacted Ted Climis, Vice President in Charge of Development at IBM and the father of one of Georgina's advanced students. The four joined forces, Climis' contacts in the business/financial circle, Hauser-Shussett's organizational abilities,⁴ and the Bahramians' contacts in the dance world, and founded the San Jose City Ballet Company.

In November, 1982, the group publicly announced that auditions for dancers would be held the following month. The United Cerebral Palsy Association promised to support the new company, but on November 29, the U.C.P.A. informed the S.J.C.B.C. that it would, "...be unable to participate in the benefit performance (because) U.C.P.A. has committed to a heavy schedule of involvements."⁵ Regardless, the audi-

3. Interview with Elaine Hauser-Shussett, co-founder of the City Center Ballet, San Jose, California, April 14, 1986.

4. Hauser-Shussett Interview. She had attempted to start a theater company in Cleveland, Ohio, but the venture was unsuccessful.

5. Letter from James Walker, Vice President of Finance for United Cerebral Palsy Association, to Hauser-Shussett, original in possession of Georgina Bahramian, San Jose, California, November 29, 1982.

tions took place and dancers were selected to possibly be members of the company at a future date.⁶

The four founders held a series of meetings in January, 1983 to try and gain financial and moral support from community leaders. Karen Loewenstern⁷ was recommended to them as a lover of the ballet with a go-getter personality. She attended the early January meeting, and immediately following the presentation, the Bahramians approached Loewenstern and asked for her involvement with S.J.C.B.C. She agreed and became a member of the Board of Directors. The Board was formed, largely, by those in attendance of the early January meeting.⁸

The Board met on a monthly basis to set up the by-laws for the new company. The "...staged its (S.J.C.B.C.'s) first social/fund-raising event - a banquet and fashion show at Fung Lum restaurant."⁹ Unfortunately, the fund-raiser fell far short of the projected figures and, "actually netted a little over \$500," said Pallas Hansen,¹⁰ special events co-ordinator for the company.¹¹

The monthly Board meetings continued and in June, 1983, officers were elected. Loewenstern was elected President of the Board of Directors. The Board received notification that the name of the company

6. Bahramian Interview.

7. See Appendix I.

8. Interview with Karen Loewenstern, President of the San Jose-Cleveland Ballet Company, Saratoga, California, March 28, 1986.

9. San Jose Mercury News, February 20, 1983, no page.

10. See Appendix I.

11. Interview with Pallas Hansen, former special events co-ordinator for City Center Ballet, San Jose, California, April 9, 1986.

must be changed because another studio was presently using the name. So, after days of deliberation, the company emerged as the City Center Ballet of San Jose. The company also set an unannounced goal of premiering in October, 1984.¹²

In June, 1983, the volunteer auxiliary was formed. The title given to the non-profit public benefit corporation was Volunteers in Vital Action. VIVA's purpose was to "...develop and advance the art of ballet in all its forms...and to produce, direct and to finance all ...performances."¹³

Leonid and Valentina Kozlov, the then-recent defectors from the Bolshoi Ballet,¹⁴ were contracted to do a benefit performance for the Alexian Brothers Hospital Foundation. This would be the last of many performances on their tour before returning to New York City Ballet to finish dancing the season as principals with the company. The administration of C.C.B. saw this as a perfect opportunity to increase public awareness of the fledgling new company.¹⁵

The Kozlovs chose several of Georgina's students to participate in the performance as the corps de ballet¹⁶ for their Swan Lake pas de deux,¹⁷

12. Bahramian Interview.

13. By-laws of VIVA - CCB, San Jose, California, 1983, Article II.

14. Pamela Jablons, "The Kozlovs Step In," Dancemagazine," (September, 1983), p. 241.

15. Hansen Interview.

16. The French translation is "body of ballet." The corps comprises the background dancers.

17. The French translation is "step of two." A male and a female dance together to form the highlight of the ballet performance.

which was strictly an excerpt from the full-length ballet. C.C.B. did all that was possible to accommodate the Kozlovs. C.C.B. capitalized on the arrival of the stars by staging a welcome party at Vallco Fashion Park on October 30 with student performances and a presentation of flowers to Valentina.¹⁸

The following day, October 31, the performance took place at the Center for the Performing Arts (C.P.A.). C.C.B. hosted "...an elegant cocktail party at the pacific Valley Bank before the performance."¹⁹ The performance was a success to both the Alexian Brothers Hospital Foundation and C.C.B. The hospital received a sizable contribution for their foundation, and C.C.B. publicly announced that their premiere would take place the following year on the same date and at the same place, the C.P.A.²⁰

