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An Interview with Hal de Becker

An Oral History Conducted by Nancy Hardy

The Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project

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LAS VEGAS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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Hal de Becker 6-23-03
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Preface

Hal de Becker traveled the world doing what he loved: dancing. He was the product of a theatrical family that moved to Southern California allowing him to grow up with the Hollywood sign in the background. After acting in small roles, he fell in love first with classical music and then with ballet. He appreciated beauty in those art forms as well as in the physical scenery of Switzerland, France, Palm Springs, Italy, Holland, and other exquisite places around the globe where he danced.

De Becker worked on stages from Lake Tahoe where he opened for Nat King Cole to a Casino Campione in the Italian Alps becoming the talk of the town and finally to the hotels of the Las Vegas Strip. As he reminisced through the years of his fascinating life, we learned that the great ballet dancers never stop practicing, always aiming for perfection. When this interview was conducted, he owned a dance studio where other dancers could go to achieve the greatness that Hal attained during his long career.

Some of the funny stories of De Becker's life come from the other side of his personality, the private detective. Educated, urbane, and sophisticated, Hal De Becker is indeed a man for all seasons and a lover of the dance art form. Shall we dance?

Today is June 23, 2003, and I am at the home of Hal de Becker in central Las Vegas.

The release form has been read and it has been signed.

Hello, Nancy.

I'd like to begin today by having you tell something about your early life; where you were born and when, and something about your childhood.

I was born in New York City in the 1930s, to a family of theatrical people. My father and mother, their parents, were all in the theater and all active on the Broadway stage. So that's what I went into, of course. They took me into it first, and I was carried on at six months old into a production of a Lehar operetta [Franz Lehar wrote six operettas], I forget the name. Then I was about six and I started acting in Broadway shows, and I worked with Ingrid Bergman and Burgess Meredith and Elia Kazan.

What are your memories of working with those actors?

I remember *Lillian* was one of the plays I was in. I was a little boy, and there was a scene where *Lillian* has the choice to go into the blue light in the wing, which is heaven, or the red light, which is hell, and I used to stand in the rings and be scared to death every time that red light came on and he went forward in there. It was kind of frightening. And also in there was the man who became the husband of Burgess Meredith and Elia Kazan, one of her husbands. I was supposed to bite my nails as a little child, and he would slap my hand to tell me not to in the family scene, and one day I just pulled back. I reacted and pulled back, and he missed me and fell over on the stage, and I got in trouble for not taking the slap. But there were a number of plays. When I was about ten years old, I came to Hollywood with my family.

Were you aware at the time how different a lifestyle and environment you were growing up in?

Yes, because I'd been to public school and then had gone to the Professional Children's School in New York, which was sort of cloistered and elite in a way, and different.

How did your parents encourage you to act? Were they pushing you?

There wasn't, it just was automatic. I grew to dislike it as a teenager, but it was automatic, and I just took it in stride.

Why was it that you ended up moving to Hollywood?

Not enough work in the theater in New York. So a lot of my family, my grandmother and my aunt, had already gone to Hollywood and were making movies. And gradually, the rest of us did, too. There was a big use of English. There was an English family, and I remember they used a lot of English actors at that time, the Second World War was imminent, and so there's a lot of work for English actors.

Did your parents get work right away doing films?

Yeah, I think rather quickly. My mother was in a number of films and my father was in most of the Sherlock Holmes movies with Basil Rathbone.

What was your father's name?

Harold de Becker.

And did your parents get you involved in film work right away as well?

Mm-hmm. They went to an agent, and I did dialects and things at that time, because the English or whatever was needed. We made the same movies together sometimes, and I used to be very disappointed as a child that I wouldn't see my dad or my mother on the

same film. But I thought, oh, we're going to work together in the same scene or something, but it never worked out that way.

How was it that you got the parts that you did in the films? Did you have to go through an audition process?

Oh, yes. The agent would – Lola was her first name, she was an agent for children, and she'd just take us, collect us all, half a dozen kids, and go out there for the interview.

Did you have rather a competitive spirit about that?

No. No, and I was sensitive to the rejection, which was most [of the times]. Only because my family was in somewhat desperate straits financially, and so the anticipation on their faces when I'd come out, and then if it was no, the face would drop. And I'd be aware of that disappointment. They never blamed me or did anything like that, but I could just sense the disappointment and I felt badly about it.

And during this time you were also attending school, public school?

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Did you enjoy it? Did you do well in school?

No. No, I didn't do well at all.

There were no subjects that intrigued you?

Oh, yes, subjects and teachers. But overall, no. I didn't like school.

When did you become involved in dancing?

When I was about eleven I took up gymnastics, and continued with that when I was at Hollywood High School. I was a city champion in gymnastics in my high school days. And then I quite high school early and joined an aerial act using the gymnastic abilities; only 110 feet in the air. There was no net or safety device of any kind. And I did that for

about a year. And then when I came back, it was after that that I got interested in ballet. And I was a late start, but the gymnastics helped me, of course. I just had a natural talent for it. I was coordinated and flexible.

You were physically inclined.

Yeah.

How did that transition come about, from the gymnastics to the dancing? Was it ballet ---?

Yeah, I went to a performance of I think it was the London Festival Ballet in Los Angeles. I was dragged to it because I had no interest in it, and a lady took me. And I was just spellbound, just awestruck. And I knew nothing about ballet, but I just came out of there. I had smoked at that time. I quit smoking so I could save money to pay for ballet lessons. And I quit eating lunch so I could pay for dance lessons. I was carried away by what I saw.

So you were motivated to study ballet at several different schools in the Los Angeles area?

Yes, uh-huh. I studied with everybody eventually, all the great teachers. Kosmovska, Panaieff, Nijinska, just on and on. All those white Russians who were based in Los Angeles at that time. Lichine, Riabouchinska, all of them. So I finally made it to all of them.

What was life like in Hollywood and Los Angeles at that time?

Just wonderful. I mean I have only the best memories. Particularly the early memories of childhood. I mean the things... I came from New York, and we lived a bicycle ride from the base of the Hollywood Hills. And the Hollywood land sign, if you're familiar with

Hollywood, there's a big sign. And I would take my bike and I'd hike up, as a little kid, through all the trails and things. No smog. And just spend whole days by myself up there. Not overnight, but I mean up and down, home and back. And my parents never had to worry. They never expressed any concern. "Where are you going?" "Oh, I'm just going hiking." I'd go up into the Hollywood Hills. Could take a bus and a streetcar, go to the beach. I did at 10, 11 years old, by myself, with other pals, same age. Parents didn't have to worry about so many things. Would just give us a couple of nickels for the streetcar and we'd be off. And go down, spend the day at the beach.

Was this during the war? Or after the war?

We moved there in early '41, and of course the war began in earnest in December of '41, the Japanese. And there were air raid warnings and blackouts and all the typical things. It was all kind of exciting.

Do you remember where you were when you first heard about Pearl Harbor?

I remember what house we lived in. I don't remember – I mean, I know exactly where I was when Kennedy was assassinated. I don't remember where it was or what I was doing. I was probably swinging on the rings somewhere in the park, doing gymnastics.

