

## Chapter 4: Dancing and Living with Nancy Wright Wiltz

### Beginnings

August 14, 2015, Alcine and Nancy will have been married for 50 years.

Alcine proclaims:

“She has really been a part of my life since I was 23 years of age. I would not have been able to do the career that I have done without someone who really understood and was totally supportive.”

He recalls his dating days in college of the issues with whomever he was dating regarding time spent in rehearsal. He knew it was going to be hard to find someone as a life partner because his “drive was there and it wanted to be in that process and wanted to be in rehearsal and it had to take time and I understood in each of the situations....I wasn’t available.”

As a child, Nancy Dyer Wright was exposed to the top 10 hits through the Hit Parade. Her mother took her to see movies starring Vera Ellen, Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Gene Kelly and many dance performers. Nancy began dancing in Lincoln, Nebraska, at age four with Flavia Waters Champs who had studied with Charles Weidman and the Humphrey people. By age twelve she was also taking tap and jazz with Grace Kelly whose daughter became a Rockette. Nancy recalls receiving very good dance training, even in Lincoln, Nebraska. After moving to Omaha, Nancy’s tap/jazz teacher held union cards for the Capettes and this credential

allowed Nancy to dance in many types of shows. She danced at the Nebraska State Fair with headliner, Brenda Lee, and actually toured western Nebraska with the Mills brothers.

Nancy was a college undergraduate from 1959-1963. She first went to Texas Women's University as a dance major. She was the only freshman picked to dance with the University Concert Dance group, and she toured southern Texas in the spring of 1960. However, "love" revealed and she followed the "boy" to the University of Missouri. Although there was not a dance major there, she got involved in musical theatre in the fall of 1960. During her junior and senior years she choreographed all of the all-school musicals. Her junior year, the musical was "Destry Rides Again" and several dancers from Stevens College danced in the show. As a result of these friendships, she received a full tuition scholarship to Perry Mansfield, a dance camp in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, where she studied modern dance with Harriet Ann Gray. That connection allowed her to take dance classes at Stevens College with Harriet Ann, in addition to her regular academic courses at Mizzou. She graduated from Missouri with a B.S. in Education, and taught fifth grade for a year in Columbia, Missouri. The summer following graduation from college, she was hired as the choreographer at the Tent Theatre in Springfield, Missouri, and she returned there the summers of 1964 and 1965. The Tent Theatre season consisted of two comedies and two musicals. Her first summer she danced the lead dancer role in "High Button Shoes" and the comedic role of Naughty Nancy in "Little Mary Sunshine".

As was common for the early 1960's Nancy's dream was to get married. After graduation, she stayed in Columbia because her "boyfriend" was there. However, the proposal did not come and she then applied to graduate schools in dance. She received two assistantships – one from

the University of Arkansas and one from the University of Wisconsin. She took the higher paying assistantship. This is where she met Alcine...the other teaching assistant at Wisconsin.

They got engaged on Valentine's Day 1965, and were married on August 14 of that year. Alcine went back to Madison to complete his MFA degree. Nancy taught 5<sup>th</sup> grade in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. After Al's graduation, they spent the summer in Warsaw Indiana at the Wagon Wheel Playhouse, where Alcine was hired as the choreographer. This was a semi-professional theater. Other actors and dancers wondered why Nancy was not dancing. She was 8 months pregnant! We lived in a trailer on the "back lot" which each evening became a parking lot. However, she busied herself helping make costumes and props, running errands and working in the box office to make "beer and cigarette money." On Labor Day, they packed up and moved on to Morgantown, West Virginia, where Alcine was hired in the Women's P. E. department as a dance teacher. We stayed there only one year, but what a fun and eventful year it was! Our daughter, Michelle, was born, and we had a group of friends that were fun, funny, and helpful! (We still have reunions with who is left of that group.)

After just one year in West Virginia, Alcine took a job at the Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, where his task was to develop a dance program. Upon moving to Collinsville, Illinois in 1967, Doris Dieu, a local ballet teacher, befriended Alcine and Nancy. Nancy recalls:

"I also taught modern dance for her. I was not comfortable doing that because these Midwestern kids wanted pink tights and pink shoes!"

Doris was excited to have artists in the neighborhood. She asked Nancy to teach for her. Doris was a member of the Cecchetti Council of America and coached Nancy on her first four Cecchetti examinations. Nancy began teaching 3-, 4-, and 5-year olds one day a week at Doris' studio. Teaching dance was fun! Doris was a visionary. She had the foresight to envision everyone speaking French in her studio, taking drama classes, and singing. She was a very talented soprano and pianist herself. When she left Collinsville, she asked Nancy to assume her business. Nancy enjoyed the studio and loved teaching. Under Nancy's guidance the Dance Studio grew into a well-organized and profitable business. It is where, in the early days of MAD/CO, rehearsals were held. She was always sharing Alcine with MADCO and the University.

Nancy recalls MADCO:

“Starting MADCO was an adventure. Night after night, Ross, Al, and I stayed up writing grants, structuring the company, writing by-laws, etc. It was fun. Ross and Al were so good as directors. They both were lovely and very different choreographers and it was really fun to dance for them. Al was the technician...he told you what he wanted and how he wanted it. His pieces were structured rhythmically...we counted! Ross's stuff was much more ad lib. He'd give you an idea, not steps, and you sort of put steps into his ideas. When he saw what he liked he'd point and say, “that,” and then we all did “that.” But his works were often really dramatic and so they were fun to do. Al's work was technically very challenging...hard! A piece like ‘Viatic’ you could do forever and never learn all the nuances that could exist. So they never got boring to do. Sometimes pieces did not ‘wear well,’ especially after numerous cast changes. Because every time

there was a cast change, there was a dance change. So sticking to the original counts never really worked, and that was frustrating for me, since I was in the original company! And then for 6-10 years, Al redid some of those works over and over. And a lot of the time I did the teaching of the roles to the new dancers. I was pretty inflexible in those days!”