First, current problems had to be dealt with and Loewenstern needed help with managing the financial areas of the company. The Board decided to hire a General Manager to aid Loewenstern. Ernie Spadafore, "...was someone who had ingratiated himself into Karen's heart and made himself quite indispensable...(he) wanted the position of General Manager." Hauser-Shussett was fearful that Loewenstern might offer Spadafore the position because Hauser-Shussett claimed that he was little more than a leech, and he knew nothing about ballet.²¹ Hauser-Shussett,

18. Bahramian Interview.

19. The invitation to the cocktail party from Karen Loewenstern, September 12, 1983.

20. Loewenstern Interview.

21. Hauser-Shussett Interview.

hoping to save C.C.B. from the ignorance of Spadafore, called Dr. Richard La Blond, former President of the San Francisco Ballet Company, for a recommendation of an available business manager who could be hired as General Manager of C.C.B. Dr. La Blond recommended Henry Holth,²² former President and General Manager of the Dallas Ballet Association, Inc.²³

Holth was interviewed by all persons associated with the C.C.B., the Board, Artistic Directors and Hauser-Shussett, and everyone was very pleased with him, but "I think he was hired out of desperation. He was strong. He was determined."²⁴ Holth was hired by the Board on the basis of his immediate availability and extensive experience in managing arts organizations.²⁵ Holth submitted his letter of employment agreement in which he declared that his title was to be President and General Manager,²⁶ and he requested a salary structure.^{27,28} He accepted a \$45,000 annual salary with an added bonus and incentive program. If he produced a total budgeted income of \$1,200,000 for the first year for C.C.B., he would receive a \$15,000 bonus.²⁹

The company worked diligently for the next eight months toward

22. See Appendix I.

23. Loewenstern Interview.

24. Bahramian Interview.

25. See Appendix I.

26. Loewenstern had been serving as President until now. The original idea was to hire a General Manager, not both.

27. Salaries had not been introduced until now.

28. Bahramian Interview.

29. Letter of employment agreement to Karen Loewenstern and the Board of Directors from Henry Holth, February 21, 1984.

the common goal of premiering C.C.B. in October, 1984. The company had a fully formed administration but still lacked on key element ...dancers. This topic caused a major dispute among the organization because Holth and the Bahramians took diabolically opposing view points regarding the topic. The entire organization was forced to choose between the two philosophies, one led by Holth and the other led by the Bahramians.³⁰

The Bahramians first intended this company to employ local talent, i.e., local dancers, choreographers, lighting and musical directors and import principal dancers whom they had worked with in Iran. Many of these dancers were working with major American and European ballet companies; Berlin Opera Ballet, Pittsburg Ballet, and Festival Ballet in London.³¹ Local dancers could then audition to become apprentices, members of the corps de ballet, or soloists.^{32,33}

Holth believed this idea to be too expensive. He said that there was a short-term advantage that the San Jose audience would see good quality dancers only a few performances per season. They would not have a constant schedule with C.C.B. because of other commitments throughout the season and could not perform exclusively with C.C.B. Holth was convinced that the Bahramians' proposal had "...a long-run flaw -

30. Interview with Susan Craven, volunteer for City Center Ballet's auxiliary, San Jose, California, May 15, 1986.

31. Proposal to the Board of Trustees made by the Bahramians regarding the Spring Performance season, December 17, 1984.

32. Bahramian Interview.

33. The levels of dancers for a ballet company are (from bottom to top): apprentice, corps de ballet, soloist, principal.

what comes next?" Holth proposed that C.C.B. select another city's company with whom to collaborate. The seasons would then be shared by the two cities.³⁴

Each of the parties presented their proposals to the Board, and the battle began.

Hauser-Shussett took this opportunity to back out of the administration and the various artistic problems of the company. She no longer wanted full-time involvement because "...it was like my baby, I'd nurtured it...now I wanted to be the mother hen," and stay abreast of what was going on, without any commitments. Essentially, she was there as a consultant if anyone needed her advice. Hauser-Shussett felt content to sit back and overlook the progress that the company was making.³⁵

The Board of Trustees³⁶ opted to agree with Holth's proposal for a collaboration. This decision was based largely on economic reasoning and Holth's belief that "it would take twenty years to build a company with local talent."³⁷ On the other hand, many of the VIVA members believed that "...she (Georgina) and Nejdeh...have been left on the 'back burner',...(and) the treatment that both of these artists have received from the Board is deplorable."³⁸ Many of the volunteers believed in

34. Interview with Henry Holth, former President and General Manager of City Center Ballet, El Paso, Texas, June 5, 1986.