You were completely absorbed in physical activity then, the gymnastics and the ballet dancing.

And music.

Music also.

I had taken to classical music early, about 11 years old, having heard some and again, having that kind of reaction of just wanting to consume all I could get. I bought records, the 78 rpm's before I had a machine to play them on. I'd have a few dollars and I'd go to

a store and I'd see a piece that I wanted and I'd buy it. I had nothing to play it on. Occasionally, a neighbor would let me play it on their machine. And I bought for five dollars, one of those old wind-ups that a lady was selling, some elderly lady was getting rid of it so I could play it on steel needles. And I worked in *Song of Norway* [1944] at that time, about 13 years old, with the entire company of the Balanchine dancers. Tallchief and Freddy Franklin and Leon **Deneli** and all the big stars of that day. They were part of that. And that was all the music of Edvard Grieg, so I heard that all the time. That also inspired my interest in music, too. By the time I was 14, I really knew most of the major composers and could recognize them.

What composers did you most admire?

At that time? The very first piece I heard was Ravel's *Bolero*, and I was in a math class in junior high, and there was a music class across the hall and the melody and the rhythm kept just drifting in through the door, and I couldn't pay any attention to the arithmetic. But from there I went to Stravinsky and Tchaikovsky. Not the middle Europeans, not at that time, not Brahms or Beethoven. Bach I liked at that time. All the major composers.

Did you go to see a lot of movies during that time growing up?

Oh yeah, yeah.

How did those affect you?

Well, yeah, I think they must have had the same effect on all of us that probably television has on youngsters today. I have spoken to friends of mine of my own age, too, and we talk about the influence of movies, the big screen was so enormous. I mean, not like they have now. Huge screens and dark theaters and velvet seats and the curtains that

you'd enter would be heavy velvet curtains as you'd go down the aisle, to keep out the light. And it was all kind of sexy, really, in a way. Sort of secret and very impressive.

It was more of a theatrical experience.

Yeah, and a going out experience, for sure.

How did it feel to see movies that you were in?

You know, I don't know if I ever did. Well, I must have, yeah, come to think of it. I remember seeing myself in a movie called *Kitty* with Paulette Goddard. I was in *National Velvet* and I don't know if I ever saw that as a kid. Movies were expensive and I don't know, I don't really remember – *Hangover Square*, I probably went to see. But I was doing bit parts, so I'd have a line here and a line there, and I'd be on and gone right away. And my pals and things, nobody took much note of that. It was sort of expected. If you lived in Hollywood, there are actors and there are other people, and it was just one of those occupations

Part of what you do. What was it like making *National Velvet*? Did you get to know Elizabeth Taylor very well?

No, oh no. She was so isolated. Mickey Rooney, we got to know. He was funny, he'd come and play with the kids and talk and laugh. He was very friendly. No. I'd see her on the set, but always in an escort of people and surrounded and things, and never got close to her at all. I remember Paulette Goddard. She was Charlie Chaplin's wife. Do you know who Paulette Goddard was? I was in the movie *Kitty*. I was sitting on a high wall. I was probably about 13. And she came by, and she had to bend over and look in the little peep show that somebody had on the street, and she was supposed to be sort of a tart. And I remember I couldn't resist looking down the front of her blouse. (They laugh.) And

she saw me and she smiled and was very – she was kind of pleased, I think, to get the attention. She had plenty of attention, but she liked attention, so...

What happened with your ballet studies and where did that lead you next?

I made rapid progress, and I gradually – I couldn't afford to pay for classes, I must say, and all the teachers gave me free lessons, which I still am grateful for, and I do the same in my own teaching. If someone's out of work or something, I just take them in as a guest and that's all there is to it. I try to pass that on, because people were very generous to me. I was married at the time. I had two children. I went through a divorce then at that time... child support and all, and so I just didn't have any money. And without exception, people were generous teachers. So anyway, I started working in small ballet companies there; for David Lichine, Los Angeles Ballet, and Misha Panaieff's Ballet of Los Angeles. And another one, Southern California Ballet, at the time Joseph Rickard was Artistic Director there. He, incidentally, had formed the first All-Negro Ballet Company. That was the name of it, and that was in the early '50s, I guess, somewhere. So whenever I read about him, it doesn't talk about the company I was in as much as it does about the other one, because that was unique at that time.

How did he manage to find dancers of that caliber?

He trained them himself.

He trained them all.

He found, maybe he'd find one or two here or there that were somewhat trained, and he'd just say, "Bring a friend, bring a friend," and he gradually got himself a company together.

Was there any difficulty with audiences, establishing a –

For him, I don't know, really.

That's remarkable.

I think that company disbanded before he formed the one that I was in, the Southern California Ballet.

Who of all the teacher and mentors you had when you studied and performed with ballet companies in the Los Angeles area, who stands out as being –

Misha Panaieff.

And in what ways?

It's an enormous personality, and big classes, all the movie people would go there. Any visiting ballet company, Ballet Russe or Ballet Theater, or Roland Petit's Ballet from France. They'd all wind up at what was called Panaieff Ballet Center on La Brea near Third. So it was a very thrilling atmosphere for a young, inexperienced dancer to be in class with major stars. Leslie Caron, I remember being there. **Rene Jean Mayer**. George Zorich. Big stars. And he was a nice man. Generous man, a man who liked to dance and dancers, and a very beloved teacher with all dancers who knew him.

What are the marks of a truly –

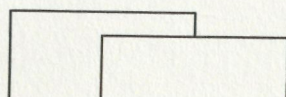
He wasn't the best teacher.

That's what I was going to ask, is what are the marks of an excellent teacher?

He gave a wonderful class.

It was enjoyable to dance?

Wasn't necessarily the best training, yeah. And I don't think he considered himself that way - the best. There were two teachers that stand out to me as the best teachers. One was Michael Brigante, small ballet school, relatively unknown teacher. And the other was



Irina Kosmovska, who was the partner of Riabouchinska after David Lichine died, in their school. And Balanchine discovered her and took her to New York every summer. She taught the classes at New York City Ballet, American Ballet, in New York. She was a great teacher. She turned out many good dancers. Diana – I can't think of her, I danced with her and I can't think of her name – but several big dancers that became soloists with New York City Ballet.

So she was able to impart that technical training?

Yeah. She could take someone from childhood to professionalism, and could guide them and teach them every step of the way, which is a rare thing.

In your opinion, is that possible with everyone, or certain body types only?

I'm not sure I understand.

If you have a master teacher with the ability and knowledge to impart their wisdom to a student, are all students equally able to use that?

Oh no, no.

What is the difference?

Well, the gifts, physical gifts, turnout in the legs and the hips and flexibility for high extensions, well-arched feet that give you spring to jump and get off the floor. And good looks. Slender. Not necessarily so slender, but nicely proportioned, so the legs aren't short and the torso's too long or things like that. And a sense of music, musicality. Sense of theater. Willingness to work hard.

So it takes a combination of things to create a good dancer.

