

# UNE DU JOUR

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## Leslie Browne

*Exclusive interview by Francesca Senzasono Groux*

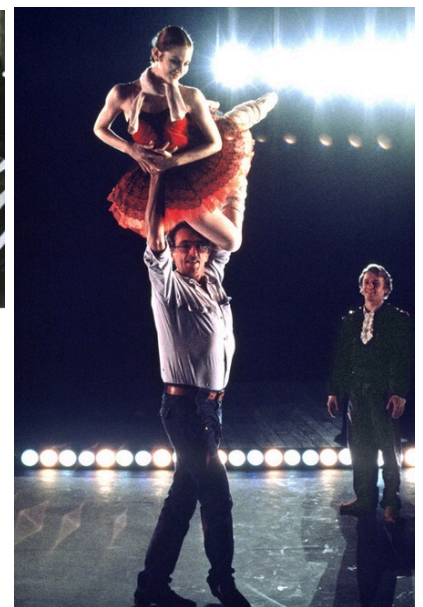


*Mikhaïl  
Baryshnikov and  
Leslie Browne in  
The Turning Point*



**Francesca Sensazono Groux:** *Leslie Browne, in 1977, you was known throughout the world for the performance of the young dancer Emilia in the now iconic film The Turning Point, which earned you to the nomination to the Academy Award and Golden Globe for Best Supporting Actress. At your side, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Shirley MacLaine, Anne Bancroft, directed by Herbert Ross. How much autobiographical is really in the film? Did the fact that the film talking about your family help you or hindered you?*

**Leslie Browne:** Arthur Laurents, who wrote the screenplay, was looking for storylines that would be believable, so he interviewed my mother and a lot of her story did get into the film. I even think they modeled the Shirley MacLaine character after her. The part of us being from Oklahoma, which was paralleled to my being raised in Phoenix, was true, and that I was sent to New York by myself was true, and that I was looked at to be a future ballerina was true, the rest was fabricated, however none of that I knew until after the filming years later. I had no idea my mother had been interviewed, and did not put two into together that



**Herbert Ross the Director**



**The premiere of The Turning Point in Monte Carlo with Mikhail Baryshnikov and Shirley MacLaine**



our story was similar to the one in the movie because we filmed it scene by scene, and it just didn't cross my mind. So it had absolutely no effect on me at all. The only scene I connected to my real life was when I was on the phone with my father, and I was crying because I missed him, and that I could draw on my true feelings.

**Francesca Sensazono Groux:** *You are the image of the American dancer for excellence, you studied at the School of the American Ballet Theatre, you danced both in the New York City Ballet and in the American Ballet Theatre, all true temples of American dance. What did it mean to be an American dancer thirty, forty years ago? What's the difference with today's American dancers?*

**Leslie Browne:** When I was a dancer with the New York City Ballet, we had incredible dancers such as Allegra Kent, Gelsey Kirkland, Patricia McBride, Peter Martins, Helgi Tommason, Suzanne Farrell, Edward Villella etc., so it was an amazing time, and then once the Russians started coming and defecting, there was a huge ballet boom and all of a sudden ballet dancers became big like movie stars. Baryshnikov, Makarova, Nureyev,



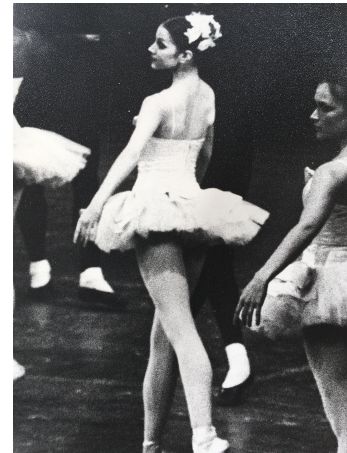
all brought a lot of glamour and excitement to the dance world. Not to mention there were other great dancers both American and European like Cynthia Gregory, Fernando Bujones, Carla Fracci, Erik Bruhn, to mention a few, but the Russian defections brought it to the spotlight and helped bring dance more into the mainstream. Guest engagements were much more highly paid than they are now, because we were considered such big stars. However, the level and standard of dancing is still at the highest level, and even though sometimes artistry is sacrificed for technique, it still is at a very exciting level and is always evolving.