In MAD/CO, Nancy recalls the difficulty of being married to her teacher, choreographer and boss. Nancy changed identities while she was in the car driving from her duties as mother, ballet teacher, and professional dancer. She remembered how difficult this time was for her. She always told Alcine and Ross, the company directors, that she planned to “retire” at 40 and leave the company. That was partly because her children were now teen-agers and her passion for teaching far outweighed her passion for going to company class, rehearsing daily, and even performing. Rehearsals often became tedious. Touring had a price. Finding a competent baby sitter, a good substitute teacher at the studio were always issues. Living on 800 calories a day to stay at 108 pounds became more and more difficult. Even performances were not all that much fun anymore. She just loved teaching. Each day in the studio was its own performance! Watching children celebrate the enjoyment of dance was its own reward. Kids were all the audience she needed now!

“He was patient with everyone except me! Sometimes it was just hard to feed his kids, wash his clothes, be criticized in rehearsal, and then be expected to go home and hop into bed with him.”

Nancy says she was a good “polisher”-- the person that goes in, after the choreography is finished, and cleans up all the spots that are a mess. She was always tough on young talented people when they would not work hard enough to correct errors. However, she admitted that in the studio setting, she was always nice to children who were not great technicians, but who danced for the joy of dancing.

Nancy continues about MADCO:

“I did have the respect of most of the dancers, though, maybe because I was the oldest. It wasn’t because I was the best dancer. I wasn’t. But I did have an inner soul when I danced that some of the better technicians did not have. I tried to help everyone...especially the company kids I really liked. I could see such potential in them. They were so good, and they had the ability to be even better, so I would get impatient when they kept hopping on turns, and stuff like that. It was just a bad habit that needed to be broken, so I guess I was hard on them. I was really hard on everyone when I was ‘cleaning’ or ‘polishing’ a piece. Unison to me meant unison. I wanted every arm at the same angle and no adlibbing. But I usually got the precision that was needed for the piece to be successful and ‘right.’ Some of the dancers that took my roles were petrified when I came to watch: That made me sad. I just wanted them to be fabulous! And they usually were.”

“We all have good nights and bad nights. Some days you are just really centered, and other days you can’t find your balance to save your soul! Frustrating, Alcine always had his balance. He was flawless. I think it is because his feet are so big! I worked on my

balance all the time...in the grocery store, talking on the phone; all the time I was on one foot in relief seeing how long I could stay there! Dancers are crazy, you know.”

“The company was fun. Touring was not so much fun. We weren’t famous enough to fly (in a plane). We were always in a van. And even though my own children were not with us, it was like 8 other children were! Some of the young company members were like little kids! And we NEVER had a room to ourselves. Al and I always had to share with either Ross or Michael or Robby or somebody. When the company got bigger and richer, I became angry and annoyed that other ‘couples’ got to room together while we were still sharing! I did get resentful of never being paid. I mean I paid to dance. We had to pay our own baby sitters. We spent a lot of our own money to dance, and to help the company. Looking back, though, it was all a really fabulous experience. We still try to support MADCO financially. And we both are really proud that it has continued as a company in the Midwest.”

Nancy speaks about Alcine the teacher:

“Alcine is a teacher. He was a fabulous teacher, and the only teacher I have ever had who makes walking hard! I used to get mad at him in class. I could see what he wanted but I just could not make my body do it. I used to tell myself, just watch his pelvis. Follow the line of his pelvis. That is when I got the closest to doing it ‘right.’” But I do think, as good as he is, that I also am a very good teacher, too. Different from him, but

good. Not as creative. He could think of the most weird and obscure combinations...odd combinations of counts...never, 4, 4, 4, or 8, 8, 8, ....nothing like ballet!"

Nancy talks about herself as a dancer:

"I never thought I was a very good dancer. But I saw myself once on tape and I was impressed. I couldn't believe it was me. I was pretty darned good. I remember once Ross saw Al and I dance a piece Al choreographed for his thesis concert called Baroque Duet. It was to Brandenburg Concerto #2. Ross came back stage and said, 'You are fabulous. I didn't think anyone could keep up with him.'" Or something like that. I was amazed and surprised. But I have seen other people dance the 'Tansman Duet', and I know that when we danced that piece, it was breathtaking. We danced as one person, one body. And we could feel each other breathe. Anna Nassif gave us that dance as a wedding gift. We danced it in many weddings. Michelle wanted us to do it in her wedding...me at 130 pounds and out of shape! So another pair danced it, and I really think we could have done it better! No other pair ever had the right quality, really. I just think it was our dance. We did some fun pieces. He choreographed a chair dance for me once. The chair was inflatable. I don't remember much of it except it was fun and funny. 'Unfettered Pastimes' was fun and I taught part of it to some kids. The rags are just great to dance to. 'Viatic' was hard, hard, hard and the costumes were skimpy, skimpy, skimpy so you had to be skinny, skinny, skinny but it was a neat piece. 'Uptown Scherzo' was a slinky duet to Duke Ellington. It was fun. I wore the coolest dress and shoes with a little heel. I was very subtle. I don't think it ever got very good reviews, but it was fun

to dance. And he did “Nocturne” for himself and me and originally Rob Scoggins, then Michael Richardson. It was a dynamic piece and very difficult. I had to run down his leg. And I was up-side-down quite a bit in that dance. I loved teaching it to Liz (Webb Lincoln) when I left the company because this girl was so gifted, I knew she would be just fabulous. I was really good, but she did it well. Whenever I saw her do it, she was a wreck because I was in the audience, so I never saw her do it as well as she could. That makes me sort of sad. I remember doing it in Detroit and a bunch of Cecchetti ladies that I knew were in the audience. I was a nervous wreck. So when I pressed my dress (the costume) was designed from a very neat negligee, I accidentally burned part of it, so I just cut that part off, and figured that was the causality of the evening. I guess that did in my nerves and I danced the hell out of that dance that night! It was really great! So exhilarating when you know you have really done well!”

