

5-5-2017

Kathy Alexander (a.k.a. Suzanne Walker) Interview, Associate Professor of Dance at Wright State University

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Repository Citation

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WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY
Retiree Association Oral History Project

Interview date: 5/5/2017

Interviewer: Abe Bassett
Professor Emeritus, Department of Theatre Arts

Interviewee: Kathy Alexander (aka Suzanne Walker)
Associate Professor of Dance (Retired)

Abe Bassett: This is Abe Bassett, Professor Emeritus from the Department of Theatre Arts at Wright State University. Today is Friday, May 5, 2017, and I am interviewing retiree Kathy Alexander/Suzanne Walker, former Associate Professor of Dance at Wright State, as part of the retiree association's oral history project. Kathy, it's a pleasure to have you here and to be able to chat with you and talk with you, and I think that today we'll break this conversation hopefully into three parts: before Wright State, growing up; being at Wright State; and then after Wright State. Okay, now the first thing we have to do is we have to get un-confused of your name. Because when you were here, you were Suzanne Walker, and that's how your students know you.

Kathy Alexander: Yes, that's true.

AB: But you were not born Suzanne Walker.

KA: No, I wasn't.

AB: What were you born?

KA: I was born a Walker. Katherine Walker. But my real name now is Katherine Alexander. I married, have been married almost 16 years. When I was in show business, on Broadway, etc., I had to use my middle name 'Suzanne' because there was already a Katherine Walker in *Equity*, in my union. So I went with my middle name, 'Suzanne', and I stayed with my maiden name, 'Walker', so I became 'Suzanne Walker'.

AB: Well, I've trained myself to call you 'Kathy'. I have to think about it sometimes, because 'Suzanne' is ingrained, and so it is Kathy Alexander, aka Suzanne Walker.

KA: That's right. Yes, indeed.

AB: Alrighty, good. So, you are a native of Dayton?

KA: Yes.

AB: Where did you grow up?

KA: I grew up in Oakwood and went to Oakwood High School. My father was the head of the band there, and I played [for] many years the clarinet. I was kind of born with it in my mouth [laughs], so to speak, and I started my dance training with Jo Schwartz at Dayton Civic Ballet.

AB: How old were you when you started dance training?

KA: Probably a little late, thirteen. Late.

AB: Oh, that is late.

KA: Yes, but I tried very hard to make up for it.

AB: Miss Jo produced a number of people who went on to professional careers.

KA: Oh, yes. And a number that could have if they had the psychological ability to do so.

AB: Psychological?

KA: Meaning you have to be tough. You have to be ready for it.

AB: Was there something about Miss Jo that forced her students to become tough?

KA: Miss Jo herself was tough. She was a tough cookie, and we had to follow her line of thought, basically, and we did, except in her teaching. I think we adapted our own personality to the teaching.

AB: Would you call her a martinet?

KA: Um, of sorts. Of sorts. She did influence us greatly, pro and con. She was very harsh. Sometimes that destroyed people, and sometimes that spurred you on to something.

AB: Right. Well, her training was all ballet.

KA: Yes, basically.

AB: You didn't do modern, you didn't do jazz.

KA: No, we did do some modern. Mostly ballet, but some modern. No jazz. Mostly on point.

AB: Okay, and then you graduated from Oakwood High School, and then what happened?

KA: Then I went to Butler for two years.

AB: In Indianapolis?

KA: In Indianapolis.

AB: Right, as a dance student?

KA: As a dance major at Butler for two years, then I went to Pennsylvania Ballet, and I finished there for only a few months. I was miserable, I hated it. So I went back to school, and I did not complete my degree, but I auditioned for Kansas City Starlight Theatre. On a whim, really, not thinking I would get it. Well, I got it, and with that job- we did I think eight shows in ten weeks, something like that- I got my Equity card and I was able to go to New York from there instead of going back to school.

AB: Okay, so you finished two years at Butler-

KA: Two years at Butler.

AB: -and I think earlier you had told me that the minute you started dancing for them, they moved you into an advanced class?

