

When Brigitt Mayer set upon the idea of documenting the key figures in ballroom dancing's history, she was to embark on a seven-year journey that would take her around the globe, meeting the legends themselves. **Alison Gallagher-Hughes** finds out how she approached such a mammoth task

Journey of a lifetime

When Brigitt Mayer's son turned to her and asked: "What is more important, your book or me?", she knew that her desire to capture the stories of ballroom's greatest names had taken over her life.

Now, seven years after beginning *Ballroom Icons*, the completed work – 294 pages, 64 icons, two sections of

dance history and 200 vintage photos – is published, but she admits it still feels "unfinished".

"It could have gone on forever. Every interview revealed something new, someone else I could have spoken to or something else to research. I just had to say, 'this is it' and get it printed," she says.

The great names, those

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responsible for crafting ballroom dancing and evolving it into what we know today, are documented in words and pictures – from Victor Silvester and Josephine Bradley to Richard Gleave and Espen Salberg. Brigitt is the first to acknowledge that her readers will no doubt find “omissions”.

“When I started, I had a core group in mind and they were the key players I knew through my own experience as a dancer, but there were others I did not know about so the group grew as a result of those initial interviews. Bill and Bobbie Irvine were among those. I met them with my ideas for the book and how I envisaged its structure and they suggested many people that they thought I should include.”

Brigitt insists there was no “flash of light” that instigated the project but that she’d had an idea in the back of her mind for some time. After retiring from competitive dancing and giving birth to her son, Niko, in 2000, it took hold. German-born Brigitt, who now lives in Canada, discussed the idea with her father, professional photographer Uli Mayer, and their creative force gathered momentum. Her parents came to stay with her for extended periods in order

for the process to get underway, and together father and daughter met the subjects and documented their participation in video and sound recordings and with still photographs. The reportage photography gives the book a strong documentary feel and the iconic status of its subjects achieves a timeless quality by continuing the monochrome application of archive and contemporary shots.

To carry out the interviews the pair visited subjects in North America and the UK, “an organisational nightmare” which meant mapping out subjects and destinations over a condensed stay. They also used four British Open championships as a hub where many of the key players converged, but this meant accepting the busy Blackpool schedule.

“It can be a bit hectic because they are standing on the floor [adjudicating] all day and when you get to meet them, they’re tired and you have to encourage them along and say, ‘you have to do it anyway!’”

Blackpool also provided an opportunity to meet with photographer Ron Self, “an institution on the edge of the dancefloor” who provided much of the archive photography for the book.

Brigitt considers meeting the greats to have been a privilege, but one tinged with sadness. Since the start of the project, many have passed away and although she is proud to have documented their stories, she wishes they could have seen them in print. The lives of those icons who overcame post-war austerity or used dancing to heal the wounds of conflict proved to be particularly humbling and enlightening.

“Alex Moore, Major Eric Hancox and Sonny Binnick are good examples of a generation that were actively involved in the Second World War and how their involvement in dance helped heal divisions. After the war was over they began teaching the German couples. There was no animosity. There was a love of dance and this helped them grow together.” →



Pictured, Brigitt with Ruud Vermeij, and opposite, with photographer Ron Self at Blackpool, where this year he was presented with an award to mark his 54 years as a photographer at the Dance Festival. Photographs by U H Mayer.

DanceMemories

There are also examples of how the war affected German counterparts. Gerd Hadrich literally built his business from the ruins of destroyed Hamburg, creating his school in bombed out premises and using dance to take his pupils' minds off their hardship.

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Researching the backdrop to these stories not only touched on social history, but the evolution of dance itself and how the two entwined. From court dances to a social revolution, the proliferation of ballrooms, particularly in the UK, not only broke down class divides but gave the country a bedrock as the home of ballroom

dancing. Moreover, it founded the innovators, the people who “wrapped it all up, gave it a form, made the effort to write it all down and became the leading authorities of the time”.

Brigitt was also able to chart the progression of ballroom and Latin American dancing on both

sides of the Atlantic, as well as its progression to the Far East.

“There was a parallel development in the UK

and US to a point, and then they went in different directions. Much later on there was a connecting point again and it merged. Japan developed independently to a degree up to the 1950s due to immigrants from England who introduced it into the country. Then people such as Len Scrivener taught it so there

was cross-pollination between the British and Japanese.”

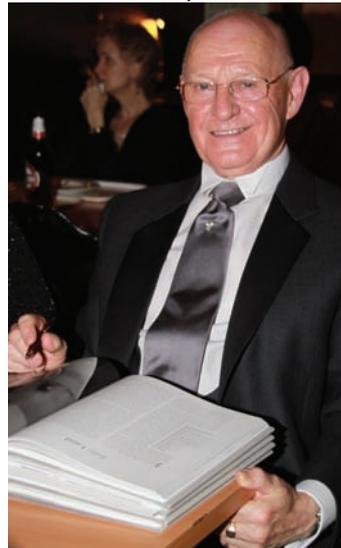
In *Ballroom Icons*, the late Tetsuji Kojima tells how in 1953 Len Scrivener and Nellie Duggan visited Japan to judge the Japanese Championship and were stunned by the style that had developed – much of it self-taught from books. “He told the board of the Nippon League that all the competitors had to change to the correct way of dancing. This meant having the lady slightly to the man’s right side.”