#### Graduate School Days:

When Nancy and Alcine got to graduate school at University of Wisconsin, Madison, she recalls gathering on the first day in the faculty lounge to meet the other graduate teaching assistant (GTA). Nancy recalls how surprised she was that Alcine was male. They began their training there together and began to get to know each other. Classes started several days later as did the rehearsals with faculty member, Anna Nassif, who was making a work with the five new MFA students. These five students were: Nancy Wright, Alcine Wiltz, Gene Stulgatis, Joyce Wheeler, and Delia Flores. Long daily rehearsals helped bond this group. While Delia remained

a loner, Gene, Joyce, Nancy and Al became a foursome, socializing frequently. When Gene and Joyce started seriously dating, Alcine and Nancy had lots of time together.

Thanksgiving time made Nancy home sick for family in Oklahoma City. She asked the others if any of them would go with her on the 20-hour drive. Yes, they would drive. Alcine and Gene agreed. Alcine met her family who were charming and fun. There was her brother's football game and an evening at a country club for a dinner dance. Alcine and Nancy danced the night away with Cha-cha, foxtrot, and jitterbug. It was a relaxed time. They left Saturday to get back to school on Sunday. Her parents LOVED him!

Then during Christmas break, Nancy suggested that Alcine drive with her to St Louis so he could get a cheaper flight to New Orleans and help her drive along the way. They talked the entire time. As they went their separate ways during the Christmas break, Alcine was going to visit his seven-year, now long-distance relationship with Margaret. Nancy saw her former boyfriend and realized that nothing was between them. He was happy and busy on his farm. Nancy recalls that her parents asked, "How is that cute little guy from New Orleans?" Nancy responded that he would probably get engaged to Margaret over the Christmas break. He didn't.

The plan was that after New Year's Day, Nancy would pick up Alcine at the St. Louis airport and they would return to Wisconsin. So back they drove from the holidays loaded down with holiday goodies and leftovers: eating all the way home to school. They both had had good vacations. Neither was engaged or committed to any former "love," However, Nancy was not happy in graduate school. Alcine suggested that perhaps she should return to teaching fifth grade, a job she talked about a great deal. She decided to resign her GTA, which was not

happily received by the department chairperson. She had planned to leave Wisconsin to go to Kansas City to live with college friends and find a teaching job. Teachers were a dime a dozen in 1964!

January brought exams schedule so Alcine and Nancy had to hit the books. Alcine had an awareness of their good friendship but he started feeling as if Nancy was something more than a friend. He recalls: "People told me look for a good friend in a partner. You needed to look at the mother. Nancy's mother was fun and ready for a party at all times." At 23 years old, he began looking and thinking about his awareness of Nancy as a partner. "I wanted a family, the American dream."

Alcine and Nancy were constantly rehearsing together and now studying for exams. Nancy was living with a family, renting bedroom, and watching the two children during the night so their mother, Joan, could work as a night nurse. Alcine usually came over every Sunday. He remembers how very comfortable and cozy it was to visit there. Also Nancy had a car and that gave them many opportunities to go places. This particular Sunday, they were studying for their exams. Nancy's college friend and sorority sister and her new husband visited, and Alcine thought more about being a newly married couple. By the end of that week Alcine needed to tell producers at the Dells in Wisconsin if he would join them to choreograph and perform in the summer. He also had another contract offer to return to East Carolina Summer Theatre for the summer. Decisions needed to be discussed and choices needed to be made. Nancy had resigned from the MFA program, planned to go to Kansas City to join friends and look for a substitute position teaching school for the spring semester. She had a summer job lined up as

choreographer for the Tent Theatre in Springfield, Missouri. Alcine kept reminding her how she seemed to like her 5<sup>th</sup> graders, and Joan had suggested she apply for teaching positions in Wisconsin. Nancy interviewed in January with the superintendent in the small school system close to Madison, the Sun Prairie Public Schools. He introduced her to the other 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers who told him, "You are an idiot if you do not hire her today."

Nancy grew up never thinking about quitting anything, especially if they were paying your way through graduate school. The phone rang, interrupting their studying. The superintendent of Sun Prairie Public Schools was on the line asking Nancy if she would take the fifth-grade opening. She asked for 24 hours to think about this offer. A job...she could make her car payment, and leave Wisconsin in May or June when school was out. They discussed the options. She had already quit graduate school, but that night, decided to stay in Madison and take the job in Sun Prairie. She already had a summer job in Missouri working at the Tent Theatre as choreographer and performer. Alcine asked her to join him in the Wisconsin Dells as a dancer and then return to Madison area as a 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. Alcine argued that two could live cheaper than one and before they knew it they were planning their wedding.

Joan got up from napping to get ready for her night shift and to take Alcine to the bus stop. She asked them how the studying is going. They giggled and laughed. "We have not done any studying but we have planned our wedding." As he was about to leave with Joan for the bus, Alcine remembers the very awkward moment of kissing her for the first time then. They had never even held hands and yet he had asked her to marry him, she had said yes, and their wedding was planned.