35. Hauser-Shussett Interview.

36. The Board changed its name from Board of Directors to Board of Trustees.

37. Bahramian Interview.

38. Letter to Henry Holth and Board members from Lynne Bell, VIVA member, June 11, 1984.

the Bahramians' ideas of a locally built ballet company.

The struggle for ultimate artistic power continued. Holth eventually won the battle by gaining the full support from the Board and Loewenstern because "...he was witty and eloquent, but could twist their (the Bahramians') words to make them appear like idiots...and he succeeded."³⁹ Holth was given the right to collaborate with another city's company without the Bahramians' consent.⁴⁰ Holth selected the Los Angeles Ballet under the artistic direction of John Clifford.

Georgina was sent to Santa Barbara to watch a performance given by the L.A.B. to evaluate the quality of the dancers. "Of course, they (the Board and Holth) had to have my permission...I can remember coming back and saying they weren't wonderful," said Georgina. However, C.C.B. still collaborated with L.A.B. "He had already...made up his mind as to the..ballet company and repertory he wanted."⁴¹ C.C.B. neglected to investigate one very important factor about L.A.B. - their financial status. "The organization...had money problems,"⁴² and C.C.B. wrongly did not delve into the situation.⁴³

The premiere was scheduled to include both L.A.B. dancers and repertory. The program included George Balanchine's Serenade, a modern

39. Hauser-Shussett Interview.

40. "An Ununiformed Board is a Weak Board," speech made by Georgina and Nejdeh Bahramian at the November, 1984 meeting. Original in the Bahramians' possession, San Jose, California.

41. Bahramian Interview.

42. Los Angeles Times, June 3, 1984, p.47.

43. Loewenstern Interview.

classic; a pas de deux from Don Quixote; a contemporary ballet choreographed by John Clifford, Charleston; and a world premiere ballet choreographed by Georgina, Silicon 7.⁴⁴ This would comprise the series of four performances on October 27 and 28.

In Silicon 7, Georgina attempted to recreate "...the life and activity and vitality of Silicon Valley." It was publicized that the twenty-two minute ballet was created by Georgina, but in fact, Holth proposed the theme and tried to persuade Georgina to use...

"...a piece of scratchy music with no melody or rhythm - violin bows pulled across cardboard..."

Georgina, not wanting her name associated with anything so unartistic,⁴⁵ discovered Allen Strange, a local composer, whose composition "Vasona Park" was adapted and became the music Silicon 7.⁴⁶ In Holth's desire to impose his will upon C.C.B., he personally selected the costume, lighting and set designers and also strongly requested the exclusive use of L.A.B. dancers. Georgina opposed this idea and insisted on using at least two local dancers. She chose two students from her advanced ballet class at her studio, Jennifer Lock and Robyn Sadler. The ballet received the name, Silicon 7, because seven dancers performed it - five from L.A.B. and the two from San Jose. Georgina originally requested all principal dancers from L.A.B., but when she notified Holth of her selection, the dancers immediately became unavailable.⁴⁷

44. City Center Ballet Program, October, 1984.

45. Personal letter to Paul Hertelendy, San Jose Mercury News, from Georgina Bahramian, October 31, 1984.

46. San Jose Mercury News, October 26, 1984, p.10.

47. Bahramian Interview.

Georgina told Clifford and Holth that she wanted to begin rehearsing Silicon 7 in July, 1984. She was informed that L.A.B. was busy rehearsing for their performances at the Olympic festivities; when these were cancelled due to financial difficulties, L.A.B. was engaged for a modeling job in Japan. They returned on October 8, 1984, only two and one-half weeks prior to the premiere performance. The L.A.B. dancers were tired, out of shape, and "...extremely unwilling and suspicious of starting a new work in such a short time." So, rehearsals for Silicon 7 began on October 10 with all of the odds against producing a decent performance.⁴⁸

That was merely the tip of the iceberg. In San Jose, Georgina requested forty-two hours of rehearsal time for Silicon 7 but was promised only thirty. There was one contingency - the rehearsals had to be conducted in Los Angeles.⁴⁹ Upon arriving in Los Angeles, the three San Joseans (Georgina and her two students) discovered, without any notification, that L.A.B. had been evicted from its facilities⁵⁰ and was renting studio space from a local ballet school. The space was less than desirable. Half of the space was occupied by stage sets and there was no sound system. Fortunately, Georgina carried a small cassette player with her which the dancers and director were forced to use. To add insult to injury, the three San Joseans were forced to room together in a third-rate, cockroach-infested motel. They returned to

48. Letter to Hertelendy from Bahramian.

49. "An Ununiformed Board Is a Weak Board."