*My first year in New York  
by myself at SAB*



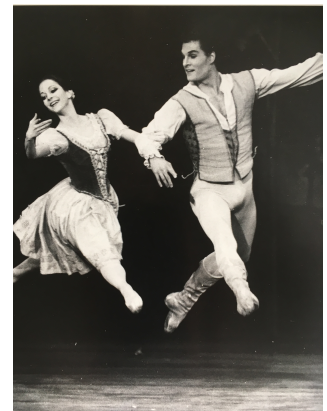
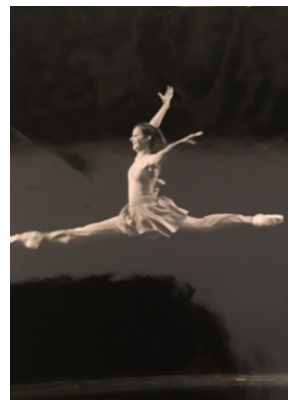
*My graduating performance  
from the School of the  
American Ballet Concerto Barocco*



*Performing symphony in C  
with the New York City Ballet*



*America Ballet Theatre years*



**Francesca Senzasono Groux: What place does Russia and Russian dance have in your life?**

**Leslie Browne:** When I saw Misha and Makarova do their first performance of Giselle at the Lincoln Center, I was a student at SAB, and I can't say enough how much that inspired me to want to continue ballet and become a ballerina. At SAB, I had a variety of Russian teachers such as Danilova, Tumkovsky, Dubrovskaya, Dudinskaya, and Kramerevsky. Then joining New York City Ballet, I had the pleasure of working with Mr. Balanchine. Even though, he tried to adapt his style to America, there was still a lot of Russian influence in his teaching and work. Then when I got the role of Emilia in The Turning Point, I had the pleasure of working and acting opposite Baryshnikov, and also being coached by Danilova for the scene for Don Q variation. When I joined ABT, I worked with Juergen Schneider, Elena Tchernichova, Irina Kolpakova, and got to watch firsthand Makarova, Godunov, Nureyev, Baryshnikov, among others, rehearse and perform. I also was coached by both Baryshnikov and Makarova.

This is not to say that I didn't have other influences by wonderful teachers and coaches that were not Russians, but the question was about Russians and Russia.

**Isabelle Mirrow**



As far as Russia goes, my grandmother and my grandfather, on my mother side, came from Odessa and Kiev, during the war, to the United States. It was their meeting of Nora Kaye's (Antony Tudor's muse) parents on the boat coming from Russia where the whole ballet history began in my family. With that meeting, they became friends, and then my mother became friends with Nora as they grew up together, and when Nora took an interest in ballet, she got my mother interested, and then my mother studied ballet, and from there got into the American Ballet Theatre. There, my mother met my father, Kelly Brown, and the two of them went on to dance in American Ballet Theatre, and, then eventually, they took over a ballet school in Phoenix, and there is the beginning of The Turning Point.

So, I guess you could say that Russia and Russians have played a very important part in my life as a ballet dancer and teacher, as I also have learned quite a bit that I have been able to apply to my teaching. Again, not to say that there weren't many other influences in my life as well.

**Francesca Senzasono Groux: So, what does it mean to you to be a daughter of art?p**



*This is my parents, Isabelle Mirrow and Kelly Brown*



**Leslie Browne:** Being the daughter of two artists, I don't really know any other way to be. I can't compare it to anything else because being in the arts is all I've known. There are pros and cons to having two parents who are creative souls and not having any kind of intellectual balance. Wanting to go to college seemed like I was from another planet. Learning musical instruments and taking dance classes was normal in my family. I did study the flute, violin and piano along with my dance lessons. I can't say I was prepared for challenges such as The competitive nature of world and also mean-spirited people who perhaps want to see you fail. In that way, I probably could have been more aware and been able to maneuver that better. However, I have to say I am very fulfilled in my soul, and being in the arts, and being able to have a creative outlet, has allowed me a depth of happiness that perhaps I would not have found had I not gone in that direction.



*Me and my brothers and sister Ethan, Kevin and Elisabeth*

*Me (in the middle) my mother and my sister*







*The film Nijinsky*



**Francesca Sensazono Groux:** *What place does acting have in your life, as you has starred in other films and TV shows such as "Nijinsky", starring Jeremy Irons, George de la Peña, Carla, "Dancers", with Lynn Seymour, Mikhail Baryshnikov, July Kent, and Alessandra Ferri, and in an episode of "Happy Days"?*

**Leslie Browne:** I think I always wanted to be an actress and expressed interest in it as a young child. I don't think it's something that is foreign to me and came rather naturally. It allowed me to add an extra dimension to my life other than just dancing. During my dancing years, I did manage to also study acting, and I was lucky to study with the great Uta Hagen for a year. I was fortunate to have the film, theater and television experiences that I had, and also bring that experience to my dancing. I also got to work with people outside of the dance profession, which also broadened my mentality and imagination. Acting still plays a part in my life today, as when I coach dancers, I always feel that I am able to impart my experiences as an actress to get them to open up and be more expressive.