The next morning they both felt like dressing up for their exam. Alcine remembers being very happy. Nancy put on her “cutest outfit.” When they met in the faculty lounge “The Kitchen”, they burst out laughing, kept their secret, and took their tests. “Every time we looked at each other we just kept laughing,” Nancy recalls Alcine broke all his own the rules. His time line said he was not to marry until he was 27, but they were neither even 24 years old. Later they talked in private. Nancy recalls a sobering moment when she said, “You don’t just decide to get married. Someone will get hurt in the end.” Were they sure about this decision? In confidence, Alcine encouraged them both to “just see how it goes.”

Rehearsals began that evening. Afterwards the dancers went to their favorite ice cream place. Anna the choreographer wanted to sit with Alcine; however, this evening, Alcine wanted to said, “I want to sit with Nancy.” Afterwards, Nancy and Alcine agreed that they needed to keep this new romance and wedding plans really quiet. They both recall that they felt revealing this secret could be dangerous and foolish.

Now one week later Alcine told Nancy that he would not consider buying her a ring until she stopped biting her nails. His intention was to give it to her on Valentine’s Day. So he bought the ring and organized everything: the nice restaurant, card, a dozen red roses, and a surprise announcement party back at his apartment for Nancy. The ring was a total surprise to her because she tried, but had not fully stopped biting her nails. The evening had a few glitches. First of all, Nancy came 40 minutes late to pick Alcine up in her car. He had to make her come into the house. He presented the regular Happy Valentine’s Day of card and flowers. She was happy. But she did not notice the ring embedded into the pedals of a rose. Finally Alcine had to

show her. At dinner she was showing off her ring as she ate and smoked. Nancy knows that when Alcine decides on something he means it. They were officially engaged.

He called his mom and she said, "Do you know what you're doing?" Nancy's parents said, "Great" and Nancy was surprised that they did not say a one word about her being married in the Catholic Church!

Easter Break Nancy met Alcine's family in New Orleans. His sister said, "I knew you were special when all he did was talk about you all of Christmas vacation." Even though Nancy left the MFA program, continued dancing in Anna's works. She simply left school every day and came to the University for rehearsal. In fact, freed from the burden of grad school and doing something she loved (teaching children), she miraculously lost twenty pounds. Somehow, she did not lose her technique, either. They continued dancing together all spring.

In May Alcine left for his a one-month military obligation on a ship in the Gulf of Mexico. He had one day at home in New Orleans before he had to be in North Carolina for Summer Theater rehearsals. Nancy was in Springfield Missouri doing summer stock. But she flew down to spend part of those 24 hours with him. And so, for the summer of 1965, they were apart except for those 24 hours.

The Wedding, August 14, 1965:

Alcine and Nancy had been apart all summer. They wrote letters, called when possible, but they had not seen each other since the 24-hour marathon. Al was flying in to Oklahoma City a week before the wedding. He had a little anxiety based on two previous experiences.

First plane memory: Alcine had been going steady with Maxine Allen, a Texan, whose father worked for the U.S. Boarder Control. When Alcine graduated high school, he joined the Coast Guard Reserve. Out of boot camp, he took a leave by way of Arizona to see Maxine. They had been separated for one year. As he got off that airplane, Maxine greeted him with her dad. Also, as a senior in high school, Maxine had moved on during his absence.

Second plane memory: For Alcine, he will never forget landing at the New Orleans airport in December 1964, and seeing Margaret was there with her mother. He knew as he departed the plane that their relationship was over. It turned out she had become involved with someone else.

So, when Alcine got off that plane in Oklahoma City, the Sunday before the wedding, he was terrified that for the third time, a relationship would end. "What if Nancy had changed her mind?" But as he stepped off the plane there was Nancy, all by herself, ready to embrace him. He recalls, "Oh yes. I'm going to be okay. I am not going to throw up." Nancy recalls how much she really loved Alcine from the very beginning, but was embarrassed being kissed in public at the airport!

The wedding was planned for Saturday, August 14, 1965. It was a weekend and the 14<sup>th</sup> was the hottest Saturday on the planet in Oklahoma City. Nancy's mother planned the wedding details since both Nancy and Alcine were working summer stock. The entire crazy week, Nancy's little 12-year-old brother kept following the two of them around. They had very few moments of privacy.

Joan O'Neill arrived with her two girls, Mary (age 7) and Eileen (age 4), by train on Tuesday. Nancy and Alcine picked them up at the train station and then went to pick up their marriage license at courthouse. Alcine, with Mary in tow, and Nancy, carrying Eileen, walked into the courthouse. As they approached the counter to get their license, Joan slipped outside the door, laughing. The children were all over Nancy and Alcine as they requested, with great seriousness, their marriage license.

Alcine was designated as chauffeur to his whole family to show them the town. Alcine joked that if someone could please call a dance rehearsal, he might be able to see more of Nancy! Then Alcine's aunt and uncle and their daughter arrived on Wednesday morning. Then came his mother, sister and husband and son, and best man via car. Many guests arrived on Thursday. Alcine's father came in Friday and Nancy picked him up at the airport. Everyone else came into town on Friday.

The night before the wedding Nancy recalls a private moment with her brother:

"The night before my wedding, my 12-year old brother came into my bedroom and asked if he could sleep with me! Since one of my attendants (Pam Minger) was sleeping in one twin bed, I told him I didn't think we'd either one sleep very well in one twin bed. But what he was worried about was that I was leaving home. We discussed that and I assured him I'd be back to see him!"