Yes.

After your work with the ballet companies, did you have ambitions to take that farther?

Well, I was teaching then, too. I began teaching at that time. And I married my second wife, who was a ballet dancer. And we put an act together with the help of a lot of people. An adagio act. She would work en pointe, which was unusual at that time. And we worked with Nat King Cole. No, our first job was in Palm Springs, the Chi Chi Club, with a comedian, I think his name was Paul Gilbert. And then we went with Nat King Cole to Lake Tahoe and was the opening act on his show. Was pretty rapid progress, really. We then went to Europe. We just wanted to go to Europe.

What gave you the idea to do this? What was the inspiration –

To go to Europe?

– to put your adagio act together?

We looked very good together, and there wasn't a great deal of work for dancers. And occasionally movie shows or ballet companies, films I mean, and ballet companies. But there wasn't a lot of steady work like there is now. Dancers make a lot of money, they get good salaries. But the nightclub and cabarets and things, the European cabarets, casinos, they paid very well for a dance team. Far more than we could ever have hoped to earn there in ballet. And we're still doing ballet. The whole act was ballet, and we just had some costumes made, and music.

When you worked with Nat King Cole, you opened his act with what, a five-minute adagio?

About that, yeah.

And were there other numbers throughout the show, or you just –

Yeah, we opened the show, was followed by a comedian, and then Nat King Cole.

How long did you work in Lake Tahoe, and how long were you contracted with –

A few weeks, I suppose, you know, short.

Were you doing one or two shows a night, that sort of thing?

No, I think with Nat King Cole, everything was one show a night. Which was unusual.

Usually, one did two shows a night.

That's a fabulous gig.

Yeah, particularly for that time. It was because of him. He probably insisted on just doing one show a night.

What was Lake Tahoe like at that time?

Hot and muggy and humid. And the motel we stayed in did not have air conditioning and we slept in the dressing room on the beautiful plush carpet with air conditioning.

Were you well paid at that time?

Yes. At that time, for that time, we certainly were. That was in the late 1950s, I suppose.

What hotels were in Lake Tahoe?

That was Harrahs. Harrahs Lake Tahoe.

And were there other hotels?

Yes. A lot of places around. That was the biggest and most exclusive at that time up there.

Did you get to know Nat King Cole very well?

Not to know him, but to talk to him and exchange compliments. He was always very nice to us. And he didn't want his... Everybody wanted his picture taken with him, including us, and he only did us. He didn't do the comedian who kept pestering him, and some

other people there. So we had a nice picture with Nat King Cole, which I've still got somewhere.

Tell me about working in Europe at that time.

That was great. Americans were very welcome. American dancers were as though you came from another planet. It was 1961, and we took a boat over and got off at Gibraltar and then down in the south of Spain. Took a train to Madrid and – I had got the names of some agents ahead of time, the big impresarios there. We walked in, called and then came over to the office. I couldn't speak Spanish, he couldn't speak English. But he looked at the pictures and all, and he said, "I have to see a movie or something. Audition." I said, "Well, we don't audition." I was just bluffing. He picked up the phone and called a big nightclub, restaurant nightclub in Barcelona, and he got us a contract right away. We used sort of our last funds to get out there by train, and I think we lasted two days. We just weren't very good. And it was very embarrassing. I felt so sorry for the agent who'd gone out on a limb.

What went wrong?

My former wife and partner that time was supposed to have done a – we had our adagio at the beginning and the end, and she would do a solo jazz number in the beginning, but she felt that she could choreograph. She just never got past the first couple of bars in the rehearsal studio, and we had to go on that night. Was very unprepared, and it just wasn't very good. So then we really were broke.

In Europe, they could let you go out within three days, and didn't have to honor the contract. Pay you by the day. Everything was paid by the day anyway, at that time. So we got a third class ticket to Paris where I also had some names and things. Drove all

night on the train on a wooden bench. And I just had a brainstorm. That's the only way I can describe it. The whole act came to mind, and I could see everything different, and the choreography, the structure, everything. And we got to Paris and we rehearsed what I had sort of had a vision of, and we rehearsed in a studio, Studio Constant up in Mamerta, near Mamerta. And it just fell into place beautifully, perfectly. We auditioned for the biggest agent there, Tavel Mouani. And the piano player who had been accompanying us for the rehearsals – I think it was five francs an hour or something, dollar an hour. And we did the audition, and after the audition I went to pay her the five francs. She said, "No, no, no. That's 25 francs. This is an audition, I performed, too. This is different from me just playing. I can't make a mistake on the audition." Which I understood, but I didn't realize in the beginning, which made a good impression on me.

We got the job. We got a job at the Casino Campione in the Italian Alps. Campione was just like a dream. It's on Lake Lugano in the Italian-Swiss Alps, and we stayed in Lugano, which is a wonderful little lakeside resort, and would take a bus over to Camione which was on the Italian side of the lake, in a big casino. We got there and I told the artistic director that I lost my traveler's checks on the train, and could I please get an advance? We were just flat broke. And I think he knew, he saw through my ploy. But he gave us a nice advance, and was very nice. So we would pay for our food and hotel in Lugano, because we didn't open right away. It was a little lapse. And then we had a nice engagement there, everything went very well. And from there...

I'm going to turn this over.

Oh, okay.¹

¹ End Tape 1. Side 1.

So tell me about Paris. Did you see the *Lido Show* when you were there? *Moulin Rouge*, any of the cabaret shows?

No. We went to the *Folies Bergere*, but I don't think it was that time. We were in Paris many times back and forth. When we were in Paris, we just didn't have any money, and we stayed in a hotel that I think was six dollars a day, Hotel Mongioli. And then got too expensive, we moved down the street to Hotel Fiat, which was two dollars a day. Because we had to walk. The elevator only went to the second floor, so it was more expensive to live on those first two floors. And beyond that, you had to walk, walk, walk. But the ballet studio was nearby. We took class every day. Met a lot of nice people, a lot of wonderful teachers there. And say Rene Jean Mayer again, bumped into her in the street accidentally. And Madame Nora was a renowned teacher, and Yvette Chauvié, Etoile les Paris Opera would be in class. So there'd always be exciting people, and – Studio Wacker, it was called. It had several floors, and one floor was a café, and they would coordinate the certain times when most of the classes were concluding. They'd have a huge fruit salad which one would buy. And they'd put liqueur over it and so forth, and the dancers would all sit around and drinking coffee and talking different languages. So it was exciting for us, not being world travelers until then.

After Campione, which was just ideal, how beautiful it was up there. We said, "Oh! This is just wonderful." We went to Barcelona, I believe, after that, and worked down there. Went to Portugal. We were booked ahead for over a year very quickly. Through agents and through my own initiative, too. We bought a car rather quickly over there. Brand new car. It was \$1500 for a brand new Ford Taurus, it was called. We bought it in Switzerland. We were in Milano, working, and I took a train to Switzerland

after the show one night. Got there in the morning. I had done it by the phone. Got the car, paid for the car, drove the car back down from Zurich to Milano, just barely made it in time for the evening show. Without any sleep or anything. It was very exciting to have a car there, because then it was a really nice drive through the countryside and stopping at inns and things, going to different places.