50. L.A. Life, Daily News, May 6, 1984, p.32.

Los Angeles the following weekend to the same conditions, and when they returned home to San Jose, only sixteen hours of the thirty promised rehearsal time had been completed,⁵¹ and the performance only three days away.⁵²

Meanwhile, there were drastic changes in plans for the premiere going on in San Jose. The change in management of the San Jose Symphony complicated the verbal agreement made between the orchestra and the company. The Symphony's new general manager offered C.C.B. terms that were extremely different from the previous negotiations. C.C.B. employed the San Francisco Ballet Orchestra to perform for the premiere.⁵³ "Because of financial problems in Los Angeles, their Board decided not to produce a season there," and the scheduled performances for October 27 and 28 at the C.P.A. were canceled.⁵⁴

L.A.B. arrived in San Jose on October 24 to an elaborate welcome party thrown by C.C.B. and their three-night stay at the St. Claire Hilton Hotel.⁵⁰ On October 25, technical rehearsals were conducted at the C.P.A.⁵⁶

It appeared that Silicon 7 was destined to be unsuccessful. The sets for the ballet were supposed to resemble computer chip leade frames, as

51. The accepted norm for a new ballet is two rehearsal hours per one performance minute.

52. Interview with Jennifer Lock, local ballet dancer, Cupertino, California, April 10, 1986.

53. Press release, "Orchestra Change for City Center Ballet," October 18, 1986.

54. Letter from Karen Loewenstern to City Center Ballet subscribers, October 18, 1984.

55. Bahramian Interview.

56. San Jose Master Schedule, given to Los Angeles Ballet by City Center Ballet.

were the costumes - they did not. The sets were simply huge pieces of netting with gold cellophane geometrically placed on them. The costumes were supposed to have metallic gold and fluorescent patterns on them so that when the black spot lights shown on them it created a visual lighting effect. Neither item was put on the costumes by the costume designer, therefore allowing for very little visual effect. The lighting director refused to do the special effects lighting to Georgina's specification,⁵⁷ but when Holth asked for an adjustment to be made it was done immediately.⁵⁸

The day of the performance arrived and final rehearsals were conducted at the C.P.A. The morale of the L.A.B. dancers was low because this was to be their final performance together.⁵⁹ The company was forced to disband because of financial difficulties. The Bahramians' morale was low because the premiere was far from what they had originally envisioned.⁶⁰

Financial problems seemed to be lurking over C.C.B. because the house for the C.P.A. was not sold out for the premiere. Three hundred tickets were given away. This stemmed partly from lack of community support because Bay Area citizens did not want to support anything but local talent, on a regular basis.⁶¹ Instead, they saw L.A.B. with the name of City Center Ballet glued onto it. Another problem with com-

57. Bahramian Interview.

58. Hauser-Shussett Interview.

59. Lock Interview.

60. "An Ununiformed Board Is a Weak Board."

61. Lock Interview.

munity support is that northern Californians and southern Californians have feuded for many decades.⁶² The final and most significant factor is the lack of support for C.C.B. was its insufficient publicity.⁶³ If the two local dancers had been emphasized to the public, it might have remedied the first problem. Many members of the ballet community did not even know that any local talent was involved in C.C.B.'s premiere.

L.A.B.'s sections of the performance were reviewed as "...a dazzling Serenade," "...a Don Quixote...looked professional...proficient," and "...a sassy, gorgeous and glitzy Charleston." The audience fell in love with L.A.B. as did all of the ballet critics. On the other hand, Silicon 7 was far less pleasing to them. The audience found it "...badly in need of structure."⁶⁴ Unfortunately, they did not realize that its failure was largely because of uncooperative dancers and crew members and little support from the Board.

