

**ROB HOCHSCHILD:** Hello, I'm Rob Hochschild, the Associate Professor of Liberal Arts for the Berklee Oral History Project. We're honored to have with us today Yasuko Tokunaga, who was director of the Boston Conservatory Dance Division and artistic director of the Boston Conservatory Dance Theater for 21 years. The dance division was founded in 1943, and she was the third director.

She started teaching at the conservatory in the early '70s and then again in the '80s-- we're going to get into all of that-- and retired from her leadership role in 2011. Yassie and her sister Emiko, also a longtime faculty member of the conservatory, founded their own company in New York City many years ago, and they continue to teach there. Yasi Tokunaga, thank you very much for the time today.

**YASUKO TOKUNAGA:** Thank you. It's wonderful.

**ROB HOCHSCHILD:** So looking forward to talking about the highlights of your career as a dancer, as a teacher, as a choreographer, as an administrator. But I did want to ask you-- retired in 2011, but you didn't really retire in general. So what have you been up to these past few years?

**YASUKO TOKUNAGA:** Oh, I've been up to a lot. I've been really-- I have to say, first of all, that I've been very blessed in my career. Right after leaving the conservatory-- well, when I announced my resignation, I virtually had four job offers on my desk.

**ROB HOCHSCHILD:** Wow.

**YASUKO TOKUNAGA:** So right after that, I took six months off just to recoup from my job. And then I was invited to join the faculty. I taught the Graham technique at the Hartt School in Connecticut, in Hartford, because my friend-- good friend Stephen Pier was just becoming the director, and he has the same artistic vision as I do, so I want to help him build that school. So I taught there for a year and a half.

And then I was asked by the Jose Limon Dance Foundation to be their licensing director. Actually, they asked me to be their education director, but I wanted only a part-time job. So I became their licensing director for five years. And then I left them, and I was very fortunate because the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance asked me to be on the sub-faculty, the adjunct faculty. So I teach advanced ballet there, and I will be teaching again this summer for Martha Graham's intensive.

**ROB HOCHSCHILD:** And you're based in New York City these days.

**YASUKO TOKUNAGA:** Pretty much. But I still have a place in Boston. I'm bi-city. I kind of go back and forth.

**ROB HOCHSCHILD:** Right. Well, thanks for coming here today.

**YASUKO TOKUNAGA:** Oh, you're welcome.

**ROB** So let's go back and talk about how sort of this interest began with dance. So how did dance first come into your  
**HOCHSCHILD:** life? How did it first start to become moving toward a profession for you?

**YASUKO** Well, it's interesting. I have an older sister, Emi, and when I was three, I was constantly on the move. And I  
**TOKUNAGA:** remember, we were just talking, she choreographed my first dance. It was called "Naughty Button."

And it was a button that was on my vest, and it popped off, and I went around and put it in my pocket. So that was my very first dance. She was always putting on recitals at home.

Then at age nine, she enrolled me in ballet classes. I was really fortunate. The University of Utah ballet division was having an extension division, so I enrolled in that.

**ROB** So you grew up in Utah?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Yes, I grew up-- our family-- actually, our family was interned, and then we relocated to Salt Lake.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** I see.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And so I was very fortunate to be able to meet William Christensen, who actually founded the first ballet dance  
**TOKUNAGA:** program in a university way back. And it was this professional ballet program that had an affiliate with a company. So I studied there, and Bill Christensen was like my dancing dad. He was really wonderful to me and took me under his wing.

So in high school, I was performing with the company. I couldn't be a member of the company because I was too young. But I was dancing with the company that's now called Ballet West. And it was at that time-- there was a wonderful modern dance program at the University of Utah. Shirley Ririe and Joan Woodbury would bring in great artists to Utah to teach master classes.

So being a bunhead, I wandered into a master class with Anna Sokolow, the great choreographer. And I was terrified because I'd never had modern, really. So she called me up after class. Said, you. And I was in tears by the time I reached her. I thought, oh, she's going to tell me never to come back. I didn't belong in this class.