What were most of these shows like? Did they consist of acts?

Yes. They would be a dance team. About half the time, we would close the show. We'd be the main attraction. And then sometimes there would be another act that would close the show. It could be a famous singer or like Patachou [singer], in some cases. And then there would be others. There would be always a juggler. Occasionally a comic, if it was France or Italy. And lots of girls. And the girls had to make – they were dancers, and they'd all do their own little quick number. But they were there, they had to make what was called “consummation.” Consummation. They had to go out and drink with the customers. And there where we saw the crazy things where the waiter would stand with his back to the ice bucket talking to the guest, and the girl, and with his hand in the back, he would pick up the half-full champagne bottle and pour it out into the ice, and say, “oh, you're out of champagne. We'd better get you another bottle.” And they were selling champagne. In those days, \$50 a bottle. You know, Fachane was probably a few hundred lira, you know, inexpensive. And the girls were so nice and so friendly, and they'd just – a group of their own. They all kind of accepted what they had to do. That they were not very good dancers, that they weren't hired to dance. But there'd be a half a dozen, something like that.

Were they costumed in such a way that they were covered? Or was there toplessness?

Yes. I don't think anybody was topless, no. No, I don't think so. Especially in Italy and in small places in France, strong Catholic countries, they wouldn't allow that. Spain too. Oh Spain, in those days, you couldn't wear a two-piece bathing suit on the beach. And certainly nothing like that in a cabaret. My wife, whose name was Linda but we called her Belinda, and de Becker, the team, she had a costume of nylon tricot, sort of nude color, with flowers, flower leaves all around. Lots of bareness. And she couldn't wear that in Spain. She was completely covered, but there was an illusion of nudity, and she couldn't wear that in Spain.

But then it would be going in and out of Paris. And the first time we were in Paris, we were broke, as I mentioned, I hated the city. I can't say "we;" I hated the city. It was just such a horrible experience, desperate experience, and I hated it. And then when we came back and we were flush and we were six months into the four or five years we spent there, and I had the car and things, then I just loved it. And I could never figure out why I didn't like it. And I kept saying, "Oh, everything's changed. The people are different." But of course, everything was the same. It was I who had changed. And it was lovely then. And then at that time we went to the *Folies Bergere*. We didn't go anywhere else. That was the only major show that we saw there.

What was your impression of that at the time?

Yeah, I think I rather liked it. It was big. I'd never seen a Las Vegas show, and the Lake Tahoe engagement had a line of girls, Dorothy Dorbin Dancers, but I had never seen

anything quite as elaborate as that, so I was impressed. So many people onstage and things. A lot of feathers.

And they did have the topless girls.

Yes.

And did that make quite an impression on you?

No.

No?

I can't remember (they laugh).

Having not seen it. You spent, you said, four to five years in Europe?

Yes.

Did you pick up a few languages while you there?

Enough to live. To go shopping and to buy essential things and to – I couldn't have a philosophic conversation with someone, but enough to socialize a little bit. French, Italian, Spanish. Just those three. And then you'd be talking, and I'd get three words in French and a couple words in Italian and ..., all mixed up.

At what point did you decide it was time to leave? You were finished?

We had worked everywhere: Holland and Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and a lot on the French Riviera, which was lovely, too. And the Italian Riviera. Venice, we spent several engagements in Venice, which in those days was just marvelous. Wasn't overrun by tourists, and it was like going back in a time machine. No cars or anything. It's like going back several centuries.

So we got not exactly bored, but we had an engagement coming up in Helsinki, in Finland. And so we thought, let's go home and visit, and we'll come back. So we got I think a half-price ticket on the Holland America Line to do a show on board, to do a routine on board the ship. So we said, we'll decide if we're going to fly back or take a boat back later. So had the one way. Came home, and went home to Los Angeles, and saw everybody.

Oh, I was writing at that time, too. Because I write now for a number of publications. And I was writing for *Dance Magazine* on the travels in Europe.

How did you land that gig?

I just wrote to them one day and said, "I'm in Europe, and I'm learning a lot of things about where the best schools are, and what hotels and pensions to stay at if people travel here. Would you like an article?" "Oh, yeah." And they were delighted to have it. We had pictures and everything to go with the article. So I'd do an article on Rome and one on Paris and one on wherever else I happened to be.

Is your writing ability, that just came naturally to you?

Yeah, I think so. My father was an adept writer. An actor, too, but he was a caricaturist and a poet and various artistic undertakings. Yeah, it just did, I don't know.

So you were submitting materials to *Dance Magazine* during the time you were in Europe?

So we came back, and we would rehearse. And we went to Perry Studios on Highland Avenue, above Hollywood Boulevard, and rent a studio and rehearse up there. And one day, a lady came and peeked in the door, and she said, "Hey, you mind if I watch you guys?" I said, "No, fine." It makes you work a little harder if somebody's looking,

anyway. So we were rehearsing. She talked, asked us where we were from, this and that, and we told her we were just visiting from Europe and going back. She said, "Would you be interested in working in Las Vegas?" I said, "Well, sure." She said, "Give me the number, I'll call you, I'm going to bring a producer over to see your act." I said, "Fine." So she called and said Wednesday, whatever it was, George Arnold, who was a big skating show producer here at the Flamingo with Bill –

Bill Moore?

Bill Moore. Right. Good for you. And so he came. So we got made-up, costumes, everything, music and so forth. And he came in, he sat down. And I carried her in a big overhead lift and do a flip and catch her. And the act was about ten minutes long, maybe a longer. And boom, boom, boom. He says, "Oh, that's fine, yeah. Give them a contract. I'll see you in Vegas, guys." I said, "Wait a minute, don't you want to see the –" "No, no, I can tell, I can tell. That's fine." And he'd really only seen maybe 30 seconds. So the woman made an appointment through her office or something. We got a contract to work at the Riviera with the Kingston Trio and Abby Lane. Which we did. It was all very nice.

And before that, I think it was a two week engagement ended, somebody came back and said, "Liberace was here last night. Would you be interested in staying on for his show?" Said, "Sure, wonderful." So we stayed on again, an extended engagement then with him. And he was a nice guy, too. And I had been accustomed to cutting my own hair and traveling and you'd close one night in Europe and you'd have to open the next night in another city hundreds of miles of way, so I didn't have time for barbers, and I just cut my own hair. And one day Liberace's assistant, Ray Arnett, who I think is still alive, a former tap dancer, and he said, "Hal. Lee wanted to know. His barber's going to

be here from Beverly Hills tomorrow.” He said, “He wants to invite you for a haircut.” I said, “No, it’s okay.” And he said, “No, let Lee do this for you. He’d like to do this.”

“Okay, thank you.” So the guy came, of course, gave me a nice haircut. And I realized that I just hadn’t looked good in the haircut that I was wearing, and that he had wanted me, you know, for his show, he wanted me to look a little better.

Tactful?

Yeah, very tactful.

