

**SIXTY YEARS OF
BLESSINGS**

Joan Campbell



Joan Campbell was born in Reading, Berkshire, UK. She came to Hong Kong in her 20s in 1954, and has been living in this city ever since. Hong Kong dance would have gone down a very different path had Campbell landed somewhere else, as she has involved herself in many firsts in Hong Kong, among which most notably was establishing recognition for the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD)'s Ballet in Education syllabus. Campbell's contribution goes beyond ballet to Western folk dance, ballroom dance, and the mixed dance forms of the Hong Kong Schools Dance Festival. She will soon turn 90, but one witnesses how her passion for and practice of dance has helped her preserve her youthful vigour. During the interview, she spoke eloquently, elegantly and energetically.

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Location: Carol Bateman School of Dancing

Recorded and noted by: Joanna Lee Hoi-yin

My mother said that I made a declaration at the age of ten that “I am not going to go on to the stage. I will teach”. And I have been a dance teacher since I received my advanced certificate at the Elmhurst Ballet School in the UK, in 1945. I was trained in classical ballet, which I was an instructor in until I came to Hong Kong (Plates 1 and 2).

Back then I had a boyfriend who worked for the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC). He made acquaintance with Carol Bateman who was looking for a teacher to join her school in Hong Kong. So I came over and taught at Bateman’s school.¹ Later on I met

1. Carol Bateman School of Dancing. Founded in 1948, it was the first registered ballet school in Hong Kong. Since its founding, its main branch has been located at The Helena May, 35 Garden Road, Central.

Plate 1: Joan Campbell (centre) as a girl in the late 1930s. Photo credit: *Dance Showcase*, issue 2 (Hong Kong: Premiere Showcase Limited, 1985), p. 47.



Plate 2: Joan Campbell in the mid-1940s. Photo credit: *Dance Showcase*, issue 2 (Hong Kong: Premiere Showcase Limited, 1985), p. 49.

Mr Campbell, whom I married in 1956. He was also an employee of the HSBC, a company which required its employees to stay out of wedlock in the first five years of service. My late husband left the bank so that he could make me a Campbell. It was a courageous yet difficult move because his father and people in his family circle were all HSBC employees. When I first came here, the population was one million. The art circle and the business circle were separate but people knew each other. Our marriage was a mix of the two circles. Probably there are too many people in Hong Kong now. The social dynamic has changed so much. Circles do not mix anymore. Even people within the arts do not know one another (Plate 3).

A folk dance “teacher”

Since my arrival in Hong Kong in 1954, the Hong Kong Highlanders has been holding “Monday Night Social Dancing”. Back then about 40 to 50 Scots, Brits, Germans, other Europeans as well as Chinese got together every Monday evening at the Union Church on Kennedy Road. It was more of a social gathering than a dance gathering—the dance did not require much technique. Scottish dance usually comes in four sets

Plate 3: Joan Campbell (first right) and her husband (second right). Angus Campbell (first left) was working in the then Education Department. An athlete with a passion for Scottish dancing, Angus Campbell was directly involved in setting up the Hong Kong Schools Dance Festival. Joan Campbell recalled Angus saying that it would be nice to get people together at the festival, and that his department would try to bring it to schools. In the first year, the Festival lasted for two days. Joan Campbell still remembers some boys doing Polish dance, sitting on chairs and stamping their feet, who “really brought the house down”. Photo taken on the New Year’s Eve of 1960 at the Hong Kong Club. Photo courtesy of Joan Campbell.



and one dance with a partner. One of the pairs is the lead of the group, standing nearest to the musicians. The lead pair does its sequence, and the other groups repeat until the music finishes. People usually walk the steps through before the music starts so that everyone knows the steps. The “teacher” is in essence the one to call out the steps, and anyone with a good sense of rhythm could do that. However, people come and go at the Highlanders. There are some repeated visitors but one never knows what it is going to be like the following week. In the 1950s, my husband and I were regulars at the weekly Wednesday gathering. With my dance training I became the natural choice for calling out the steps and helping those who could not follow very well. Gradually people regarded me as the “teacher”. In the meantime, there was a more serious but smaller performance group formed by some of the better dancers.