Most of the wedding guests were staying at the same local hotel. Al's father and brother were staying in one room; his mother was in a room by herself, since Al's parents were separated at

the time. His father and brother came to Alcine's room after the rehearsal dinner. He recalls: "Father started grilling me about how I was going to support a family with this degree I was getting." They stayed past 1am. They stayed too long. Alcine's best man ended it by saying he thought everyone just needed to get some rest for the next busy day. This commitment was for life. "That's it...no turning back." His mind was spinning with questions about his responsibility. He worried about how he was going to support someone else when he could hardly support himself.

Nancy recalls:

"The morning of the wedding my mom came into my bedroom and started to cry. I said, 'Don't cry mom. I've never been surer of what I'm doing.' I don't know how or why I was so self-assured except that Al is such a confident person. I never have figured out what he sees in me!"

That entire morning Alcine got so sick. He couldn't eat. But the moment he sat down on the pew, it was show time. The curtain was about to rise and his entire energy went into the performance of the wedding. At the altar, they were standing facing each other, about to go to the vows when Alcine whispered to Nancy, "Remember they have to hear you in the back row...speak up." It was a performance.

As they exited the church, the wedding/performance ended, Alcine burst into tears. The best men took him in the bathroom so no one could see him crying. He settled down, put water over his eyes, and went to the reception party. The impact of a lifelong commitment to his best

friend and the seriousness of the covenant gave Alcine pause. Strangers/wedding guests kept squeezing his hand and his ring kept cutting into his hand. But they were also giving him large quantities of money. The pain and the gain of the event were remembered.

Their honeymoon, short as it was, was in Dallas. Driving there in Nancy's Chevrolet Corvair, ("He really married me for my car. He didn't know it wasn't paid for!") Alcine and Nancy stopped at a gas station. The attendant was entertained by the newlyweds and told Alcine that "Everything is alright sir.....except your radiator is low on water. " As Alcine began to worry, Nancy said, "Honey, this car doesn't have a radiator." Another joke came at the Adolphus Hotel in Dallas. The Honeymoon Suite they were shown to was so small with unmade twin beds. Alcine quickly realized this was a common joke. Their real suite was a lovely room with a king size bed and two bathrooms.

The wedding event itself was choreographed. Alcine and Nancy really did not know anyone there except family members. The 200 guests were all friends of her parents. It began 11:00am, there was a rushed honeymoon after a four-hour drive to Dallas then back to Oklahoma on Tuesday morning. They drove Tuesday evening back to Madison for Nancy to return to work on Thursday. Alcine remembers, "Then we just went on living...we never stopped." They were more together in rehearsals than in the other parts of their life.

Twenty-five years later, Nancy and Alcine, while living in Kensington, Maryland, celebrated their 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary by renewing their marriage vows. Nancy wore her original wedding dress; Alcine, a tuxedo. Anna Nassif's "Tansman Duet", a wedding gift to them, was performed

by former students Kathy Muenz and Joseph Mills. Their children, Michelle and Stefan, served as their maid of honor and best man.

### **Al and Nancy Dancing**

Anna R. Nassif recalls in a March 2014 letter about Alcine Wiltz: Student, Teacher, Dancer, Choreographer, and Administrator:

“Alcine Wiltz was an exceptional graduate student and an outstanding dancer, teacher, choreographer. Alcine was professional through and through. Alcine worked with me in my first company as a graduate student in the 1960s and thereafter served as a soloist and guest artist for Anna Nassif Dance Theater on the University of Wisconsin-Madison Campus. Alcine worked with concentration in rehearsal and danced in chamber works and performed with skill, artistry and musicality over a period of four decades. His duet work with Nancy Wiltz was outstanding. He also performed some poignant duets in a piece with Nancy and a work by Dello Joio titled ‘Meditations on Ecclesiastes’. I recall expressive duet roles performed with Nancy Wiltz and with Joyce Wheeler.”

Excellence in performance and craft was also reported in musical theatre for Alcine and Nancy. In June and October 1972, they carried the musical “Cabaret” as reported from the Granite City journal and the St Louis Post-Dispatch through the group The Masquers, Inc. from Collinsville.

Sue Thomas reports:

“The Masquers theatrical company is concluding its 1971-72 season with the musical production, ‘Cabaret,’ starring Al Wiltz III as the Emcee and his wife Nancy as the carefree Sally Bowles....

Mrs. Nancy Wiltz has performed in such shows as ‘The Boyfriend,’ ‘Little Mary Sunshine,’ ‘Bells are Ringing’ and as Tessie La Tura in ‘Gypsy.’ Additionally, she has choreographed several productions, including ‘The Fantasticks,’ and ‘Bye, Bye Birdie.’

Mrs. Wiltz has been a member of several summer stock companies, including the Town and Country Players and a group at the University of West Virginia. She teaches modern dance at the Academy of Theatre Arts in Collinsville.”

Mountainlair Theatre, West Virginia Mabel DeVries Tanner reports on “Boyfriend”:

“An innocuous bit of fluff was so well directed and presented last night at Mountainlair Theatre that, in spite of a small stage, the production was a huge success. It delighted a large audience with its gaiety, colorful costuming, music and choreography.

Nancy Wiltz, Susan Barnes, Candy Elyanich and Marty Morris were the young ladies at Madame Dubonnet’s finishing school.....

Al Wiltz, Don Triplett, Bill Doner and Jerry Stewart essayed these parts and made the male foursome a delight to behold and listen to.....

Al and Nancy Wiltz are a husband and wife team of dancers and actors par excellence and the name Wiltz can be measured in terms of great talent in the drama division. Mr. Wiltz is responsible for all the choreography. Arthur Wiltz filled in a tiny role as a waiter,

proving that drama students do not shy away from such parts but make them a stepping-stone to bigger ones.”