KA: Well, because of Miss Jo, the fact that I had talent was pretty hidden, and I was so afraid that I would not be accepted at Butler. But I was not only accepted, but I was put in the best class with the best students, and given many soloist parts in the ballet and given some principal roles, and I was really aghast that I had any ability at all. You know, my training was quiet training, and I say quiet because Miss Jo was pretty pronounced with her verbal assessment, so to speak, but Butler was quiet. I knew, because I was getting all the roles. That's how I really knew, and my confidence finally began to build.

AB: Yeah. Now, can we just talk a little bit about body types for ballet? Is there a- how close was your body type to what would be considered a good or highly acceptable body type?

KA: Um, I think it was good. It was non-exceptional, not. I had the feet. My feet were the mainstay, so to speak. I remember at Pennsylvania that they were impressed with my feet.

AB: Really?

KA: Now, I was pretty surprised, too. Of course, I didn't know much. Because all my toes were the same size and the same level and the same distance, and my arch was good but not overly good. If your arch is too good, you tend to have a weaker foot. So I was right at the right point with my feet, and I was really thin at that point, and being thin-

AB: You were thin?

KA: Yes, it's imperative to be thin, at that point, especially. At that point.

AB: As a young person.

KA: Yes, and also that decade.

AB: Right. And also how about your torso size to your leg size? Was that, is that important?

KA: Well, yes, very important. As I said, I was not exceptionally built, as a ballet dancer. However, I was thin, my legs were pretty long for my size, I was fairly short, but because of the length of my legs and my arms, and the fact that I danced larger than a small person- I danced like a large person- so I was lucky to get the roles because of all of that. It wasn't that I was exceptional in one area, it was just that I was very good in all areas. That was it, really.

AB: Okay, now you mentioned that your dad was- that you grew up playing the clarinet.

KA: Yes.

AB: And your dad had an influence there.

KA: Oh, tremendous.

AB: How?

KA: When I moved to New York, for example, I was really about the only dancer who could read music. So I had all the harmonies, [laughs], they kept throwing harmonies at me and it really paid off in the end, because I was about the only dancer who could read [music]. So I was at an advantage, if I had to sight-read, or during the show if they were passing out parts, I always had the difficult part because I could read music, and it made me- I mean, I had music in the house all the time, of all kinds of music. Especially '40s or classical music, from my dad. But really all types of music from a very young age throughout high school. So I was always in the band in one capacity or another.

AB: Your dad was band director.

KA: Yes.

AB: Yeah, and he had a major influence on you.

KA: Oh, major.

AB: How?

KA: Well, I think that his teaching was extraordinary. He was a wonderful teacher, and I have to think that if I do teach well- and I'm assuming I do, at this point anyway- he had a great influence in how he taught. And he always used good humor, when called upon to do so. To use something to stimulate the band, stimulate his teaching, and he was always... he was strict, but with that strictness he always had humor in his back pocket, and used it constantly. It was a great influence to me in how I teach. I looked at him as a prime example of success in teaching. Not Miss Jo, but my father. And Miss Jo, because Miss Jo did not have that sense of humor, and she was quick to cut you down, my father would not do that as a teacher. He would try to build you up, as a human being, and I learned a lot from him.

AB: And your teaching was more like your father rather than Miss Jo?

KA: Oh yes, and I did that on purpose, and also genetically I think it was in there. I really do. And that was the way- I was raised like that as well.

AB: Okay, so we've been talking about your early years, which is important background information, because when you came to Wright State, you came as a person without a college degree, which was very unusual. But you came with incredible training and background, so this is like college training, you know?

KA: It was. More so, really.

AB: Okay, we're going to come back and talk about your Wright State years, but I want to talk about your New York years. So, there you were, about 20 years of age, you quit Butler, you had gone to Kansas City- between your freshman and sophomore years at Butler?

KA: Sophomore-junior. I left.

AB: And after Kansas City, where you worked with some professional people and had your Equity card, then you came home and said, 'Mom and Dad, I want to go to New York'.

KA: Oh, I thought they were going to be really unhappy.

AB: And were they?