But she told me she wanted me to go to New York. I want you to come to New York. I want you to come to Juilliard, where I teach.

**ROB** And how old were you then?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** I was 16.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** OK.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** So I still had a ways to go in college. And she said, I want you to apply to Juilliard. And call me when you get to New York. I will come.

But I was really insecure. I mean, I'm not going to get on the phone and say, here I am. I mean, thousands of people knew Anna. But she did-- I did get into Juilliard, and I did perform with her all her works at Juilliard.

And she-- I have to say, Anna Sokolow has been kind of my guardian angel, too, because whenever there was a major turning point in my career in dance, she was there in the background. I don't know whether it was by design, but it was synchronicity. And like when she brought me to Juilliard, and then after Juilliard, I will say I got my diploma, and I quit dance for six months because everybody was pushing me too hard. So I decided to quit.

And then I got a call that said Anna Sokolow wanted me to join this alumni company. They were forming a Juilliard alumni dance ensemble, which was going to be a professional company of eight dancers presenting ballet and modern. And I was the swing between ballet and modern.

But Anna said, I want her to come back and do the solo. So I was in the company. So she brought me back.

And then after that, I was very humbled to see who I was dancing next to. They were all principal dancers with Limon. And I was out of shape, and it was terrible.

So I ran and hit the studios really, really hard. And I got myself into shape, and I danced with-- that company lasted for two years. So we danced with that company for two years.

But at the same time, Emi and I decided to form our own company I always wanted to dance-- I was wanting to do my own choreography and be independent. And I think that was because of my experience in the ballet company since in high school.

**ROB** So a couple of things I just want to ask about. And you used the phrase "bunhead" a moment ago. So for anyone  
**HOCHSCHILD:** who doesn't know what you meant by that, would you explain that?

**YASUKO** Oh. Yeah, it's ballet trained. It's a ballerina.  
**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** OK.  
**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And I was only trained in ballet. And that's all I studied. So when I went into Anna Sokolow's class, I was a fish out  
**TOKUNAGA:** of water.

**ROB** I see. Because the focus there was really modern dance, contemporary dance.  
**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Well, it was a master class with a master teacher.  
**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Yeah.  
**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And I just wandered in. And I thought-- it was really interesting. I loved it. I really loved it. And then I owe that to  
**TOKUNAGA:** her, too, because going to Juilliard opened up a whole other world for me because I'd really only really known ballet. And then all of a sudden, I'm introduced to Jose Limon's technique and Martha Graham technique and modern dance.

**ROB** And then you wound up double majoring in both ballet and Graham, right?  
**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Yes. I think I was the last major that they-- after that, they just had a contemporary dance major. But before, to  
**TOKUNAGA:** be a ballet major, you had to get-- Antony Tudor was there, who I don't know if you know who he is. He's--

**ROB** From doing your research, but you can tell us about him.  
**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Yeah, he was a genius, a master choreographer who was known for his psychological ballets. And he was a  
**TOKUNAGA:** contemporary Balanchine, only Tudor went away for 15 years to meditate. He was a Zen Buddhist. And he just washed his hands and disappeared, and Balanchine grew and grew and grew.

But Martha Hill brought Tudor to the conservatory.

**ROB** I see.  
**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** I mean, to Juilliard. And I studied with him. And I met Jose. I was one of the youngest-- I think last dancers who  
**TOKUNAGA:** really studied with Jose and worked with Jose while he was alive, because he died in '72.

**ROB** OK.  
**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And then I went to Martha Graham, and I was a ballet Graham major.  
**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** I see. So a ballet Graham major.  
**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Mm-hmm.  
**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** So that was two majors, two different--  
**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Well, yeah, double major that--  
**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** OK.  
**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** What you had to do is generally, you had to go with a petition to these teachers, and they had to say yes, you could be a ballet major or no, you can't. And at Juilliard at that time, if you weren't accepted either in ballet Graham or Limon, you were out of the school.