Modern Dance acceptance into the regular theatrical offerings at mid-western universities continued to be challenging in the 1970's. Alcine's choreographic attention to musical scores allowed for many audience members to enter the challenging visuals and find a way to enjoy both music and movement in coloration. Alton Telegraphin December 6, 1974 published a report by Dr. Paul F. Guenther (music critic) linking Alcine's teaching to excellence in performing and quality choreography:

“The annual Dance in concert recital of the SIUE Dancing Studio under the direction of Al Wiltz III has been a regular feature of the university's theatrical season for some time. In addition to Mr. and Mrs. Al Wiltz, a large number of dancers of both sexes participated in the program.

'Tautical', the next item, was likewise beautifully staged with scenery of sails and rigging against a stark blue backdrop. Created by Al Wiltz, with sound by RemiTassman, the piece offered much excellent dancing, although its length made for some uneventful moments.

The two Wiltzes who appeared in this number together with four others, couldn't help being outstanding members of the cast; they are, after all, first-rate pros. Their partners supported them with much talent and finesse.

The first half of the program ended with 'Aireola', again by Al Wiltz, with an interesting score by Mike Oldfield. Danced by an ensemble of eight including, again, both Wiltzes, this piece offered a very large variety of dancing with a solid admixture of good humor. Possibly because of it, as well as because of the very effective score and the dazzling manner in which the music found expression in the dancing, 'Aireola' appeared to be the most completely successful of the evening's offerings.

Last item was a vast canvas of the dancing art, 'Spirare', again by Al Wiltz, and fetchingly costumed by Leslie Wolf and Tom Soehnlín with music by George Crumb.

Those that know even a little about it will gladly admit that Mr. Wiltz has done a magnificent job as a teacher."

The 1970's certainly brought a continuous challenge to define and educate WHAT modern dance is and HOW an audience might appreciate it. Alcine and Nancy offered "something pleasing to watch" which allowed them to also introduce some of the new aesthetic slowly for an audience. SIUE's performance at Lindenwood College on Friday, April 23, 1976 offers a report of "Concert pleasing, explains modern dance" by GuadaWoodring.

"Except for 'Tropical Appetite and Blue', which was choreographed by SIUE's own ballet instructor, Gayle Kassing, all of the choreography was put together by AlcineWiltz III, who is the resident modern dance professor.

'Tryptich' is a modern dance duet done by Wiltz and his wife, Nancy. The hazy lighting sets a romantic mood for the classical, almost balletish, poses. The dance shows the Wiltzes as a smooth, well-rehearsed team, doing some mellowed modern movements. Modern dance, being an art form, needs to be understood somewhat to be appreciated. But Wiltz and Kassing manage to put together a concert which is pleasing to watch (occasionally redundant, maybe but pleasing) and can be counted as a basis for understanding dance in this form."

MADCO allowed for Alcine and Nancy to take their excellence as a duet to a wider audience. At the 2<sup>nd</sup> annual Dance Festival at Rockford College May 21, 1978, The Chicago tribune writes Charlie Vernon reports:

"Recently, 16 dance companies from throughout the state converged on Rockford College for the Second Illinois Dance festival.

In addition to its scheduled performance, the Mid America Dance Company was called on to fill in for the Joseph Holmes Dance Theatre at the last minute. (Holmes had difficulty transporting a prop used in his dance to Rockford and decided that the dance couldn't be done without the prop.) It was an expected pleasure to see Wiltz and Nancy Wright Wiltz perform 'Duet' from 'Tryptich': A fine piece in a more serious vein choreographed by Anna Nassif to music by Alexander Tansman."

Being at the right place at the right time and saying yes to an opportunity propelled Alcine and Nancy's performance reputation.

Continuing into the 1980's, Alcine and Nancy continued to deliver excellence in their performing. John I. Ades reports about the Friday April 17, 1981 SIUE dance concert showcases both faculty and student skills:

“Director Wiltz concluded his own solo, ‘Paralleling Phrases’, by shifting virtuoso agility and grace to the simple comic swatting of a gnat, as if to say, to dance is divine, to swat is human. He was later joined by this wife, Nancy, in an imaginative ‘Uptown Scherzo’ (music by Duke Ellington) in which the perfect coordination of gesture of the two dancers was almost unbelievable.”

Further reports of the detailed choreography offered by MADCO come from The Kansas City Times Harry Haskell, Dance Critic Monday April 27, 1981. He speaks of

“Spirited dancers going places” At Goppert Theater, Avila College:

“Bright, witty, theatrical and unabashedly entertaining choreography seems to be the hallmark of the Mid America Dance Company.

Six modern dances by artistic directors Alcine Wiltz and Ross Winter showed off the winning spunk and versatility of this 5-year-old troupe, which makes its home in St, Louis.

The program Saturday night, at Avila College's Goppert Theater, began and ended with colorful, exuberant works for the full ensemble of seven dancers, Wiltz's 'Unfettered Pastimes.' To piano rags, was a playful piece built on stylized everyday movements and featuring a show-stopping Fred Astaire-type solo for Wiltz.

Winter's 'Pretty Fooles and Peasantries' was a bawdy folk dance performed in Renaissance costumes. The music, a potpourri of Renaissance tunes and mover arrangements, set the stage for rambunctious displays of athletic prowess by the three men and serene, dignified solos and ensembles for the four women.

Even Wiltz's darker pieces – 'Viatic' to an electronic score by Nancy Hennings and Henry Wolff and 'Nocturne' to a George Crumb violin-piano duet – were rather lightweight choreographically. The latter resembled a runic ritual, performed by a Merlin-like figure (Wiltz) and a young couple (Nancy Wright Wiltz and Michael Richardson).