KA: No [laughs]. Primarily because they would have to put out too much money. They didn't have much money and they were afraid that I would want to go back to Butler, and because of the expense they were relieved, I think. And they paid for my education forever.

AB: Okay, so you went to New York and you were about 20 years old?

KA: 20.

AB: Now that's pretty frightening.

KA: Well, I think you have to be 20 and stupid to do it. Because it really is high risk, and I had no money, and at first I stayed at the YWCA. It was called the Tatum House, and I stayed there for about four weeks, and I had to share a bathroom with a total stranger. It was a little uncomfortable, but I was waiting for my three roommates that I had met at Kansas City to move into their new apartment, and I had to wait. I remember getting in a cab, and I remember the Tatum House, and I remember coming out the front door of the Tatum House and absolutely not knowing where I was or where I was going. I mean, I had no clue of anything, and I think you have to be young- and in my case and a lot of cases- annoyingly brave. Annoyingly. I mean, you're so young, you don't know any better. I had 100 dollars, and we finally- the four of us- move in to a very safe, expensive area, we had no furniture, no pots and pans, nothing. Absolutely nothing. But we made do. I remember my mother coming up to see me for Thanksgiving, and she made everything out of foil because we had no pots and pans, so we had a delicious dinner on foil, with foil. I mean, it was all foil.

AB: Well, when you go to New York, and of course you have to get set up and so forth, but did you start taking classes?

KA: Oh, immediately. I was immediately- first I had to find a job, you realize, to live. Though I did one of many things, from modeling shoes to answering phones to waitressing to working for a temp agency. It went on forever, it seemed like, at the time. I had to do that in order to pay for the classes, and then I started to take- soon- classes in jazz and tap and ballet, over and over. I knew the ballet was not a problem, but I needed to keep in shape, and in those days the only thing that you could do was to take a class. We were trained that way. Nowadays they do everything, from aerobics to Zumba to Jazzercise to weight training. They do everything to stay in shape, it's changed immensely. The only thing we were even permitted to do was to swim, and obviously I couldn't do that. So the only thing I could do on my own was to work out on my own, in the ballet world, but I would take classes rigorously when I had the money.

AB: Well, it was also good because- you got to meet other dancers.

KA: Oh, yes. And I went to every audition that I could find out about.

AB: Did you start going to auditions right away?

KA: Immediately.

AB: And were those hard to do?

KA: Nerve-racking. My whole life I've been judged, and it's pretty public, but I always did well at the auditions. If I didn't get the job, I was real close. But it didn't do your pocketbook any good to be close.

AB: Or your ego.

KA: Or your ego, right. But-

AB: When was the first time that an audition was successful?

KA: The very first one. I turned it down. I know. Well, I talked with my boyfriend at the time, and I said, 'Well, what should I do?', and he'd been in the business a whole year, [laughs], so I figured he knew more about it than I did. It was a Disney- *Disney on Parade*, they used to put them out a lot. It was their first tour, and they used to have us do major point work. They were not kidding, they were looking for ballet dancers and they asked me to do the show. Unfortunately, I had just moved to New York- or fortunately- and I did not want to leave. I did not want to sign a contract for a year, it was a long contract, and so I decided to turn it down.

AB: Okay, when was the first audition that was successful that you accepted?

KA: I believe it was *Cabaret*, at Westbury Music Theatre. I know- yeah, it was the first Equity show that I did in New York, and it happened about two months after I'd been there, so I lucked out.

AB: And how long was that stint?

KA: That was only about two weeks, I think. Two or three weeks.

AB: Yeah, and did the next audition occur soon?

KA: Um, I think that I was probably starving to death after that. I don't remember. [Laughs] I think that was a period of time where I kept getting callbacks for shows and not getting them. It happened a lot, really. I think that the first show after that was maybe my first Broadway show. I got that through a- it was very strange, I went to the open interview with the stage manager, and I thought, well, I'm not going to get this job or an audition or anything, because there's no way, and I spoke to him, and I got in line- there was a line out the door of people- actors, jugglers, dancers, it was everybody- and we were all Equity, all union, and we went up and stood in line, and I went up to him and he looked at my resume, and he thought I looked exactly right for the show. I said, 'Really?', and he told me, he said, 'Yes, you're perfect for the show', and I had an audition set up right there for the next day. I couldn't believe it, and I auditioned, and I had a callback, and I got the show. So that was highly unusual to get a show from an open interview.