**ROB** I see. So was that unusual to sort of major in both of those areas?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Well, I think in-- yeah, it was. And I was the last-- I think Mr. Tudor was a Zen Buddhism, and he was fascinated with the East, so I fascinated him because I come from a Buddhist family.

**ROB** I see.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** But he-- I think I was the first female ballet major he accepted in three years.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Oh, OK.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** So he really was down on me, pushing me hard.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** I see.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Which was lucky for me.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** So in the early '70s, then, you and your sister, Emiko-- or Emi started this company in New York. So I wonder if you could say a little more about that. What was the name of the company, and what were you sort of trying to achieve there?

**YASUKO** OK. The company was called Tokunaga Dance Ko with a K-O, which means children in Japanese. It also means institution. So Emi's in anthropology. She got her master's in anthropology from NYU. And she worked very closely with Pearl Primus, who was the great African doyenne of dance.

**ROB** OK.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And Pearl encouraged us to explore our roots as well. So we wanted to do our own choreography and our own-- so we actually explored-- I did a lot of modern and ballet dances. We had a program called Japanese Culture Through Dance. And we did our choreography on Japanese themes. And a lot of our pedagogy and teaching comes from our Japanese training because in Japan, you learn whole dances. You don't learn technique.

So we have that holistic approach in our training, which I'll talk about later. So we wanted to do that. But we also did strictly Western choreography. I did a lot of that.

**ROB** So were you actually born in Japan? Or--

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** No.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** You were born in the States.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** I was born in Salt Lake City, Utah.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** OK, yeah.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Yeah, my father was born and raised in Japan.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** I see.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** My mother was born-- she's [NON-ENGLISH]. She was born in San Francisco but raised in Osaka.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** I see. But the cultural influence, both of dance and otherwise, was always a part of your upbringing and your life.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Yes. And that's because my father's background is very prestigious, if you will. I mean, we're 17th-generation samurai. And he was very wealthy, from a wealthy family.

**TOKUNAGA:**

And I think once-- they were in the import-export business. And they'd just opened a new store before the war broke out. They had the store for five months, and they poured all their savings into it. And then everything was confiscated.

So then they were interned. They went to-- later in Gila River, Arizona. But I think they went to Tulare, the assembly center. And my father was really quiet but very upset.

So he decided that should this ever happen again, he wanted to bring his whole family to Japan. And in order to fit in with our family, we had to learn the cultural arts. So we learned a little bit of ikebana flower arrangement, tea ceremony. And she would bring-- my mother would find and bring in Japanese teachers to our home for Japanese dance.

**ROB** I see.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** But I certainly don't profess to be a Japanese dancer.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Right, OK. Gotcha.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** That was just tangentially, too.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** And so in the early '70s, you had your dance company with your sister in New York. What was the set of  
**HOCHSCHILD:** circumstances that led to you or both of you having a connection with Boston Conservatory?

**YASUKO** Oh. Well, as you know, we used to teach in the summers. We came out every summer.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** So when did that start?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** '72.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** OK.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And I think the last residency we did-- excuse me-- was in January '78 during the blizzard. And we would come out  
**TOKUNAGA:** to do-- we developed a pedagogy that was called the coordinated concept. And I think it was from the background of our training, and especially mine at Juilliard, where I was a double major. I was taking every class in the book, all the ballet pointe classes, ballet rep, pas de deux, modern, modern rep. And it's exhausting.

So we decided to do a coordination, which meant that we took a combination in ballet and translated it into Limon and Graham techniques. So our basis was the similarities of the three techniques-- and we only did those three-- not the differences.

So we had a base. If you do a turn-- like an attitude turn is an attitude turn. It's just where you place the flow and the body of how you place it off center. So we decided to do that, which was fascinating and fun. And we developed that one summer at the Boston Conservatory.

**ROB** This was the two of you--

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Yes.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Developing this pedagogy.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And we had the perfect lab because at that point, I think, Brambilla, President Brambilla, was the president. And  
**TOKUNAGA:** he allowed us to-- we had to have two sessions. Our sessions were really popular. They were three-hour sessions, an hour and a half of ballet, an hour and a half of modern.