'Viatic' was one of those sustained pieces with long, stretched-out phrases, in which the dancers never touched but seemed to swim, with outstretched arms, through a watery medium. It was attractive but unmemorable, and the same was true of Wiltz's 'Uptown Scherzo,' a light, slinky duet to Duke Ellington music.

The most theatrical – and most puzzling – work on the program was Winter's tongue-in-cheek 'Kreisleriana.' Set to Fritz Kreisler's schmaltzy violin pieces, it began as a campy Edwardian melodrama and ended as a very funny send-up of classic ballet that had the audience of about 150 in stitches.

The Mid-America Dance Company has a great deal going for it: interesting, accessible choreography; a distinctive, well-defined style; and several superior dancers. It is the kind of company that will make a lot of friends for modern dance."

### **Nancy's Perspective on Transitions:**

"I feel I have lived many lives. I focused on many things. I never viewed myself as an artist. I was a pretty good dancer. Loved to teach and never loved rehearsal."

"Janet Butts was a neighbor lady in Illinois...a banker. She thought our life was fabulous. She was treasurer on the Board of MADCO for years. It was so interesting how regular people viewed our life."

"I was raised in the Midwest in Lincoln Nebraska. I always loved to teach. I taught swimming when I was 12 at the local Y, taught tap to the kids I babysat for. I came from a family of teachers. That is all I ever wanted to do. I loved young children but I ended up teaching 5<sup>th</sup> graders."

"When Al got his first university job at the University of West Virginia, I didn't dance at all. I was a mommy with Michelle and stayed at home, played bridge and did a little substituting. It was one big party. Al did a couple of shows and we both did 'The Boyfriend' that summer."

"The dance department was a horrible situation with Al as a political football. The theatre department loved him and he had a huge success when he choreographed 'West Side Story'. Because it was the mid-west, there were only a handful of good dancers and Al got acclaimed quickly."

"We lived in Illinois, in Collinsville, a small town of around 25,000 people near St. Louis. What a great place to raise kids. We were very well accepted. Al was hired to start the dance program at SIUE and he did a fabulous job. He really built a very strong program. I was dancing part-time with the company at the university and also working with Ross

and his wife as a quartet group. Al would bring me in as the 'cleaner upper', as coach and polisher. I was tough on people with the counts on a section. I would not settle for just anything or playing around. I tried to give them secrets about what Alcine was looking for."

"When we came to Maryland I danced in one concert with Cynthia Reynolds and Al and I. You see I retired as a dancer in 1981 and we moved to Maryland in 1983. I mainly taught ballet and little kids in Maryland. Moving to Maryland was hardest on me. It was a big political place and I felt less qualified and less talented. I was accustomed to being part of the kids' school life but they were already in middle and high school then. I wanted a job teaching regular school during the day, but openings were scarce. So I continued teaching dance—ballet mostly. I was also doing a lot of teaching of 3- and 4-year olds in preschool settings, and teaching ballet, as well."

"When I was 50, I decided to go to grad school because there was a discount for spouses, I was feeling 'dumb,' and I needed to do something new." I was a conscientious student and since a degree in dance was not an option, my second favorite thing was young children, so I settled on early childhood education. I wanted to explore the many ways dance helps young children intellectually at ages 3 and 4. My advisors were not interested in that. It was suggested that I apply to be a Teaching Assistant . . . all my professors suggested that, and even though I did not need assistance, I figured that was what you did there. Since I received the assistantship, second semester I was being paid to go to school and assist in classes. My second year at graduate school I was asked to teach some of the classes I had assisted. I did research with Dr. Greta Fein, famous for

her articles on children's play, and my advisor, Elisa Klein. I loved to do scholarly writing and ethnographic research in schools. I was fortunate to publish several articles while I was in graduate school. I received my master's degree in 1993, and, since school was so much fun, going on for a PhD was a no-brainer! I received my Ph. D. in 1997. But who was going to hire someone at 56 years old?"

"I was applying for jobs: University of Georgia, Vanderbilt, Rutgers, but I didn't want to live far away from AI. My first job out of school, was at UMCP as a lecturer, teaching some courses in early childhood education. I supervised student teachers, taught and advised all the early childhood majors. The next year, I applied to James Madison University and Towson University. I would have had to live at JMU to do that job, so I turned them down. But luckily Towson also wanted me and I worked there on the main campus from 1998-2008 at Towson. I retired in 2008, but Ocie Watson-Thompson, my chair, asked me to start the program at Towson University-Shady Grove. I really liked that. It was not a commute! It was more administrative in nature. And it was part time! Perfect!"

"I loved working at Towson with the chairperson Dr. Terry Berkley, and later, Dr. Ocie Watson-Thompson. The people there were really nice, not cut throat. I was supported by my department; my students were mostly great working class kids that wanted an education. Towson appreciates a hands-on approach to teaching, and good teaching is rewarded there. I loved my students; I loved sitting in real classrooms, once a week all day and getting paid to do it! Not only did that help my students become better teachers, it helped me become a better teacher. My own children were grown, my

husband was happy, and I really had my own identity. No one in my field cared who AlcineWiltz was.”