By word of mouth, more and more people learnt about the Highlanders dance gathering, including university students. People started inviting me to teach, for example, as the Western folk dance instructor at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) in the 1960s. Some of my students subsequently formed the Budlet Dance Club.² I also served as the advisor to the Hong

Kong University Students’ Union Folk Dance Club and the Folk Dance Club of the Hong Kong Polytechnic (now the Hong Kong Polytechnic University), among others.

In the 1950s, Russian folk dance was highly popular. In a performance, its tempo and movement style were enticing. It attracted many male learners. The girls did not really have any preference. They just wanted to look nice and have a partner. I honestly thought that I barely knew enough to be a folk dance teacher. It was war time during my youth, rendering it impossible for me to travel to Hungary or Poland to receive proper folk dance training to add to my classical ballet skills.

Western folk dancing remained pretty much an entertainment until the Schools Dance Festival³ was inaugurated in 1965. Government schools have been actively participating from the outset, students of which learnt the dance so as to compete in the “Western Folk Dance” category. I remember that in the early years of the festival, Western folk dance was

2. The full name of the club is Budlet Folk Dance Club.

most frequently practised by government school teams, followed by teams consisting of slightly handicapped children. I can still picture the four boys doing the waltz in their wheelchairs and the blind children touching each other to stay in their formation. It was so fantastic, so moving. I found Western folk dance welcoming because the dance puts everyone on the same level and makes one understand his fellow human dancer, and humanity, better.

In 1975, Pearl Chan, who had studied the ISTD (The Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing) curriculum, brought examiners to Hong Kong when ISTD showed interest in promoting it. I arranged for some of the HKU students to take the ISTD examination, the popularity of which flourished as Western folk dance gained traction in schools. The Schools

3. According to *Hong Kong Dance History*, the Schools Dance Festival was founded in 1956: “[It] was initiated by Angus Campbell, Senior Education Officer of Education Department, with Education Officer Betty Mair and Physical Education Inspector Lee Chan Po-chi being in charge of its planning. Ballet teachers including Joan Campbell, Stephen Kwok, Jean M. Wong and Lau Siu-ming were invited to serve as advisors and judges. It saw the launch of the inaugural competition-based ‘Hong Kong Schools Dance Festival’, commonly known as the ‘Schools Dance Competition’.” Hong Kong Dance Sector Joint Conference. *Hong Kong Dance History* (Hong Kong: Cosmos Books Ltd., 2000): 11. [English translation by Nicolette Wong]

Dance Festival was much sought after for multiple reasons. The school management wanted to build the school’s reputation, the students enjoyed dancing, and the teachers wanted extra accreditation. Passing the ISTD associate examination qualifies physical education teachers as junior dance instructors. Yet, the ISTD examination has now passed its peak in Hong Kong.

Sixty years of ballet teaching

I said just now I came to Hong Kong in 1954 and taught at the Carol Bateman School of Dancing. Miss Bateman was a Russian dancer. She came to Hong Kong from Shanghai in 1948 and started her ballet school at The Helena May in Central. In 1954, she had the idea of introducing the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD)’s Ballet in Education syllabus to Hong Kong and she needed someone who could teach according to the syllabus. She therefore offered me a two-year teaching contract. At the school, I taught ballet of course, and also national dance (or “folk dance” as is generally called). The girls took classes and performed at The Helena May which had an in-house stage. People who came to watch the performances

spread the word and invited my students to perform at Rotary Club balls, hospitals, and fairs. I am positive that those performances successfully connected the public with (usually secluded) ballet classes.

The first RAD examination was offered in Hong Kong in 1956. However, at that time, most people had very limited exposure to the RAD curriculum. One almost had to be personally involved with the teachers or the examiners, say being an assistant, to learn. It took tremendous effort to complete the curriculum. In the first year the examination was offered, only 120 people sat for it. Luckily, since then, the number of examinees has grown rapidly. Why is that so? A few decades ago there were fewer options, which also meant less distraction. If one danced, he just danced, and stayed focused. There are so many things happening now.

Most Hong Kong people, whether inside or outside the ballet circle, know Jean M. Wong and Christine Liao. They were my students too. I have to admit that, back in the 1950s and 1960s, only girls from rich families could afford to learn ballet. It was not easy for those with limited means, because, look, pointed shoes were very expensive, let alone other gear

and costumes. But we did try to help the less well-off ones. The Carol Bateman School offered one-year scholarships annually to two girls from the schools in Kowloon who did well at our auditions. Not many, indeed. But look, there is the Schools Dance Festival! It is for every school to join! I do believe the Festival has contributed immensely to the popularisation of dance. However, I think students learn better in a proper dance studio compared to a rehearsal after class at school. They think “Oh, it is just another class” if they learn within the confines of the school, while they get more serious if they make an effort to travel to a dance studio after school or on holidays.

