

A dancer turns her passion for dance into a passion for history...

## Chatting with Brigitt Mayer



Photo by UH Mayer

Originally from Germany, Brigitt Mayer saw much success as an amateur and professional dancer both in Germany and then later in Canada. Among many accomplishments and attesting to her creative side, Brigitt with partner Brian Torner were invited to perform in the *Dual of the Giants* at London's Royal Albert Hall.

In 2002 Brigitt began a project that comes to fruition this May at Blackpool. She has produced a book that chronicles in story and picture many of the Icons that ballroom dance what it is today.

Dance Beat asked Brigitt why she did it and who was the most interesting.

**DB:** What were your titles when you were competing with Brian (Torner)?

Brigitt: We were North American Professional Latin Champions and ranked second in Canada.

**DB:** What really pushed you forward was when you became involved with showdance and cabaret.

Brigitt: Yes, we came second in the world in the South American Showdance Championship.

**DB:** You also competed in the Blackpool Exhibition division. Did you win that?



Brigitt Mayer with Pierre Dulaine

Photo by UH Mayer

Brigitt: We never won. I never won anything in my whole life, I was always second! Before I came to Canada I was second in Germany also. A runner-up for ever!

**DB:** You have decided to write a book. I have seen some of it. It is filled with beautiful photos and is about the personalities of our business. Can you explain to us why you decided to create this book?

Brigitt: How do you decide something like that? I had a strong urge to do something about our history because I cannot find out anything really without going to five hundred different sources. Or I have to ask someone or someone has to volunteer something. I thought why not put it all together. I wanted to write about the personalities who put ballroom dancing where it is today. It starts really in the '20's with people who just used to dance; the Castles first, then the first competitors and teachers. The question

then was, "what are we really doing?"

**DB:** So in your book you describe how ballroom dancing began and then you bring in the characters as dancing evolves?

Brigitt: Exactly! I have two historical parts. A



Capturing John Kimmins

Photo by UH Mayer

small part explains how ballroom dancing came to be. I don't go back to cavemen, but I start with court dances around 1700. There is not too much detail on that, just some introduction because the book is really about competitive ballroom dancing and also the social aspect, you can't really divide one from the other. They are intertwined. Then I move to the personalities involved and who wrote the first technique, made rules and formed governing bodies. You need rules.

**DB:** Like today we have no lifts allowed, for example, they used to allow lifts.

Brigitt: Yes, while researching I found that at one time there were all kinds of "freak" steps and these were eliminated. Of course much of this occurred in Britain. I think Britain and North America were the prime movers. A lot of the dances

came from North America but the British took these and formulated them. The British were



Brigitt Mayer with Sam Sodano

very conservative and this was a high-class pastime, so they did not want any "freaky" things.

**DB:** I know in your book you interview many of the living legends of ballroom dancing. Who was the oldest personality that you interviewed?

Brigitt: The oldest was Paul Krepps from Germany. He was someone who

helped develop the Viennese Waltz technique. He was 89 when I interviewed him and is 96 now. Six people I interviewed have passed away since I started the project. Len Colyer just passed away recently. It is a little sad that several of these people will never see the finished book. Actually Wally Laird passed away right as I was starting this book and that really made me realize I had to get on with it. I had got the original idea in 1999, but I had a baby in 2000 so it was pushed into the background.

When the baby was two I felt I had to continue with the project. I never interviewed Bobbie Irvine either. We had scheduled the interview but she was already ill and had to go to London so we never did it. I interviewed Bill.

**DB:** Who did you find the most interesting? Who had the most colorful life?

Brigitt: I think Doreen (Freeman) is very interesting. She is still a "diva" and I don't



Pages from Mayer's new book

Photo by UH Mayer

mean that in a negative way. She is still so beautiful and animated, she seems to come from showbusiness. Paul Krepps was also very interesting. We have to remember that that generation went through the war, but after the war they all got back together and many of the British dancers taught the Germans. I found that interesting. Victor Sylvester, for example, went through two world wars so there are some very interesting stories out there.

**DB:** What type of book is this going to be?

Brigitt: It will be a coffee table book in black and white. My father was my photographer and traveled with me. A third person involved was the dance photographer Ron Self (who is an icon in himself) and he dug through all his archives and all the archival photos are from him or from the attics of our icons. So we have vintage photography and some of how they look today. We chose a medium that reflects our world. We print in Germany, our graphic artist is there. We are doing a limited, numbered, boxed edition with all the signatures of the icons who were still alive. There are between 250 and 300 pages.



Brigitt Mayer with Bill Irvine

Photo by UH Mayer

**DB:** What is the amount you are going to print?

Brigitt: We have decided on 2,500. When they are gone, that edition is over. Possibly in the future there may be a soft cover edition aimed more at the kids who may not be able to afford the limited edition.

**DB:** You seem to have enjoyed this, are you planning any other projects?

Brigitt: I did enjoy it. It was intense. For the last two years that's really all I have done. But I'm not sure where it will take me. You asked me at the beginning why I did it, I think I can say, "because it was worth it!"

**DB:** When is the book

going to be published?

Brigitt: In Blackpool 2009 is the official launch. We are also talking to distributors. Probably there will be one main distributor in North America and another in Europe. Also it will be sold online.

**DB:** The book is in English?

Brigitt: It is, although I have someone who has offered to translate it into Mandarin for the Chinese community and others have asked for the rights in Russian and Italy. But this is for the future. I have a very good editor, because English is my second language and she told me my English is getting better!

**DB:** You said I've always been the runner-up, is this your winning trophy?

Brigitt: I didn't do it for that reason! I don't know what the benefits will be other than the feeling that I did something worthy.

**DB:** Well I wish you much luck with this venture. I'm going to buy one!

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