Tippet’s legacy preserved for generations

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Native Parsonian Clark Tippet died in 1992 at age 37, but now, through a non-profit’s work, the professional ballet dancer and choreographer lives again.

“POBA gives a second life,” co-managing director, Regan McCarthy said of the first-ever virtual cultural arts center “preserving legacies of talented artists who died without being recognized, or recognized to the point their talent deserved.”

POBA is a Tibetan term that describes what Buddhists believe about the transformation of consciousness at death to prepare for a new life. Spelled phowa, but pronounced poba, POBA is trying to capture the transformation of a creative legacy to give it a new life.

Clark Tippet is one example.

Clark’s mother and father, David and Virginia Tippet, strongly encouraged their son, who began dancing at the age of 5 under the direction of instructor Joyce Gandy. Seeing his tremendous potential early on, Gandy took Clark at age 11 to New York, to the New York Academy Ballet School, where she worked during the summer.

“That’s where he got a full dance scholarship in seventh grade and attended this private school during the year and came home in the summers on break,” his sister, Janie Tippet, said. “Just six years later, at age 17, he signed with ABT (the American Ballet Theater).

“He always said he was one of the most fortunate dancers,” being afforded the opportunity to learn under Mikhail Baryshnikov, who became director of the company after defecting from Russia, Janie said.

Clark performed with Baryshnikov in the American Ballet Theatre’s premiere of “The Rite of Spring (Le Sacre du Printemps)” at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1976, among other performances with famous dancers.

“Mikhail Baryshnikov later decided to give a workshop for the dancers and people interested in choreographing. That’s when Clark started choreographing his first ballet,” Janie said.

Clark became one of the first principle dancers for the company and created his first ballet, “Enough Said,” in 1986. He choreographed seven ballets in five years.

He danced in the world premiere of two of his ballets, “Bruch Violin Concerto I,” which he dedicated to his mother, and “S.P.E.B.S.Q.S.A. (The Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in America),” which he dedicated to his father.

“He tried to record most of his seven ballets, but the last one wasn’t finished, and tried to document them best he could, especially when he found out he was dying,” Janie said. “He created kind of a portfolio for mother and father, so they would have a record of his life, showing that he was very appreciative these two parents in Parsons who were willing to help him on that path, a very different path than most other (young boys) at that time.”

As often happens when someone passes, the legacy Clark left behind was packed away in boxes and stored in the homes of relatives, tucked away on shelves and in hearts and minds. Then came a call from POBA to Clark’s other sister, Patti Nutt, in Parsons.

“Patti asked me to talk to them. They said they really wanted to create this website for artists that didn’t really finish their work because their lives ended too early,” Janie said. “It was great they asked me. It forced me to take a good look at everything and see what we could preserve for his legacy.”

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works of nearly 50 deceased artists, and offers well over 100 portfolios for public viewing, with new ones being added all the time.

POBA's work goes beyond display. "We also work with the estates of many others who we don't display, mostly because the families are still working out what they want to do with the artists works," McCarthy said, referring to a variety of concierge services offered to artists families to help them get the works organized, preserved, digitized, appraised, marketed and sold.

Some artists never did anything with their art, then one day "closed the barn door" and died, leaving the families to wonder what to do with it all. Some examples include 1,500 historical letters and 14,000 photographs. Some items have personal significance, while others may have historical significance, artistic significance, or even financial significance. POBA helps a family walk through the process.

Beyond preserving legacies of talented artists, McCarthy said POBA tries to try to tell a human story, showing the artist's life from beginning to middle, to end.

"(Clark) was the young man with unbelievable talent finding himself in a community that didn't necessarily appreciate or promote that particular talent. I'm sure there were others, but ballet, I'm not sure was one of them. He stuck with it because his family recognized this is a kid with talent," McCarthy said. "Clark went on to make his own life and used the talent to become something extraordinary. To become a principal dancer at the American Ballet Theatre is probably as unique an accomplishment as becoming president of the United States. There are very few people who achieve that recognition in the arts, in ballet, and Clark achieved it, young, one of the youngest principal dancers ever for the American Ballet Theater."

"And from everything I can gather from his family members he was just nice, sweet, hard-working, helpful and generous," McCarthy said. "It's just a great thing we have been able to show his work, and people are enjoying it and equally important that folks are paying attention to it. He got to dance with some of the greatest ballet dancers in history... Mikhail Baryshnikov. To not only study under Baryshnikov but to dance with Baryshnikov and choreograph with Baryshnikov, whew. It's amazing. Here's this young man from Parsons, Kansas. It's just remarkable.

"We're just really happy his story is told, because it's a real person story. It's Parsons' story. He was just a regular guy from Parsons, Kansas. By showing the works of ordinary people, who accomplished extraordinary things, it's inspirational."

McCarthy said pictures displayed of Clark from 1976 and later encapsulate strength, grace and pushing one's body to its limits.

"What we really want to do is create legacies, but we want to do it in the full gamut of media, because artistic expression is varied. It's not just painting, which is what people think of when you say 'art.' It is much more than that. Much more than that," McCarthy said. Clark's videos of his ballets are one example.

Another, McCarthy said, is music. For instance, one of McCarthy's personal favorites displayed on the POBA website is Andrew Gold, who was never famous but his musical works are very well known, such as his theme song for "The Golden Girls," "Thank You For Being A Friend," and others, such as "Lonely Boy," "Hope You Feel Good," "One of Them is Me," "Firefly," and "Kiss This One Goodbye."

For Clark's portfolio, Janie gathered video, photograph scrapbooks, reviews and news articles.

In accordance with his will, Robert Hill and David Richardson took over Clark's creative work and choreography, keeping his legacy going with companies that want to perform his work.

"When I started working with POBA, David was in Japan choreographing some of Clark's work... I still enjoy watching his ballets," Janie said, despite new choreographers bringing in their own creativity to Clark's works, changing it in them over time.

"When someone passes away, the way it impacts the family, it's kind of hard to open it all up again. Old scars. All of his things were stored," Janie said. "But I was very interested in opening it up again."

During the search, memories were rekindled of her watching Clark perform and enjoying time with him when he was off stage.

"As time allows, Janie said she continues to research.

"As for POBA, I just have so much gratitude for them. I mean, my gosh. That they came up with this idea and that they are being funded. I hope people keep funding them. It's a non-stop. They keep finding more and more brilliant artists. I think it's a necessity, or else how would you preserve it. How would you preserve it without an archive. It's very, very important the work they are doing for the future. It documents history and captures the essence of that time period and what art was being expressed."

"I hope more people look at the website and communicate it out to the world."