Did you go out socially, or hang with Liberace at parties or anything of that sort during the time –

Well I don’t – I think there must have been some sort of a cast party towards the end, and I don’t remember if it was onstage. It seems to me it might have been onstage with the curtain closed.

Nat King Cole had had parties up at his villa or whatever he was staying at in Lake Tahoe, and I went there in a sweater. I don’t know if I even owned a jacket at the time, just a young fellow. And I went there in a nice sweater, and probably a tie. And everybody’s in suits, of course, at the party. And I was there for a moment and Cole came over and said, “Hello, glad you could come.” And he said, “Oh,” he said, “What a good idea. I’m so sick of this jacket.” He says, “I’m glad you wore a sweater, now I can get out of this thing.” And he went into his room, he took his jacket off and put a sweater on. Which either he was doing it to make me feel comfortable, or he really welcomed the opportunity to get out of his jacket. I don’t know which.

An excuse.

But I was touched by that. It made me feel much more comfortable.

Do you remember what year it was when you first worked with Liberace?

Liberace, 1964.

What was Las Vegas like during that time?

Oh, it was wonderful. Everything's wonderful when you're looking back, you know, thirty years or so. But there was some nice things, subjectively. The hotels were spaced, and there was vast black empty desert and starless skies between hotels, and we'd drive from say for example, the Thunderbird to the Desert Inn. And there just was nothing in between, virtually. There may have been something here or there, but there were these areas of just blackness, and in the distance, the little light of the resort like a roadhouse, getting a little larger and larger as you'd approach it. But everything else was the stars and the black sky and space. I used to put the bright lights on. It wasn't a city then. It was things in the desert.

Don Rickles, we used to go to his show because I liked him, at the lounge at the Sahara. And then he would know us, and he would always point out celebrities big or small. We were certainly small. He would point people out in the audience and make jokes and things. And he used to say, "Oh, there's Belinda and de Becker in the audience. They're working at the Hacienda. You ought to go and see them. But be sure and pack a lunch." Because in those days, the Hacienda was an enormous trip out of town.

And so after that – Oh, there are a lot of friends here, too. Jose Antonio was the – choreographed at the Flamingo for about five years. He had *Nymphs of the Nile* belly dance shows and things there. He'd have wonderful titles. *Nymphs of the Nile* is a good one. And he and I had known each other in Los Angeles as dancers, and his wife and my wife knew each other, and so we had a lot of fun with him.

Did you go out and see the other shows?

Yes. In those days, you'd just go, and there'd be a line, particularly for a good – like *Vive les Girls*, the lounge show at the Dunes. And we'd just kind of push our way and tell the maitre d', "We're locals, we're in the show." "Oh, come in." And he'd take us always ahead of the things. They would not accept tips from us as local people and as artists. I could never tip any of the maitre d's anywhere. And would always get in, given the best seats, and so were treated in a family way; just not prestige, just pals. We're all in the same racket sort of thing.

What were your impressions of *Vive les Girls*?

Oh, I liked the show very much, yeah. Carsoni – because I was a gymnast, and Carsoni did this one-armed handstand on the microphone. Carl Carsoni, so yeah, I liked the show very much.

Are there any numbers you remember specifically?

Yeah. A wonderful adagio – not big-lift adagio, but just a dance duet with Michael Stazny, who now I think has a boy who's a dancer here, and Marie Jose, a beautiful French girl. They were ballet-trained, so I was looking at the nice feet and extensions and so forth. That probably impressed me the most, was the ballet connection.

Training.

Yeah.

Did you also see *Casino des Prix* at that time?

Yeah, a little later, because we were always working at the same hour, and it wasn't possible. The lounge show, you know, was a different schedule so we couldn't go to see

that. And we saw other lounge shows at the T-Bird and the Sahara, I mentioned. Caesar's wasn't built then. I think the Frontier was under construction to replace the New Frontier.

How aware were you of the influence of organized crime in Las Vegas during the '60s?

During this time? Yes, only in the sense there was The Tower of Pisa on the Strip, and the fellow who ran that, whose name I would recognize if I heard it, nice, hospitable guy, again, always nice to performers and things. And I remember while he was here he went to jail for bookmaking. That's about the only – There were later times I had more contact, but in that time I wasn't aware of anything at all.

But you were always well treated where you worked?

Oh, yes. And the conditions – I mean in Europe, we would sometimes change under a stairwell or a staircase with a curtain hanging and then have to run down the hall to the bathroom to get water for the sponge and put the makeup on. It was just awful conditions in most cases. Not in the big casinos on the Riviera or Campione or Lugano or places. But the average cabaret provided nothing. And in Las Vegas, I mean, it was spacious dressing rooms and private dressing rooms and showers and it was just wonderful.

Where did you live at that time? Where did most of the dancers live?

The Country Club Apartments. And that was located behind the then-Desert Inn. There was a very nice men's store called Jackman's on the corner. I eventually acquired a nice wardrobe up there. But that was the motel apartments – not motel, but little apartments that people of our caliber, you know, supporting acts and things, would stay at. Marina Maubert was a lead dancer with a number of shows. She was staying there. And she had danced with Maurice Béjart in Paris, again, a ballet connection. They had a swimming

pool for us, you know. Only millionaires had those in Hollywood, and certainly didn't find them in Europe with the people we were traveling with.

What kinds of things did you do during the day?

Took ballet class. I also taught classes at the Virginia Lee Studios. Third and Charleston. I would teach guest ballet classes there. In the beginning, we probably took a drive. I bought a car while I was here. Naively, it was in April, and I bought a car without air conditioning. And I thought, "Gee, what a wonderful buy," you know, so cheap, and the car was in great shape. But I learned later. But we probably went typically to the dam and the lake, and we slept late in the daytime, too. I don't mean late into the day, but late. We probably didn't get up before noon. Get up and out before noon. Working late at night and unwinding and everything.

And that was probably the schedule of most dancers at that time.

Oh yes, sure.

Did many people have second jobs?

No. You mean two dancing jobs? No, no, no.

Or did they do something during the day, go to school, that sort of thing.

No, not that I heard of then. Subsequently, yes, a lot of dancers do go and get increased education. But at that time, no. The university was nice, by the way, at that time. It was like a little oasis of trees and green grass and things, surrounded by desert.

Did you at some point become inspired to choreograph or direct a show of your own?

Yeah, I produced a number of shows later, but choreograph, no. I had done some choreography in Los Angeles and I had no particular calling for it.

It just wasn't your thing?

I mean, it could have been, I just didn't – it wasn't anything – certainly not anything like a Las Vegas show, because that was – I was totally unfamiliar to that production.

But the producing came later?

Yeah.

How many years did you –

From Vegas, we went back to Los Angeles and we worked again at the Chi Chi Club with Pearl Bailey in Palm Springs. And then we came back to work in a small show at the Hacienda, when Judy Bayley owned it. Just after Doc Bayley had died, and we were there for over a year, and during that time we bought a home, and that's when we stayed permanently. By the way, the Helsinki engagement never happened. I had to cable Paris to say no, we're going to stay home in America, sorry we can't make it. But that was a seven-day job.