So since they grew to be two sessions, we decided to do an experiment. We said, OK, let's coordinate the morning session, but we won't coordinate the afternoon session. And let's compare. It with an eight-week session, so let's compare the results after eight weeks and see if we're full of baloney, or the coordination really works.

**ROB** Right.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** The improvement was incredible.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Wow.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** In fact, the afternoon class was really mad at us because they said, why didn't you do it for us? And we were  
**TOKUNAGA:** doing a study. So that convinced us. And we continued that in New York. We had a New York studio where we offered ballet and modern classes.

**ROB** Interesting. So what was the conservatory like in those days? The students, the faculty, the whole environment,  
**HOCHSCHILD:** what was it like then?

**YASUKO** Well, I remember when I first came in '72, I'd said to Emi, I said, this is my second home. I felt really at home  
**TOKUNAGA:** because the structure and the curriculum was very much like Juilliard. So I felt pretty much at home.

And Jan being the founder was a global visionary. He was really amazing. He developed this whole curriculum. The difference between the conservatory and Juilliard was they offered courses in pedagogy, which I thought was fascinating because Juilliard was performance oriented, and you had to be a performer.

And he offered pedagogy, anatomy. They offered acting classes for dancers, which I wanted to take, but I couldn't because you couldn't, at that point, cross curriculum. So Jan Veen was, I think, not the first. We were not the first, but one of the first programs to integrate ballet and modern because Ruth Ambrose, the second chair, joined the conservatory faculty, I believe, in 1950. And she was a ballet dancer. So that brought ballet then. And Juilliard wasn't founded until 1951. So we were ahead of them.

**ROB** Yeah.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And Jan had a tremendous global vision about bringing in not only ballet and modern, but ethnic dance. He had  
**TOKUNAGA:** always some form of African or East Indian or Spanish, flamenco. So that was exciting to me, too, because we didn't have that. I didn't have it then. They have it now.

**ROB** And what sort of interaction did the dance division have at that time with the other divisions at the conservatory?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** I think not a lot. I know that when I was hired, I taught in the musical theater division. We always had dance in  
**TOKUNAGA:** musical theater. I revised the curriculum once I started teaching there. I doubled the ballet. I doubled it because you couldn't get a consistency.

And if they were going to say there was truly a triple threat, you had to have dance. So I helped Neil Donohue, who was the chair then, and we expanded the dance curriculum in the musical theater. So that had a lot. And sometimes, actually, we used the musical theater guys in our concerts because they were really good.



**ROB** Yeah.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And I always, from when I was nine, I mean, in a ballet and working with the ballet company, my first  
**TOKUNAGA:** performance was with the Symphony Orchestra, I mean, because the ballet company always danced to the Utah Symphony.

**ROB** I see.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And my parents were friends with Maurice Abravanel.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** And I'm sorry, that was the conductor of the symphony?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Yeah.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** OK, yeah.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Wonderful man. And he allowed me to sneak up to the fourth floor and sit and watch him rehearse the orchestra,  
**TOKUNAGA:** which I was fascinated. So music was very important in our family.

**ROB** I see.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And so Juilliard, we always had live music. There was not any concert. And then when I went to the conservatory,  
**TOKUNAGA:** and I started choreographing, I always sought live music because our company had live music. We had a company of seven-- five dancers and a musical component of flute and piano, which we toured with.

So we started out with that rep. And I always contracted a musical-- a pianist and a flautist to come play. And then we expanded-- I worked with the music chairs. And eventually, the orchestra was playing for our concerts. And we traveled with the string quartet.

**ROB** That's great. So just lifting all boats and helping provide some work for musicians as well. That's fantastic.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Yeah. It was interesting because same thing happened at Juilliard. The musicians really resisted. They don't like  
**TOKUNAGA:** to sit in the pit. But after a while, we got a good rapport, and they understood. And I worked also with, just towards the end of my years at the conservatory, Lynn Chang, the famous violinist, asked me to choreograph a piece for him. It was "The Stream Flows," Bright Sheng.