AB: Yeah, and you were still 20 or 21 years old.

KA: Yeah. I was about... yeah, I was about 22, I think.

AB: I remember once you told me that you almost got the lead in a musical and at the last minute you lost out because you were an inch too short.

KA: That happened a lot, and I tried lying, but it doesn't work [laughs]. After a while you say, 'I'm 5'4" and a half?' I'm really only 5' 3", but I used to say 5'4", always. I was still the shortest girl, though, and I have many, many show biz stories of good, bad, ugly, but I ran into really phenomenal moments that won't be repeated by anyone, probably. They were so unusual. Like Michael Bennett handing me, literally handing me *Coco*, starring Katherine Hepburn- her first national [show]. More Broadway actors did that show than I did, because they were on Broadway with the show prior to my coming to New York, and I was the shortest girl. But Michael Bennett handed me that show because I was called back for *Follies* two or three times and I was the only one that did not get the show. So he gave me *Coco* with Katherine Hepburn. That happened like a few days later. It's a long story, but that and the fact that I received a last minute phone call and I answered the phone, and she said, 'Do you want to dance with Baryshnikov at an audition?', and I said, 'You've got to be kidding me?' That was his assistant choreographer and I knew her, but I did not know the choreographer, and I thought, 'Oh, there is no way'. Long story short, I got the job and I danced with Baryshnikov on Broadway. It was called, *Baryshnikov of Broadway*, done by a California company. It was a national show, for a national television station.

AB: Well, Baryshnikov! That's quite a plumb. [Laughs]

KA: It was amazing. I couldn't believe that I got it. You know, they have an old saying: "Don't ever believe that you did it until you did it", [laughs], and so I was stunned that I got that show.

AB: Well, your New York years were incredible, in terms of what you learned. You worked with well-known choreographers, different styles, you got to know- I guess when you are in New York that long you got to know the various styles of the famous choreographers, so that you could replicate them if you had to.

KA: Yes. You had to be able to be very versatile, and in my teaching that's one thing that I stressed above everything else, really. You had to be versatile. First you try with ballet, and then you go from there. Nowadays you really have to sing, too.

AB: And sing, too.

KA: Oh, yes.

AB: Did you ever have voice training?

KA: I did, when I could afford it. I would have all the time, if I could afford it.

AB: Right. Okay. Well, that was great. Let's talk about the next phase of your career, and that's coming to Wright State. Now, I think it was in 1981 you were in Dayton teaching a class for Stuart Sebastian at the Dayton Ballet.

KA: Oh, I taught a lot of summers.

AB: Oh, you came back frequently?

KA: Frequently, at Dayton Ballet. Because that was where I was trained, and I had known Stuart since I was a little, little girl. I think I was the first one he choreographed on. I think so. He was very talented.

AB: When you taught for the Ballet, what classes did you teach?

KA: I usually taught the- oh, I guess the second or third level.

AB: Of ballet?

KA: Of ballet. Always ballet.

AB: Okay, and I know that in 1981, I needed a summer- I needed a teacher, and you came up at taught at Wright State.

KA: I did. I loved it, I loved it. I had taught in New York when I wasn't performing, at the High School for Performing Arts, and so when I came to Wright State to teach for those 10 weeks, I just- I loved it. I had more fun, I had acting majors, I had dance majors, and I had majors that weren't in the theatre department. It was very freeing and they were very easy to teach, and they loved it. They loved what I gave them, which was different, a little quirky, and there was a lot of humor involved, and props, and they weren't used to it at all. But they loved it, and I loved it.

AB: Right, and you were offered a permanent job here for the beginning of the 1982-1983 year.

KA: Yes.

AB: Okay, and you were offered a job as Assistant Professor, and do you remember your salary?

KA: I don't want to talk about it [*laughs*]. It was low.