A similar metamorphosis happened in the 1970s when the dichotomy of US and European Latin influences converged.

“Social cultural systems in America had a direct influence on dance and movement whereas the British were influenced by [Monsieur] Pierre and Doris Lavelle and the movement in Paris from the 1920s and 1930s – the Cubans that were there. Then the likes of Victor

From left, Lorraine Rhodin, Julie Laird and Bryan Allen sign copies at the book’s British Open launch.

Photographs by Ron Self.





Above, Brigitt interviews Pierre Dulaine. Inset, discussing *Ballroom Icons* with Alison Gallagher-Hughes. Photographs by U H Mayer.

Silvester matched the music with the feeling of the Latin but within the confines of the time. Some things, such as hip movement, were not considered acceptable and so Latin dancing evolved along those lines until the 1970s when the Americans came over and everybody said, 'that's what we want to do'."

Brigitt felt it important to capture the stories of those whose contribution to dance was not on the dancefloor but supporting from "behind the scenes", such as former Blackpool Festival organiser Gillian MacKenzie, Mick and Barry Free of Supadance and Ron Gunn, tailor to the champions.

"I wanted to include some other

interests that are also part of our industry. The selection of subjects could then be structured to provide the reader with variation. Also, people like Ron [Gunn] had such interesting stories to tell. In the 1970s, he was doing fantastic business making Latin catsuits until Donnie Burns danced a show in dress pants because his outfits didn't arrive. Overnight the fashion for catsuits was gone and Ron was left with rolls of expensive material in his basement."

It's around the mid-1970s that Brigitt concludes her icon stories. More contemporary icons provide commentaries on

their legendary icons later in the book. So why stop there?

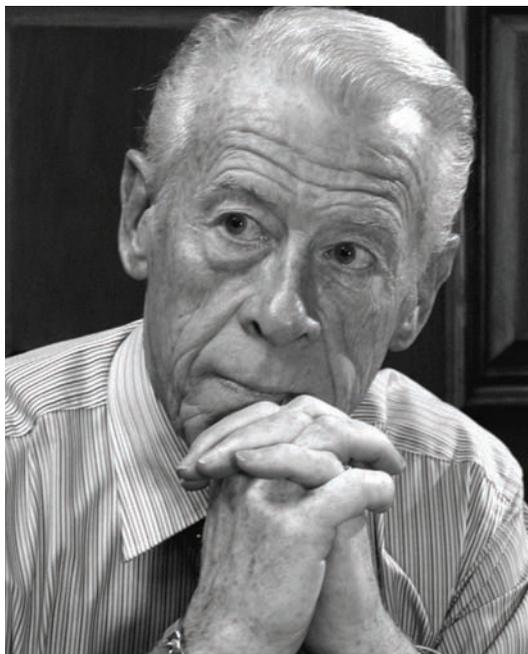
"As I say in my closing words for the book, it's not satisfying for me to leave things there. There's another book waiting to be written."

And will she be writing that book? Brigitt laughs: "I've spent the last couple of years sitting at a computer – some days for 15 hours at a time – and it's had an impact on my life. I think now it's time to pay back my son for his understanding." →



DanceMemories

Here we print an extract from Anthony Hurley's entry, reproduced with thanks to Brigitt Mayer



Anthony Hurley photographed by U H Mayer.

“It took until 1969 to win our first British Championship. Thankfully, my mother was looking after our daughter. We retired from competitive dancing in 1973 in Nuremberg at the Europeans after winning the British Open four times, then two Worlds in 1971 and '72 and three Europeans in 1971, '72 and '73.”

In those days the principal European countries involved in ballroom dance were England, Germany, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, Norway and France. But interest was booming fast in Eastern Bloc countries. Worldwide, Japan was leading the way, with Australia, South Africa and New Zealand and later the US emerging as potential threats to European supremacy.

Italy and Spain had very little involvement during this period.

The World Championships were held in either Germany, Japan or England, but they were not always an annual event. In 1959 the Mecca Corporation in England bought the World Championship title. They owned all the big ballrooms in London. There

were five to eight that were open to the public, and you could go and dance every night to a big orchestra like Joe Loss or Victor

Silvester. Floorcraft, referring to dance floor etiquette, such as controlling one's speed and direction, was the gentlemanly thing to do or the general manager from the Hammersmith Palais, for example, would ask you to leave. The men had to wear jackets, collars and ties, and the ladies wore net petticoats. On Sundays you paid ten shillings and six pence admission, which included tea served at your table.

“I remember a lady, Doris was her name, who served at the Hammersmith for years, became quite a dancing expert just by watching us practise all the time.

“We retired from competition because I didn't have the fire for it anymore. I wanted something else. I wanted to see what could develop from dancing just for pleasure. As a result, Fay and I danced better. There must have been an inhibiting psychological factor with competition dancing, because now we were more relaxed and allowed more natural elements to emerge.” ●

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WIN



A total of 2,550 copies of the boxed, limited edition book – each containing four collectable stills of ballroom icons for framing – have been produced. Copies are available to buy (priced £105) from dancesport-international.com. **We have one copy available to win**, courtesy of Brigitt Mayer and DSI. To enter, simply **tell us how many icons are profiled in the book**. Send your answer, along with your name, address and contact telephone number, to arrive no later than August 10, 2009 (contacts page 5).