

Interviewer's Introduction, Gary Bates Oral History

Gary was a storyteller, captivating, exhilarating, and inspiring to all who were lucky enough to study with him, dance with him, and be a part of his life. In this spirit, it feels right to have this introduction follow a storytelling format of how this oral history came into existence. In these interview sessions, the reader will be carried on a wonderful visual and kinesthetic journey that is Gary K. Bates' life, full of color, detailed descriptions of the Los Angeles dance scene during the 1960s, what it was like to study with some of great teachers of that time, as well as his own personal struggles of deciding between continuing his dance studies and eating one bowl of oatmeal a day versus quitting dance to get a job that allowed him to eat and house himself. So with no further ado, here's the "story" of how this oral history got created.

It was August of 1991 at Santa Monica College (SMC) in California. Gary was assigned to teach a beginning choreography class for both the fall and spring semesters. He had previously taught two summer sessions at SMC that went very well, and the chair of the Department of Dance, Linda Gold, felt he was ready for the larger commitment of a two-semester class. The class was set to start at 2:00pm. There were about 20 students waiting in the hall of the physical education building. (At that time, the dance department consisted of two dance studios housed within the physical education building, as many community college dance departments are.) The hallway was unlit, long, and dark. We all sat in silence, waiting, listening to the intermittent squeak of the basketball players' sneakers and the ball dribbling the next hall over. As the time ticked on, more and more students left. The shadows grew long, and the time was around 2:30pm. There were 3 of us left. The two other students introduced themselves to me. I had seen them around the dance department and they were very friendly. "Hi, my name is Diane Takamine, what's yours?" I introduced myself as Nina Kaufman. She had taken Gary's summer class and couldn't speak highly enough about what an amazing, engaging teacher he was. The other woman introduced herself, "My name is Marianne Kirk". She too very eloquently stated Gary was 'worth the wait.' And we all three agreed to wait until 3:00pm. Little did I know that these two women would eventually become colleagues, collaborators, and creative partners beyond this class as we continued our dance careers.

At 3:00pm sharp we saw a dark silhouette making his way through the south doors about 500 feet away from us. We instantly knew who it was. His shoes made a hard clack sound with each swaggering step, and I noticed he had an exaggeratedly puffed-out chest to exude a sense of confidence that might actually be lacking. As he got closer we could see he was wearing worn cowboy boots, a flannel shirt, and faded jeans. I thought to myself, "Who wears this in Los Angeles, in the heat of summer? He looks like he just came from a farm in Idaho." We all stood up to greet him. His first words were, "Where is everybody?" He was shocked and surprised just three students had shown up. He had no idea he was an hour late yet. Marianne gently let him know that there were about 20 students here earlier and that class was supposed to start at 2:00pm. We had decided to wait the hour, in case there was a mistake. We saw the color drain from Gary's face, his jaw drop, and his hands fly up to his face, the puff in his chest deflated and hollowed. "I'm so sorry...I swore the class started at three. I planned out the route on the bus all ahead of time to make sure I would get here on time. It takes an hour and a half by bus for me to get here. I can't believe it." He sunk down and sat on the hallway floor. "I guess it's no use opening the classroom door, we'll just have class here." It took a while for him to get over the

shock of his miscalculating the time and being worried that he'd be fired by Linda Gold. We all assured him that she'd give him another chance; it was an honest mistake. Most of what I remember about that first class really was my opportunity to see a teacher as a vulnerable human being. I was used to being around teachers that buffered themselves with assistants and were "untouchable" at the music conservatory. This experience left a lasting impression on me.

As the semester went on and I signed up for the following spring semester, I was learning far more than dance from Gary. I had come to SMC as a 21-year-old student in 1989 at the urging of a psychologist to "find something that I liked," after I dropped out of an East Coast music conservatory for flute performance after suffering a serious bout of depression. I had been "dancing" for 2 years when I entered Gary's class. I had no intention of being a dancer. Having suffered from PTSD from a traumatic background, dance was accessing things I couldn't access in talk therapy. Gary somehow understood this and allowed space for this to be expressed in his class with unformed, ugly movements, not trying to ask for me to "shape" it in any way to make it "pretty." He saw the rawness and power in the movement and that the movement simply needed to come out of my body for these other reasons. He lived very far from the school and in the direction that I was driving home after class. So I offered him a ride home, and he accepted. We never spoke of my background. He spoke of his life, and he would obliquely mention how he appreciated the honesty and rawness with which I moved. Somehow there was a likeness and connection that he appreciated and saw in my work. Those conversations piqued my interest. There was so much richness in how he talked about dance, about the history of dance in Los Angeles when he was a young person studying, like myself, seeking out mentors. How he was "finding his truth," as I was finding mine at the time.

An opportunity came up to continue studying dance with a mentor after his class ended in 1992, with Marion Scott at SMC. She handpicked 3-4 students to mentor one-on-one for a year. I knew, and so did Gary, that likely I would not continue my study of dance past his class without this kind of support. I remember him advocating in the hallway one time with Marion to take me on. She was ambivalent and didn't feel I was ready. Gary and Marion had a "love-hate" relationship that went way back to his days at UCLA when he was a student and she was a professor. At times they spoke, and other times, they didn't. But I remember his passion about getting me into her class. And it worked: Marion took the chance, and continued the work Gary started, helping me to refine the rawness into dance. If it hadn't been for Gary, I would not have continued. And this is actually very important, because this oral history would never have been written, and a very important piece of Los Angeles dance history would have been lost. I would never have applied to be a dance student at UCLA, earning both a BA and MFA in dance (when I wrote this oral history in 1994). I would never have gone on to become a somatic therapist and physical therapist. I would not have gone on to specialize in working with patients with PTSD, using movement as a healing modality. I would not now be presenting research on the efficacy of movement with these populations at conferences if it hadn't been for Gary K. Bates, all those years ago.

- *Nina Kaufman, November 2018*