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## On the Wit and Theatricality of Clark Tippet

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*The CFR is honored to partner with POBA.org on profiles of its affiliated artists. In this post, we focus on [dancer and choreographer Clark Tippet](#), as recalled by his friend and colleague, [Kevin McKenzie](#), who has been [artistic director of American Ballet Theatre](#) since 1992.*

Who was Clark Tippet? [From the POBA biography](#): *Clark Tippet (1955-1992) was one of the most acclaimed dancers and most promising choreographers of ballet in modern American dance. As Principal Dancer for the American Ballet Theatre (1976-1990), he danced in and with some of the greatest talents of his day including Baryshnikov, Tharp, and Parsons, and created numerous works for ABT and other dance companies. Tippet came to choreography in the mid-1980s, producing works for ABT and for the Pacific Northwest Ballet of Seattle and the Kansas City Ballet. The New York Times described his "Bruch Violin Concerto No. 1," as "downright terrific" and declared him one of the most promising ballet choreographers of that decade. Tippet's works for ABT also included S.P.E.B.S.Q.S.A (The Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barbershop Quartet Singing in America), Rigaudon, Some Assembly Required, and Enough Said.*

*And now our interview with [Kevin McKenzie](#), in memory of Clark Tippet:*

CFR: If we could ask Clark three questions to start, they would be: "What's the most perceptive question anyone has asked you about your work?," "What's the most idiotic question anyone has asked you about your work?," and "What's the weirdest question anyone has asked you about your work?" What do you suppose he'd say?



Clark Tippet costumed for *Push Comes to Shove*, 1976. Photo: Martha Swope.

Kevin McKenzie: For Clark, the answers would likely be the same to all three questions. Something like: “What is your work about?” Or: “Why did you start choreographing?” He would have thought any question equally perceptive, idiotic and weird at the same time because he seemed to view life in general as inspiring, chaotic and unexplainable.

He came to choreography very late in his career and completely by chance. By applying to a choreographic workshop because he’d get paid for it, not because he was interested in developing into a choreographer, he was as surprised as anyone how it so quickly became a tool for him to express his thoughts and feelings about the art form and life in general.

After a chaotic bout with drugs that nearly ended his dancing career, he returned to ballet with a newfound respect for the history and language of it. So very much wanting to conquer the classical prince roles, which he did beautifully, he was actually more suited to contemporary vocabulary, which is why all the choreographers wanted to use him.

He found his resolve in the tugs of his conflicting interests in ballet, and in a zany outlook on life — of going with something unless it was harmful. Mainly because trying to control his circumstances of career and ideals was not an option and would probably not turn out to be what he wanted, anyway.

There was something about growing up in a large family (we both had 10 siblings) that made us both aware that life is at best organized chaos, and that life does not actually revolve around you.

He used to comment when making plans or hoping for something that “The only thing we know for sure is that we’re all going into the future...”

**CFR: In his [New York Times obituary](#), Clark was applauded for his “witty sense of style and theatricality.” For those unversed in dance but find the images on his [POBA page](#) galvanizing (as we do), how would you describe the wit and theatricality in his work? Would it impact audiences the same way in 2014 as it did in the 1980s and ‘90s? What elements of Clark’s life — his personality, aesthetic and work ethic — do we not know about? And what did you personally learn from him?**

KM: He was an extremely witty and intelligent person who had the ability to sum up the character of another person through observation of their behavior and rarely did he seem to miss the mark.

What was hilarious about this quality was when he turned it on himself. Which he did fairly regularly and it was infectious. And healthy. One wished one knew oneself as well as Clark seemed to know himself. I think, given his philosophy on life and his experimentation with classical vocabulary, he was a precursor to the likes of [Christopher Wheeldon and Alexie Ratmansky](#). But given that we, as an audience — because of the likes of Wheeldon and Ratmansky — have evolved, I’m not sure if Clark’s work might look dated or before it’s time. But it certainly would be recognized as Clark’s signature insightful and zany outlook that was always engaging, on stage and off.

I remember when I started to choreograph and fretting that the work I was doing was a [Tudor ripoff or a Kylian ripoff](#), he said, “That’s all right! You’re copying masters! Then you’ll do your Balanchine ballet, your MacMillan ballet, your Tharp ballet and eventually, you’ll do your own.” He knew there was a process of self-discovery that was seeded in exploring what you admired. Sometimes you discovered you could improve on what you admired, but mostly you needed to put it behind you to go forward.

**CFR: From the afterlife, Clark is granted permission to return to our mortal coil for 48 hours for the singular purpose of creating a new work. However, the type and the nature of the work will be assigned by you. What kind of piece would you commission him to choreograph — and why?**

KM: I’d say to Clark: “OK, you’ve been dead for over 20 years — now you’ve got 48 hours to create a work of my choosing. Tell me what you’ve been up to and maybe we can work this through together.”

And as Clark frequently did when he would listen to me try to work things out, he’d lean in close and with sincere eyes and a caring tone say, “Kevin, you’re an idiot – you’ve always been an idiot, you always will be...”