In November 2014 SIUE at Edwardsville had a 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the Department of Dance. Alcine and Nancy attended. Nancy writes afterwards:

“Alcine and I flew out here last Thursday to St. Louis. Friday Al went off to SIUE to meet Steve Brown. That night we went to see MAD/CO’s concert. Alcine got to see Stacy (West) and all of the MAD/CO dancers that he had worked with previously. Saturday a bunch of SIUE people organized by Calvin Jerrell met for dinner at a very nice restaurant in Edwardsville at 5pm. We got the scoop on lots of ‘old’ SIUE people including Gary Smiley and Paul Mabrey (who played Cliff opposite me in Caberet). Rob Scoggins was there, as was Teresa Kehrer and others.

Edwardsville campus is about three times as big as it was when we were there. The meaning behind this event was that Alcine’s first concert there was called DANCE: In Concert, and that was the show we were seeing. And the first Dance: In Concert was done 45 years ago, so this was to commemorate that event. Prior to the concert, there was a 7-minute video telling the story of the dance program at SIUE with lots of old photos and text by Calvin. Following that, the current director, Kristin Best, who is an SIUE alumnae and a student of Calvin Jarrell’s, gave a curtain speech, honoring Calvin for his many years of service. (He retired in January.) Kristin then introduced Alcine, who had been Calvin’s teacher, and who founded the dance program at SIUE 45 years ago. His speech was so wonderful, so passionate about his art form, so grateful to SIUE for allowing him the freedom to develop, so complimentary of his students (many of

whom were there, seated together) who had so willingly danced for him while he was there. He got a standing ovation. He was nearly in tears. I WAS in tears! There was a very nice reception with lots of former students. We spent Sunday reminiscing with Janet and Calvin Butts who had been our next-door neighbors on North Crown Drive. Janet had been Treasurer for MAD/CO after we left the area, and later even president of the Board. Monday Alcine headed to SIUE to meet with Kristin, see the studios and the building and to meet with Calvin Jarrell for coffee. Then he went to St. Louis to meet with Stacy West, MAD/CO director, to look for information although all of the SIUE videos, programs were missing. Monday evening we watched MAD/CO videos that Al had gotten from Stacy.

Alcine and Nancy returned to St Louis area February 20, 2015, for a family event and they were able to attend an Alumnae Concert Celebration presented by SIUE Theatre and Dance Dept., Saturday February 21. Alcine recounts:

“We arrived at the Katherine Dunham Theatre by 7:15pm and entered the line for people buying tickets.

Kristin Best, Director of the Dance program, came in and saw us and said ‘What are you doing here?’ and of course gave us free tickets. She asked, ‘Do you want to go backstage and see the dancers? We declined and looked forward to seeing them at the end of the concert. As we walked into the theatre we saw Grant Andrea who had previously organized the reception for us. He said, ‘What are you doing here?’” As we sat in the

back of the theatre, people whom we know acknowledged us with gestures of 'I'll see you at intermission'.

Alcine recalls: "Grant came out to thank funding people. He said he needed to announce a wonderful surprise, and asked Nancy and I to please stand which was acknowledged with applause. "Michael Mizerany choreographed the first of three sections. I taught him for one year before I left in 1983. I had never seen Michael's choreography. He danced with MADCO before going to the west coast. He directs a dance company called 'Compulsion' which is based in San Diego. His company seems to be a pick-up company with dancers from the LA and San Diego areas. His work was quite interesting and theatrical with strong performers, four dancing with him."

Joseph Mills performed 'Circle Walker' for the second section. For the third section, MADCO performed an excerpt from a full evening length work that was accompanied by jazz musicians on stage. It was beautifully choreographed and performed. The audience responded with great enthusiasm.

SK asked: How does it feel to go back to SIUE?

Alcine responded:

"It was interesting. I said to Darla Connely and Teresa Kerher that all of a sudden this place feels familiar and comfortable. I know this place. The last time I recognized the differences. This time it was about being with those people again, former students of mine, in the space that I lived in. It just was comfortable. It was wonderful.

A couple who were sitting next to us were the parents of a daughter who performed in the high school work. At the first intermission, they were excited and shared how they celebrated what I had done for Edwardsville. I was enjoying observing the professional integrity of the dancers that I was seeing. It felt like my “Legacy’.”

“I, with the dancers, created a billion memories in love and respect. It was there and is still there; those ethics, it’s true, all of these connections; that love that was in that studio, all that nurturing, finding the best within them to feed them, stuff to hang onto that could mean something to them as they grew. The seeds, and it wasn’t just doing the dance.”

“At the Concert 2<sup>nd</sup> intermission, I never did get out of the seat. Stacy came out right as soon as the lights came up. She looked and said ‘It is you!’ She wanted me to see the excerpt from ‘Second Line’, from New Orleans with live musicians, a real Dixie land jazz funeral march. It was a wonderful piece. These MADCO dancers were really performing and it was beautifully danced. Jeana Patterson who has a contemporary ballet background choreographed it. She is a strong choreographer with international work in her background.”

“Stacy informed me that at the end when the company takes a bow, she wanted me to come out with her. I said I would do this. I took a bow and received a standing ovation! I hugged and kissed the whole company. The place went wild. From the Dixieland jazz

band the trumpet started to play and dancers brought members of the audience on stage to dance. Nancy and I started Jitterbugging amidst all of the dancers of MADCO.”

Children and grandchildren:

Alcine and Nancy have two children: Michelle Marie, born in Morgantown, W. Va., October 7, 1967, and Stefan Alcine, born in St. Louis, Missouri, on September 20, 1970. Both took dancing lessons as children.

Michelle married Jeffrey Clemovich in 2002. They have one son Jeffrey Alcine, called “JAC” for his initials and a daughter Katherine called “Katey”.

Stefan married Buffy Patton in 1994. Buffy comes from a family of ten children each with a name starting with the letter “B”. They have three girls: Abigail, Emma, and Caroline. None of the grandchildren dance!