AB: It was \$14,500, and we were just in the process of discovering that we were the lowest paid department in Liberal Arts, and therefore the lowest paid department in the university.

KA: Yeah, that sounds about right.

AB: Yeah, it was really disgraceful, but that's the way it was.

KA: Horrible.

AB: It was awful. But we hired three people that year. Who were your colleagues?

KA: Sandra Tanner and Mary Giannone.

AB: Did you get along with them?

KA: Oh, fantastically. We were very, very close friends, too. We became that. We spent those three years- it was before the computer so we hand wrote everything, all of the curriculum. It took us hours, we were there at like 10 o'clock at night only for that, trying to write. We tried to write the whole curriculum- in I think it was less than a week, maybe in two days- for the fall registering, the fall/winter registering, for all four years. Luckily, we had a very understanding chair, named Dr. Abe Bassett, and he was wonderful. He backed the acting first, and we were next, we were up, Dance was next, and the three of us knew that we were hired with great respect and loyalty from you, the chair, and that helped us to get through that first year that was very tough. It was really tough to build a dance program, but you allowed us to build the dance program with a good feeling from the hierarchy. We really worked hard to have what we wanted, and we did. We designed a program that encompassed everything. It gave the student the opportunity to go into ballet, or modern, or jazz. You know, we wanted it to be open to them, and we wanted to train them to be ready for anything. Because we had a saying in show business which was- one saying was "Never Assume Anything", and that meant- and we reiterated this constantly- about how if you preached that one prop was stage left, make sure that you check that it's there before you go onstage [laughs]. It sounds maybe small, but it's not when you go to the side of the stage and your prop is gone, and you're in big trouble.

AB: And, you know, we have to give credit to Dr. Eugene Cantelupe, who was dean of the college for 11 years, and he understood the importance of the arts, and he was the one that made it possible to hire you and Mary, and I don't know if Mary had a college degree or not.

KA: I think she did, yes.

AB: She did, but other people- you were instrumental in getting John Rodriguez-

KA: That's correct.

AB: -and he was not a college graduate. Because we broke that barrier, thanks to Dr. Cantelupe.

KA: Thank you.

AB: Yeah, thank him.

KA: A million times, right, and I'm sure many students feel the same way.

AB: But the training that you had, again, is the equivalent of- in fact, you couldn't learn what you learned in a university, without a professional career.

KA: No, and that's a real problem and concern for me. To make sure, whether they have a degree or masters or whatever, that they have that professional experience, because in our field there is nothing like it. You learn so much, and not just about the steps, but how to treat your students. I mean, I did four Broadway shows, one off-Broadway and one national. I did tons of- I even did Radio City, I've toured the world, I've been to over 30 countries- some because of my parents, some because of my art- and you can't beat that experience in a book, or even in a classroom. You have to be out amongst all of it to understand.

AB: Well, I think you were 33 years old when you came to Wright State, so-

KA: Correct, and I was so lucky to have the opportunity to have a second, lucrative- eventually- career in teaching, directing, choreographing, all of that. I was strictly a performer and a beginning teacher, but I learned that art form, too, and I got better and better and better and better, because I was determined to get better in something I might be a little deficient in, because I hadn't done it.

AB: That first year, you directed a musical. You directed a musical almost- you choreographed a musical almost every year, right?

KA: Right, almost.

AB: Yeah, and the first year you choreographed *Guys and Dolls*-

KA: Yes, I did.

AB: -which I directed.

KA: Yes, you did. And we got along! [*Laughs*]

AB: Oh, you were great. Because you really set a lot of the musical pieces, because you had skills that I really didn't have. That's not a- so I really needed you. But I said to you one time, I said, 'Kathy', or, 'Suzanne, you do not need to be here every night. We're not doing any dance tonight', and you said, 'No, I need to be here, because I need to support my students'.

KA: Oh, I don't remember, but I believe you. It sounds like me.

AB: Okay, this is 2017, and in 2014 the theatre students had a reunion, and on the stage of the Festival Playhouse and so forth, and you came to that. Do you remember that night?