Together with a few others, we founded the Hong Kong Ballet Group (HKBG) in 1964. The mission of the HKBG is “to bring ballet students onto the stage”. I found people were more dedicated and put their hearts into it when they wanted something, for example, performing in a theatre or being awarded a scholarship. In 1974, then HKBG patron Dame Margot Fonteyn (Plate 4) invited a German dancer, Heinz Bosl, to perform in a HKBG fund-raising gala. Unfortunately, Bosl died of leukaemia in 1975, aged 28. In 1976, the HKBG decided to introduce a scholarship

in memory of Bosl. The then President Sally Leung Cheuk-hung donated the sum required for the establishment of the “Heinz Bosl Memorial Scholarship”. The scholarship was originally designed to support study and living expenses for one awardee in an overseas dance institute for one year. Later we found it a rather large sum to spend on one person, and decided it was a better use of resources if we distributed the money among more awardees to summer schools. Between 1976 and 1989,⁴ scholarship winners including Cliff Lui, Wilson Cheng, Janet Lau, Janet Wong, Andree Ma Lee, Linda Vann, Melissa Kong, Yuri Ng, Christina Lai, and So Hon-wah studied at the Royal Ballet School in England, Académie Princess Grace in Monte-Carlo and the Beijing Dance Academy in China.

4. The Hong Kong Ballet Group launched the Heinz Bosl Memorial Scholarship in 1976. Campbell said that the scholarship “stopped after a few years” but she failed to remember exactly which year. The HKBG website states that scholarships had been offered between 1976 and 1989. See the HKBG website: <http://www.hkbg.org/scholarship/intro/>. Accessed 17 November 2018. According to the HKBG 30th Anniversary publication, the final recipients, Christina Lai and So Hon-wah, received their scholarships in 1986, more than “a few years after 1976”, as described by Campbell. The Hong Kong Ballet Group. *HKBG 30th Anniversary*: 22-24.

Plate 4: Dame Margot Fonteyn (left) and Joan Campbell (right) in a conversation. Photo credit: *HKBG 30th Anniversary*, p. 17.



I also taught in the education arm of the Hong Kong Ballet (HKB) after its establishment in 1979. Yes, the company once had an education department, but it was later disbanded. The disbandment was a shame. Should the department have continued to exist, the company could have nurtured home-grown dancers. I object to the saying that Hong Kong girls do not meet the requirements for company dancers. If you see someone with the right shape, right attitude, right technique, right musicality, and train them your way for six months, they will fit into the company. The company is called the “Hong Kong Ballet” and there should be Hong Kong people in it. I feel sorry for those Hong Kong girls with good potential who are not accepted into the local company. It is sad to see local girls deprived of this chance to join. I find that the HKB either has a good corps-de-ballet but poor soloists, or the other way around, but they are never both good at the same time. If they trained their own dancers, there would be a reserve of dancers (apprenticeship), and the unbalanced quality could be rectified.

You have to believe in something if you have been doing it for over 60 years. I believe in ballet training. Every child should be given the opportunity

to go to a ballet class for at least a couple of years. When you are sent to a ballet class, you are not sent to become a ballerina. You are sent to become sociable, to sit and walk nicely, to move gracefully, and to listen to the music. It does not matter if you will never go onto the stage when the classes are over—one walks down the street, and one should walk nicely down the street. There were seven of us in my RAD class back in the UK. Only two of us ended up ballet teachers. Among the remaining five, one became a model and one a film actress. Ballet paves the way for what you want to do in your life. Only one in a million can become a ballerina, while those others learn to enjoy dance and music. And to me, that spells happiness.

A few days before this interview, I was at The Helena May when a gentleman came in. He greeted me and asked me how long I had been teaching ballet. I said 60 years. He was so taken aback, saying that he had never met anyone who worked in the same place for 60 years. I said to him, “I like dancing. This is a beautiful place. I do what I like in a beautiful place, and I am lucky.”