**Francesca Sensazono Groux:** *Tell me, if you like, about your father, whom the audience has been able to admire in films such as Seven Brides for Seven Brothers, Oklahoma, Daddy Long Legs, and more.*

**Leslie Browne:** My father was a very talented man. And what a physique! Stunning even by today's standards. He could dance any style, sing and act. He also was a wonderful teacher. Sadly, he passed away when I was 20, and I had left home, which was Phoenix at the time, when I was 14 and ended up staying in NY on scholarship with SAB, and later joining NYCB, making the Turning Pointe, joining ABT, and making the film Nijinsky, all by the time I was 20. So, when I was on tour with ABT, and got news that my dad had died, I was mortified. He was only 52 and suffered a heart attack while he was teaching. I realized I had let so much time go by, and I didn't get to really know my dad whom I loved dearly. My mom had since divorced my dad and had moved back to New York, so my mom was the one who was around the most during these years.



*Me and my dad*



*In the Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*



*In The Girl Most Likely*

What I do remember about my father is that besides, the enormous artistry that he was born with, the depth of his emotions and the enormous body of work he accomplished, he loved just being in Phoenix with the family. We always had so much fun with him. We didn't have a lot of money, but every summer, we went to Disneyland. He came to my school at Christmas dressed as Santa Claus, and came to my class and called me



**Dancing with Shirley MacLaine**

to sit on his lap, and I never knew it was him until years later. When I was 5, and in the hospital with pneumonia, he came everyday to see me on his lunch break, during a Broadway show he was in at the time, and played games with me. So, I was very close to him when I was young, and my sister and brothers also loved him dearly. He was a warm and loving father, and just a very sweet and simple man with an awesome talent, that I think sometimes felt like a burden to him. I think he just wanted to be a regular guy, and then go to work and do what he loved doing. He just wanted to go and play golf, swim, go fishing, have picnics and barbecues, and then go and do his art. Definitely no airs about him.

When he took over the ballet studio in Phoenix, he became the star ballet teacher there, and everyone flocked to him to study ballet whether they were professional, amateurs or just adults wanting to get some exercise. He loved them all, and he taught a great jazz class as he studied with Luigi. He loved putting on performances and doing choreography at which he was also talented.



**In The Girl Most Likely**

From what I heard about him from people who knew him, he was a great guy, he worked very hard his whole life and earned everything that he had achieved. I think he wanted to be a star on Broadway, but when he got his big break and invited the agents to come, I heard that nobody showed up, and that defeated him. So, then he took over the dance studio in Phoenix where he was very happy because he could be with the family all the time, and not have to go on tour with Broadway shows. Unfortunately, his desire to stay in Phoenix and teach ballet went against my mother's desire to be in New York.



**Francesca Sensazono Groux: Today you teach, tell me about your life, your students, your desires as a teacher.**

**Leslie Browne:** My life as a teacher has been rewarding, and equally as satisfying as my life as a dancer and performer. Instead of me doing the dancing I get to make somebody else do it. It freed me from the mentality of having to take class every day myself, which when you stop performing is sometimes hard to let go of. I love working with and getting to know the students that I have had over the years. It is

interesting to get to see the many different personalities and different artistic gifts, and also the struggles that they have. I also love watching them grow and develop into beautiful artists

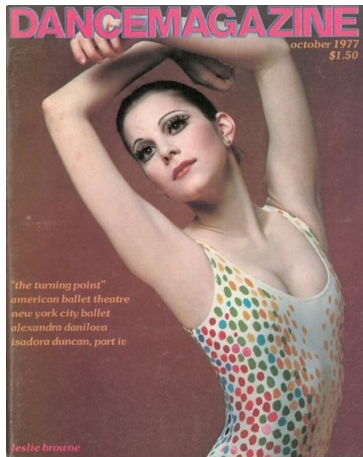
and dancers, and just seeing how learning the discipline of ballet makes them better human beings. It can be very frustrating at times, when students don't go fast enough, and you don't see enough progress, but then, all of a sudden, you see them move forward, and it's very exciting. That is my only desire as a teacher is to see the progress and feel like I accomplished something. Teaching has also taught me a lot about myself.



I feel very lucky that I was given many teaching opportunities, which includes choreography and setting repertory for performances, which I also love to do. This allowed me to make a smooth transition from my dance



career into the next phase of my life, which can be a difficult transition. Teaching has been very important in my life as it allowed me to draw on all the life experiences that I had as a dancer, performer and actress, and use them to help my students. I love that teaching is something that I can continue doing for as long as I like, or, I guess for as long as I can walk. I may choose to stop completely at some point or I may continue well into my old age. I will see.