The show at the Hacienda?

The Hacienda. And eventually, it became a weekend job, Friday, Saturday, Sunday. And Judy Bayley told me, "One of the things that influences me to keep this show, which we would normally just change shows, but the key to it is you kids have bought a home and I know you've got house payments and this and that." She was quite nice about it.

Was the show not doing well? Not attracting audiences?

Oh yeah, it was good. It was a lounge show. It was an afternoon show, in fact. Just after a year, you know, they felt they'd change it. So they reduced it instead and kept it on the weekends. Bill Moore was there as the maitre d', and her sort of confidante. Judy Bayley's confidante. *Bottoms Up* played there, too. They opened the big room. The lounge was only open when we were dancing, and then they opened the big room, and *Bottoms Up* came in, so I got to know all those people, too. Lots of laughter and nice, pleasant, funny times.

Did you get to know Judy Bayley very well?

Not very well. She was the owner of the hotel, after all. But certainly, many conversations, sitting at the bar where you could get food and things, a counter. And yeah, we would talk at times. She was very sensitive because apparently she'd led somewhat of a sheltered life when Doc Bayley ran everything, and this was suddenly thrust upon her. She was a little out of balance sometimes. I don't mean mentally, I mean just uncomfortable. And she would say, "You know, I'm going to do such-and-such-and-such," I'd say, "Gee, Mrs. Bayley, that's a wonderful idea. Oh, that's just great." She'd say, "Well, why do you seem so surprised? Why shouldn't I have a good idea? Why should it be something special?" So why am I surprised? But she was sensitive about that. A nice big woman, very stately woman. And she was nice. And then I took the show – Oh no, then I produced a show for the Hacienda. It was called *Let's Go A-Go-Go*.

Was this your first show?

Yes, this was the go-go shows they had. And it had a band of four or five guys, and – who were working on their own. It comes back to me now. The band was there. They were called The Gaynighters. And there was a guitarist and a bass player and a saxophone

player and a very good drummer, Tony Quigley. And we just started talking, you know, why don't we put the show together? I'll get the girls and this and that. So we did, and then we auditioned it for Judy Bayley, because this was sort of her group, these musicians, and she liked it and agreed. And it was a huge success. There were I think five girls and the musicians. And go-go stuff, you know, go-go dancing and I forget what some of the names, though. *The Pony* or things, whatever. And then the musicians interspersed, and it went over very, very well. That stayed there for months, maybe a year, I don't remember.

I then made duplicates of it, and I had a show going in Reno, north shore Lake Tahoe, and Elko, kind of a crazy place, Elko, in northern Nevada. And one day some bookers from Sweden were in town, and I had billed one of these girls, the lead girl, as "Miss Sweden." (laughter) She wasn't and never had been. She was a German girl, very lovely. Anyway, they were drawn to this Miss Sweden. They came and said, "Well, when did she win Miss Sweden?" I said, "Well, you know, Las Vegas..." So they bought the show to take to Europe, and I got permission from Judy Bayley to take a leave of absence, and the show went over there. I went with them, and we went all over Sweden. Every little hamlet and village and city, internal and the coast, interior, everywhere. And it was a very nice tour. Then they went to Spain, and I couldn't stay with them. I had to come home, I just had a little daughter and had to come home. And it kind of fell apart without the leader, and it never got back together, that show. So they had the other shows going in different places.

Did you have to oversee all of those and pop in from time to time?

Yeah. Yeah. I drove. Made a whole circuit up. And boy, it's a long drive to Elko. I don't know if you know where Elko is [670 miles north of Las Vegas].

Mm-hmm. In your role as producer, were you responsible to yourself to hire and audition the dancers for the show?

Oh yes, uh-huh. In fact, the band – and I won't mention any individual names – whenever there was an audition, one of the girls or two, we'd have a topless girl dancer. And they always – I would have my wife at the time look at them, at their breasts was what it was, you know. I would take a glance, I didn't want to embarrass anybody, so I said, "You know, you do that, you know." And the guys were always insisting, "Let us look, too. Let us look, too." And I of course never would. I just thought that was shameful. But that's the only reason they were in the show, they wanted to see all these auditioned girls.

Who did the choreography for you?

Ron Walker, whose real name is Harvey Kaufman, and I'd known him as a dancer in Hollywood, and he and his wife had moved here some years earlier. And he wanted to be a choreographer, and I think this was his first assignment. And he later became the only choreographer for the fellow who produced the Tropicana show *The Tumbling Girls*, and went on to take shows all over, the Bahamas. He had a Russian sort of name. He's now the exclusive impresario representative for Luciano Pavarotti.

Wow.

So Ron went up there and had a good successful career choreographing for him.

Who did the costumes for you?

Friends and my ex-wife.

Excellent.

They were simple, you know, this go-go thing, little shiny material skirts and a lot of sequins on them and things like that. But it was just a fad. Go-go shows were a fad at the time. They were all over the place.

And from there, what did you –

From there, I stopped dancing at that time for a period. I wasn't even taking classes. I didn't really have time. And we had the home and we had the little girl that was born – Yes, the little girl was born and – was conceived in Elko, born in Las Vegas, but during the run of that show up there. Because one of the girls dropped out and my wife jumped in and took her position. So then it was nothing. I got very disenchanted with producing. It was extremely difficult and always headaches and always people not showing and it was just too much. All spread out too much. And I had, in California² there was not enough consistent work as a dancer. And having been an actor, I went to work for a detective agency; working on the telephone trying to find people and so forth. And so I had a good background, a good grounding in that other profession. My father had always said to me, "Always have something to fall back on." Because he had been unemployed a lot as an actor. So at that period when I finished producing, I opened a detective agency. A private investigative agency here. That was in 1968, and it's still flourishing. The detective agency is what enables me to now teach and write and do all the things I really prefer to do.

That's really an unusual combination.

² End Tape 1, Side 2.

It is indeed. It is indeed. I resumed taking classes and became sort of dancing again, just retraining, after opening the detective agency. And teaching. Taught at Roberts. In the '60s, there were only a couple of dance schools in town. And the best one was Roberts downtown. And the lady who owned it was named Jeannie Roberts, but the main teacher was last name Roberts, and I can't think of her first name. But all the professionals would go there. Nancy Houssels, who was working with Francois Szony at the time as a team, she was always in class. Lillian Montevecchi would be in class. Anybody who was a ballet dancer would come to those classes there. So those were nice classes. You know, ballet is like – I guess wherever you go, you just find a ballet class, you're home, because everybody has the same aspirations and the same aches and pains and the same technical problems, so... I mean, I found in Europe, going to different places – First thing I'd do is find a phone book, find the ballet school, try to find out ahead of time what the best school was in the city, and go there. And there would always be – you'd make friends right away. And it was the same in Las Vegas at that time.

What in your opinion attracts a ballet dancer to come to Las Vegas and be a showgirl or dance in the shows?