KA: Oh, I'll never forget it. I went to the picnic more than anything, and I really didn't think anyone would know me or care that much, frankly. But it was amazing, the students all remembered me and thanked me. It was a wonderful day for my ego. Wonderful. And I needed it, because my mother had just passed away, and I was diagnosed with MSA. That's why I have trouble speaking sometimes. It's a rare, progressive neurological disease, so talking sometimes is difficult.

AB: Well, I'm glad you introduced that so we can talk about that. One of the things you do know to keep MSA at bay as much as you can is to do exercises.

KA: Constantly. That's the only cure- well, there is no cure. It's progressive.

AB: What kind of exercise do you do?

KA: St. Leonard's pool, constantly, and I take everything I've learned at Woodman and 35 [*Woodman Dr. and Route 35*], which is they have one-on-one therapy, but it became so expensive so I went to St. Leonard's, which is free, and I've incorporated every exercise. Besides doing the ballet bar, I do upper body strengthening, constantly, and every day that I'm not there I'm at Southview Rehab doing physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy... let's see, how many therapies are there [*laughs*]. I do all of them. I'm as stubborn about that as I am about becoming a good teacher,

AB: Do you enjoy exercise?

KA: I do. I do, I think it's in my nature to get a lot out of it. I've been doing it so long that it really does seem like second nature.

AB: And tell us again, MSA stands for what?

KA: Multiple System Atrophy. It's very rare.

AB: Multiple Systems Atrophy. Very rare.

KA: Yeah. It is right underneath Parkinson's, but it's very different. It's in the cerebellum, which is at the top of the brain stem. It is not part of the brain. In other words, I will always have my memories, which- thank goodness, it won't affect that at all.

AB: It's one of those things you know more about than you ever wanted to know.

KA: Exactly [*laughs*]. I guess.

AB: You know, one of the memorable things that you choreographed that I just literally loved was *Evita*.

KA: Oh, *Evita*. I loved it, too.

AB: That was such a wonderful, wonderful show, and it's got everything you did, and of course I wrote in my book, *Producer's Notes*, that the students came to you and expressed their love for you because they remember you so well. Because you taught them things that they weren't learning anywhere else, you did it without being a martinet, and if they were lucky enough to be in something you choreographed, they know that at the end there is going to be wild applause, and they were going to get all these accolades, because they danced so well. Because you helped them dance so well.

KA: Well, I tried. I certainly tried. I'll never forget one day in rehearsal for *Evita*, I had a very complex part for the soldiers. They were really- it was difficult, they were pivoting and going one direction and another direction, backwards and forwards, and they were so good, they really were. And one night, Lenny Daniel- who became one of our best students ever, I think he was even honored at Wright State for that, and he went into the profession and did well on Broadway and so on- anyway, during that rehearsal he decided to go the wrong way, and the whole group of about 12 soldiers went this way, and he went stage left, and we just let it- he was very authoritative about it, you know, and the whole group was going the right way and he was going the wrong way, all the way off into the wing. [*Laughing*] and we laughed and we laughed, and we finally said, 'Lenny?' 'I went the wrong way!' 'Yes you did!'

AB: Well, somebody might have thought, 'Boy, she has some unique choreography!'

KA: Very unique. He ran right into the aristocracy [*laughs*]. But it was a good show. It was a good show.

AB: Yep. And the other shows that you choreographed, you did *Chicago*-

KA: *Chicago*.

AB: -and *Sweet Charity*, maybe?

KA: *Sweet Charity*. *Guys and Dolls*, twice-

AB: Twice.

KA: -and, um, what is the name of it? I can't... it had about 400 dance moves in it, I thought I would never get through it. But, *A Chorus Line*, twice. I wish I could remember the one. It's like forever lost. I can't remember it, I'm sorry.

AB: Well, I wish we had videos of all of those so we could=

KA: I wish we did, too. We only had partial videos in the theatre department of some of them.

AB: Well, Kathy-Suzanne, this has been a very enjoyable conversation-

KA: Thank you.

AB: -and I really appreciate your coming here.

KA: Thank you, I've had a wonderful time.

AB: So thank you.

KA: A lot of good memories.