**Francesca SenzaSono Groux: What does it mean to you, Leslie, to be a dancer?**

**Leslie Browne:** The meaning of being a dancer to me has been fluid and has changed many times throughout my life. In my younger years, it was my family profession, and I did it because my mother took me to ballet class. I enjoyed it, but I didn't really think too much about it. I was interested in many different things. Then when I was about 12, my mother said that I needed to narrow my focus, and get really good at something and stop spreading myself too thin. She felt that ballet was the direction that I should go, as I had the talent to go far, and she didn't want me to waste it. So, I followed her lead and decided to pursue ballet, but when I came to New York on a scholarship at SAB, I didn't go home after that. I missed my family terribly. So, for the first time, ballet presented sadness and pain even though I

enjoyed being in the class, it made me unhappy to some degree. Once my mother, my brother and sister move back to New York, I felt happier again, and then I joined the New York City Ballet and loved it. I felt the most alive when I was on the stage. I then did the film *The Turning Point*, and being a dancer meant that I got this great opportunity, and I got to act, and be in a movie, and I got to dance with Baryshnikov. It was a very exciting time.



**In The Sleeping Beauty**

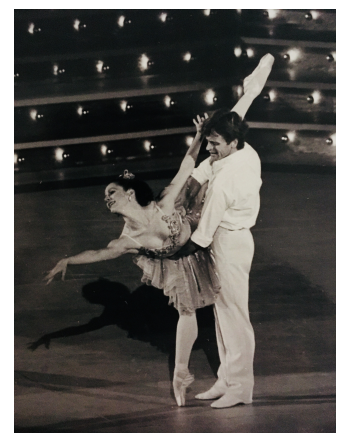
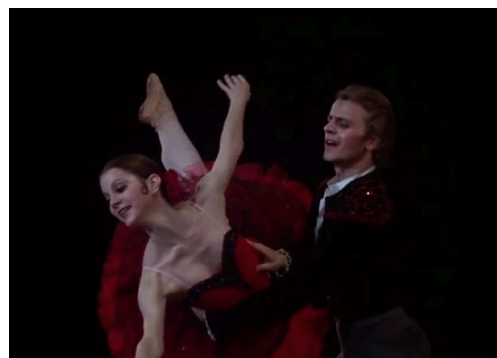


**With Mikhail Baryshnikov in The Turning Point**

After the film, I joined American Ballet Theatre as a soloist, and then dancing became about survival against the pressure of having to prove myself. I went into ABT as a soloist because of the film, and once the film came out, I became an instant star, and with that comes many pressures, and burdens and jealousies. So, dancing became about overcoming these hurdles to get back to just enjoying my dancing. There were times when I tried to leave dancing and do other things, but I wasn't satisfied and felt like something was missing from my life and my identity, so I always went back. Being on stage was when I felt all me was open. No walls up. It was a great feeling.



**With Robert La Fosse in Romeo and Juliet**



**Whit Mikhail Baryshnikov in Who Cares**

Today, I am grateful to have had the wonderful career and life that I had, and all the great experiences and travel that I got to do, I saw so much of the world. I was able to earn a living at something so beautiful and exciting and satisfying to the soul, and I am very lucky for that. Being a dancer has also given me the opportunity to have a second career as a teacher. I am happy where I'm at, I can look back on my life and feel that I've done enough.



*With Mikhail Baryshnikov  
at ABT*



**Francesca Sensazono Groux:** *Would you like to tell me something that I did not ask you about and that is particularly dear to your heart?*

**Leslie Browne:** I don't have anything else to add.

**Francesca Sensazono Groux:** *It's not easy to talk about the great Leslie Browne. I think that the film, **The Turning Point**, has particularly engraved her existence, not only because it was inspired by the real life of the Brown family, but because there is so much of Leslie in Emma's character. It's imprinted on me the end of the film, where she dances a beautifully interpreted solo. It is the image of the dancer, of the artist who through movement is free to be, beyond the words of the misunderstandings, of complicated human relations, of jealousy... That solo tells the world who Leslie Browne is, a soul that only wants to dance thus realizing her being a woman. A soul that wants to fly towards the infinite in an afflatus with the whole. And so it is still today with elegance and grace, she continues to be a dancer, a steel butterfly that seems fragile but is not. It is a testimony of what dance is beyond technique. We need technique as a means and not as an end. If the technique remains an end, you can no longer fly towards the infinite, towards the embrace of the whole that gives you a different perception of your being on earth. For me, dance is spirituality, it is to be able, by taming technique, to be more than just a body. Leslie is all that, that's what I feel when I see her, when she writes and when she acting. A complete artist who started out young to be famous and known all over the world, thanks to a film, **The Turning Point**, that had a worldwide success, a film that for me still remains the best in the quality of the screenplay, interpretation and choice of actors, in the direction, in the dancers. You can feel that it is a film made by those who know the world of dance in depth, because they have lived it. All the themes are present. In all this whirlwind came out a gem, Leslie Browne, who with her grace and genuineness, gives us herself with immense generosity, and has made it throughout her career, and still today as a teacher. Her freshness and curiosity emerges from her words, as well as her soul that vibrates in telling herself. Thank you Leslie, thank you from all of us.*

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