Part of it is the good pay, the good conditions. And in those days, back in the '60s, it was swimming pools. Dancers always commented on: "I'm in a hotel and we have a swimming pool." "I'm in an apartment house, there's a swimming pool." Girls in particular because they could get out and get suntanned, and they could tan a little topless if they wanted to, something from their back, and things they just couldn't do in New York or Paris or where they came from.

The lifestyle and the security and the jobs?

Yeah. Good jobs, good conditions, long contracts. It wasn't just two weeks here and there. You'd have a contract for a year, those girls. It was very appealing.

Through the dance studio, did you get to know people who later became choreographers, became producers of shows, after a career dancing on the Strip?

I mentioned Jose Antonio. I don't think so, no. Ron Walker, Jose Antonio, producer/choreographer. I don't know anybody who evolved before my eyes.

Most dancers came and worked throughout their career and then retired to do something else?

Real estate. Very popular at one time.

Did you get to know, just in passing, or meeting people socially, choreographers and directors of shows on the Strip?

Well, Fred **Apcar**, of course.

Did you see him perform when he was dancing?

No, no. But his picture with he and his wife, whose name I can't remember, were in the lobby of the Moulin Rouge in Paris. And I remember when I first met him I said, "Oh, your pictures are still up there," and so forth.

What shows do you remember over the years seeing and admiring the most?

The Dunes' show, *Casino de Prix*, was a wonderful show. Wonderful acts and top quality acts. The best in the world. I remember they had a teeter board act in there once that was breathtaking. We would take our daughter there, whatever age, 5, 6, 7, she could go there and see the show and liked it. Circus-Circus was very impressive when they opened because they had a restaurant on the upper level that put you at almost the same level as the trapeze. And you'd sit there on the terrace of the restaurant and you could almost

reach out and touch the trapeze, and I had done similar work with the aerial act that I mentioned. And we would just sit there and eat dinner and watch all the wonderful entertainment. It was terrific.

Do you continue to see shows occasionally?

No. Very occasionally. I rarely go to – Not because I wouldn't like to see the show, I just don't want to park and drive, and it's so much traffic and it's so congested up there. You have to walk to so far once you get in the hotel to get somewhere, and the slots going, and the tobacco, it just no longer appeals to me. And I often turn down nice invitations.

Perhaps you hear stories from dancers who attend your classes today about – which sort of leads you to think that things and conditions have changed for dancers over the years, and many have told me that they used to like it better in the old days.

What changes have you seen or are you aware of?

I think part of that is just that the old days always are better in retrospect, you know, no matter, dancer or otherwise. Because we're younger and things are new and fresh and wondrous. I don't know what might have changed. They do a lot of improved things.

They give compulsory classes now before the shows for dancers to protect themselves from lawsuits from injuries. They now have a compulsory warm-up so dancers can't go on the stage cold and pull a muscle or something.

I think that may largely be because corporations are concerned about the costs of injuries.

Oh sure. That, and they don't want to be sued and have somebody say, "Yeah, they forced me to go onstage, I couldn't even do a plié or backbend, and I had to go out on the stage. So now they give this. I don't know what might have changed. They don't have to

work as many shows. In those days, there were two shows a night and three on weekends; three on a Saturday night.

Was there ever a time when you worked on the Strip as a dancer that you belonged to the union?

No. I just, I kind of missed that. It was a short-lived, I think it was AGMA [American Guild of Musical Artists] had Ted Munson, I believe, was the representative here, but I don't think it lasted very long.

What are your memories of changing from live orchestras and bands being in each hotel with the shows to everything nowadays being on tape?

It was much more exciting to have a live orchestra, of course. You have trumpets and brass going, and the excitement of live music. You can't hope to compare. Recorded music can't compare to it at all. Just, live music creates a vibration and you feel that's part of the ear and the eye at the same time. It's a big loss, I think.

Las Vegas entertainment seems to be always trying to reinvent itself. Do you think we'll ever come full circle and go back to having live orchestras?

Well, I can't predict, but I wouldn't be surprised at all. There were some very good musicians here. Some of the best musicians in the world were here. Some of the best trumpet players and best drummers and best arrangers were working here at that time. So if public taste starts to like big bands again and things, then they'll respond, as they always do to everything. Another change was the Disneyland aspect here. It used to be elegant, and you dressed when you went to a casino and things like that. And of course, now it's just shorts and t-shirts and undershirts, even tattoos. And fantasy, different kind

of fantasy make-believe: Excalibur Hotel and things like that. It looks like Disneyland to me.

Today, our Las Vegas premiers arts critic, what do you think about the cultural development of Las Vegas? How it's changed over the years and how it has –

Yes, it definitely has. No question about it. The public has become more aware of theater, ballet concerts.

Tell me a little bit about the history of Nevada Ballet Theatre, how that got started.

That was Vassili Sulich's idea, and he got a number of dancers from the Strip shows where he was working. They wanted to dance. They wanted to do something different from what they were doing every night. And he presented an afternoon show at Judy Bayley Theater. I don't know how he got the theater, I think it was donated to him by the university, and it attracted a lot of attention. People liked it. And then Nancy Houssels, who was a friend of Vassili's. He had befriended her and supported her when she had her falling out with her partner Francois Szony. And subsequently married J. Kell Houssels, Jr. She had married money, and she was a dancer herself. Good ballet dancer. So together, she financed it and he provided the artistic direction, and they gradually developed this professional company.

So you've seen Nevada Dance Theater and Nevada Ballet Theatre performances from the beginning?

Oh yes. My former wife worked in the first show with Vassili. She was one of those dancers, who all worked for nothing, which Vassili would have liked to have kept it that way, I think, but they eventually wanted to be paid.

Since the recent name change to Nevada Ballet Theatre and Bruce Steivel taking over the artistic direction of the company, what differences do you see?

Improvements, changes.

Oh, vast improvements. Vassili – this is only my opinion – Vassili carried the company for a certain period of time. He was right for the company. But the company outgrew him. He was sort of fixated on the 1950s and '60s – 1950s, not even the '60s, in Europe, where everybody was in bad straits and you'd dance for a chocolate bar, in a sense. And he just couldn't understand why the dancers wanted to be paid and they wanted to know in advance that they were going to have their contracts renewed, and they might want a raise occasionally. And they certainly would have liked to have had some medical insurance. He'd say, "They ask how much instead of asking who's choreographing. I always asked who was choreographing, that was my first – " But of course, he lived in an entirely different time and a different country. So eventually it just got to be a big conflict and he fired one – four years before his departure from the company, he fired 13 dancers because they primarily wanted to know if they were going to be rehired. And he would never tell anybody if they were going to renew their contract until the last day of the season. By then it was too late to audition for anywhere else if you weren't going to be rehired. And they went to the National Labor Relations Board and filed a claim. The Labor Relations Board sued Nevada Dance Theatre and Vassili. Vassili's and Norman's defense was, "Well if we told them we weren't going to hire them, they wouldn't work as hard" in the last days, which was ridiculous. And I and another journalist named Jerome Horowitz came to the defense of the dancers and got them lots of – we wrote many articles in *The Sun* and all over in defense of the dancers, and the dancers won their case.