The gala party, held at the ROLM Business Center, which followed the show was much more successful than the performance. The general attitude of all who attended was the L.A.B. and Clifford were fantastic. Loewenstern and Holth attempted to introduce the Bahramians and Clifford as co-Artistic Directors, but the press' main focus was on Clifford because his ballets and dancers dominated the performance. The

62. This tradition is well-known among native Californians.

63. "General Statement of Purpose," given by Georgina and Nejdeh Bahramian at the November 15, 1984 Board meeting.

64. San Jose Mercury News, November 1, 1984, (no page).

Bahramians received little attention except for criticism of their ballet.

C.C.B. had publicized a set of performances for the Spring, to be held at Villa Montalvo in Saratoga. Setting this as their main goal, they began planning for the performances at the Board of Trustees meeting on November 15, 1984. First, the Bahramians voiced their opinions about the premiere. They were, "...appalled and at times, devastated with the handling of the world premiere..." The largest factor being that the Board completely supported Holth taking artistic control away from the Artistic Directors by assigning them Silicon 7, thus allowing little creative expression.⁶⁵ The discussion about the handling of the Villa Montalvo performances was postponed to the December 18 Board meeting.

The Bahramians were asked to submit a proposal for the performance series. Loewenstern and the Board expected a plan explaining how the Bahramians could work with a collaboration.⁶⁶ Instead, the Bahramians submitted a proposal for the performance series which went back to their original conception of local dancers and imported principal dancers. Every aspect of the budget was covered and the grand total for the cost of the performance was thirty-five thousand dollars (\$2,000 less that Holth's collaboration proposal).⁶⁷ "...before we even walked into the board room, it was decided" that the proposal would not be accepted. Loewenstern asked if she could meet with the Bahramians immediately following the meeting. She and three Board members met with the

65. "An Ununiformed Board Is a Weak Board."

66. Loewenstern Interview.

67. Recommendation for May, 1985, Performance Schedule at Villa Montalvo, December 28, 1984.

Bahramians and told them than⁶⁸ "...there was nothing at all that indicated that there could be a team work effort." C.C.B. no longer wanted to import dancers, but they wanted to import an entire company, and there was no place for the Bahramians in the future of C.C.B.⁶⁹

C.C.B. promptly went to work seeking a ballet company with whom to collaborate. In 1985, Loewenstern, who remains President, selected the Cleveland Ballet Company, now the San Jose - Cleveland Ballet. The company premiered a critically successful season in 1987 under the artistic direction of Dennis Nahat and appears to have a bright future in the Bay Area ballet circle.⁷⁰

Holth no longer works with the company because he wanted to return to Texas and "...with the apparent successful relationship with C.C.B. and Cleveland," there was no challenge.⁷¹

The Bahramians have fallen out of the ballet world. After several years, they still have a feeling resentment and bitterness toward the political intrigue which shattered their dream. "Perhaps one day we shall find an area that supports our ideas." Until that time, Nejdeh remains at his position with an electronics firm, and Georgina has returned to school to work toward a Business Degree.⁷²

68. Bahramian Interview.

69. Loewenstern Interview.

70. Loewenstern Interview.

71. Holth Interview.

72. Interview with Georgina Bahramian, former Artistic Director of City Center Ballet, San Jose, California, February 18, 1987.

APPENDIX I

Georgina T. Bahramian:

Trained at the Arts Educational Trust School in London, England
Soloist with the Iranian National Ballet
Director of Saratoga Dance
Artistic Director of City Center Ballet of San Jose

Nejdeh Bahramian:

Member of Iranian Folklore Group
Lead dancer with Iranian National Ballet
Co-Artistic Director of City Center Ballet of San Jose

Henry Holth:

General Manager of Boston Ballet
Managing Director of Houston Ballet Foundation
Director of Programs Development for the Society for the Performing Arts
President and General Manager of Dallas Ballet Association, Inc.
Development Director for Theatre Under the Stars
President and General Manager for City Center Ballet of San Jose

Karen Loewenstern:

Auxiliary member of several women's auxiliaries in Washington, D.C.
President of City Center Ballet of San Jose
Chairperson of the Board of Trustees of City Center Ballet of San Jose
President of San Jose - Cleveland Ballet

Pallas Hansen:

Designer and Manager of the video library in the Tokyo American Club
Crisis Counselor for Tokyo English Lifeline
Volunteer for City Center Ballet of San Jose
Fundraiser and Special Events Coordinator for City Center Ballet of San Jose

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12. Pallas Hansen, interview with fundraising coordinator, San Jose, California, April 9, 1986
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*NOTE: All interview tapes are in possession of the author,
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