And it was settled literally on the courtroom steps before going into the courtroom. And it cost Nevada Ballet Theatre a big hunk of money. So this – and this was only the fault of Vassili and Norman Caine. And this turned the board of directors of Nevada Ballet Theatre pretty much against Vassili.

And then I understand from board of directors that every year he would ask for a raise, a \$5,000 raise, and threatened to resign when they said they couldn't do it. And the last time he did it they just accepted the resignation. And he was flabbergasted. His vision was large enough to create the company but not to develop it as far as it could go.

So they got Bruce Steivel, who I think is a very good director. Good for this time. He might not have been good in the way that Vassili was good in the early days, because Vassili was kind of attractive and could attract people, and he was very flamboyant and so forth, which Bruce is not. But the company is much more professional now, and it has certain benefits for the dancers. They have a wonderful big studio out in Summerlin. Fabulous studios and a building, beautiful façade and statues and sculpture and things. So they've come a long way. And that's the story as I see it of Nevada Dance/Ballet Theatre.

Do you plan to continue teaching ballet for as long as possible?

Oh yes. As long as they'll come. Indeed.

What career achievement are you the most proud of? What have you done that just brings you the most joy?

I think my time in Europe, because we went there on spec. We had no contract or anything. It was just all, it was like a little fairy tale. We became minor celebrities, well known there and easy to get jobs. And I just love to travel in Europe and my former wife, she liked to sleep. We both liked to sleep in the morning, we worked late at night. But she

would sleep; 9:00 I'd be out in all the museums walking my feet off, my shoes off. But all the museums and galleries and everything that the city offered in Florence, for example, Rome, Paris, so much to see.

Do you ever go back to Europe?

I've been back several times as a tourist. Not the same at all.

It's changed.

Nice, but – No, no, I mean it's just not the same experience for me. I'm going back as a tourist as opposed to working there, having a purpose there and being a part of the milieu of the city and the country. But I do enjoy going back once in a while.

Well, you've added immeasurably to the culture of Las Vegas, and I appreciate your time.

Let me tell you two things.

Oh, you have something to add.

When – I have a detective agency. Frequently, dancer friends of mine would be out of work. And I would always, if I had the opportunity, I'd give them a job following somebody or sitting in a car to see who goes in or out of the house or typical kind of stuff that didn't require any great talent, but it was work that they can do. So I hired – I won't mention the name, because this gentleman is very prominent here in the dance community – and I hired him. And the assignment was just to watch the hotel room of a man who was here from New Jersey for his wife, who's back in New Jersey, to see if he had ladies visiting him. So this fellow sat there in the hallway on a bench and watched the room. And he was there for a couple of hours, and suddenly, he saw a lot of men going in and out of this thing. And a couple of guys got out of the elevator and they

walked and they just grabbed him under the armpits. Two seconds, he was thrown into this man's room, spread-eagle on the bed, stripped, his arms and legs held. And they said, "Who are, what's going on?" The figure who came here was a New Jersey crime figure, underworld figure, who was connected by family to a politician who was prominent at the time in New Jersey and in Washington, DC. And he tried to explain to them – They didn't believe him, anyway. They thought that he was an assassin from a rival gang. They had heard that something was going to happen to their guy. That's why he had all these bodyguards. So they went into the bathroom, one of the fellows. He took a glass and he broke the glass and he put it on my friend's throat, you know, "Speak up, who are you? What's going on?" "I'm here with a detective agency. I'm a dancer!"

They took him by the ankles and hung him nude out of the window, with a man on each ankle and hung him upside down out of the window. Said they were going to drop him if he won't talk. Of course he's screaming and this and that. They pull him in finally and they put him back on the bed, and a security guard comes to the door. And this is a big ruckus that's going on. They open the door, the guard looks in, and here's this naked man being held and "Help! Help!" And they said to the security guy, "It's okay. Don't pay any attention." Guard says, "Okay, you guys. Bye." Goes off. This was in one of the major hotels.

They finally believed him, he just convinced them. So they dressed him, took him downstairs to buy him a drink. He said he couldn't even hold a glass. They took two one hundred dollar bills and put it in his pocket. And they said, "Hey, want a girl? Want a girl? Come on, go upstairs." "No, thank you! No thank you!" He wasn't interested,

anyway. He of course came back to me. And a nice guy, he said, "Here's the \$200." I said, "No, you keep it! You keep it." So that was one experience with that element.

Oh, then I got phone calls from them, from their attorney who was traveling with them. They were on their way to some football game in Houston, Texas. And he said on the phone very menacingly, he said, "We'd like to leave town in a nice clean way and feel that everything is okay here. This man's a very important man to us, and his family situation is important, and we wouldn't want his wife to have any information that might disrupt their marriage. And we'd just like to leave things in a nice, peaceful way. If it's not possible, it's not possible. But if it could be, we'd like to do it that way." And I said, "Yeah," because he hadn't seen anything. If anything had happened, my man hadn't seen it. I said, "There's nothing to report, there's nothing." "Oh, that's very nice. We're glad. That's better for everybody that it's going to be like that" and so forth. They had also offered this man – it must have been hyperbole, but they said, "How'd you like to run the docks in New Jersey?" to my friend the dancer, the ballet dancer. (They laugh.)

And that was it. But I recorded the conversation that I'd had with this man. I've lost it somewhere. But it was just such a menacing, subtle threats, it was scary. And when I told the attorney whom I was working for, who got the assignment from the woman in New Jersey, he said, "We'll go to the FBI and they can –" I said, "No, no thank you. I'm happy. I'm fine."

The other experience was that a fellow down the street from where we lived was the comptroller at the New Frontier Hotel, which had a big scandal. It was owned by underworld people and this and that. And he had a nice little modest house and a modest little car and things. And he gave testimony, and he would boast to us, his neighbors, we

were a little bit friendly. He said, "I told them what the boys wanted me to tell. I told them what they wanted the guys to hear." The anti-crime squad or whatever it was at that time that was investigating all the connections here. And all of a sudden, his house becomes a two story house, and he's got three cars, Cadillacs and Jaguars, and fabulous parties, and his house becomes the showplace of the neighborhood. Obviously, he'd been paid off for giving that testimony.

Are dancers uniquely qualified to be private investigators? (She laughs.)

I don't know. I don't know. But I don't think this young man then would want to do it again.

I was working for Frontier Savings and Loan as a detective doing some things for them, I forget what it was at this time. And I suddenly got a call, said, "de Becker, can you come down here? We've got a couple of people here from back east who are looking for somebody. Maybe you can help them find them." So it's the middle of summer. And here are these two guys with topcoats, big trenchcoats and hats, you know, dressed for the east. It's 110 degrees. And they had some connection, and they wanted me to find somebody for them, and I don't think I was able to find the guy. I found out later it was for a debt, a gambling debt. God knows what they'd have done to him if I had found him. So that element sure did exist at one time. Whether it does anymore, I don't know.

You've had a really colorful life, and I thank you for sharing.

Oh, it's been a pleasure.

END INTERVIEW.

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