And that was wonderful. It was perfect timing for me. It got me out of the office and teaching and back into the studio to create.

**ROB** Great. So just before we started recording, you were telling a story about how you actually sort of helped your  
**HOCHSCHILD:** sister apply, in a sense, for her first job at the conservatory. What happened there? Would you tell that?

**YASUKO** Yeah. Emi was thinking of going to premed. And Pearl Primus, the anthropologist Pearl Primus, and I got on the  
**TOKUNAGA:** phone. And she said, well, she's going to be a mediocre doctor, but she'll be an excellent dancer.

So unbeknownst to her, I saw an ad in *Dance* magazine advertising a faculty position at the Boston Conservatory. So I wrote the letter, and I applied for her. And being a poor dancer, all I could afford was a bus ticket. So I handed her the bus ticket, and I said, you have an audition in Boston. You have to go.

So she went, begrudgingly. But she had a really strong-- we hired her immediately. And she taught full time at the conservatory for about a year and a half. And then--

**ROB** And I'm sorry, what year was that?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** I think '72 to '73, something like that. Or '71, '72. I think she joined in February '71 and went through spring of  
**TOKUNAGA:** '72.

And then it was me again that called her. And I said, if we're going to have a company, we either do it full time, or I'm going to move on. So she left the conservatory, and we really devoted full time to our company and studio. We opened a studio in '75.

**ROB** And that's when-- but throughout that period, you started coming up here in the summers. You were coming up  
**HOCHSCHILD:** here in the summers--

**YASUKO** Yeah, from Emi's-- yeah.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** OK.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** I started in the summer of '72, and I loved it because the students were really good.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** And then you taught up here in the winter of '78, you think.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Yeah.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** We had that big blizzard, and that was the end of it for you?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** No, actually-- well, we taught a few winter seminars in between semesters. But the blizzard was really scary. But  
**TOKUNAGA:** that's not what ended it.

We had a full-time studio in New York at that point. We were really obligated to carrying classes there. And we toured a lot with our company. So I was busy.

**ROB** Where did you tour?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** We toured nationally. We went to Japan. We've been in Norway, international and national. We did over 2,000  
**TOKUNAGA:** productions.

**ROB** And what was it like to go to Japan? I imagine you had gone back there at some point prior to that.  
**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** No, I had not.  
**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Oh, so your first trip to--  
**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** My sister had, because she got married, and she brought her husband back there. We were terrified because my  
**TOKUNAGA:** perception was they were not going to treat us well, being Japanese-American women. And I thought they were going to be resistant. But when we landed in the airport, there was a line, and they were all applauding.

**ROB** Oh, wow.  
**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And I turned around, and I said, oh, somebody famous is on our flight.  
**TOKUNAGA:**

[LAUGHTER]

And then I looked, and they had pictures of us. So what we were billed as, the dutiful daughters bringing back the family name.

**ROB** Oh, wow.  
**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Which was totally a surprise, because our family is pretty well-established there. And I was shocked. And the  
**TOKUNAGA:** reception was tremendous.

**ROB** That's great. So did you reconnect with family as well?  
**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Oh, absolutely. Yeah, that was one of the things. In fact, some of our family helped us because I think when we  
**TOKUNAGA:** went to Japan, it was in '87, I think. The stock market crashed. And there were only two American companies that went to Japan. I think it was us and the Boston Pops, or maybe it's the symphony. But our relatives would help us with some of the funding and stuff.

**ROB** Yeah. Wow. That's a pretty extraordinary gift to go back there and be recognized like that.  
**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Yeah. I was really taken aback because I honestly thought we were going to be like, oh, these are American  
**TOKUNAGA:** women. But it didn't turn out that way. It was really lovely.

**ROB** So throughout this period, you were really building the company and touring and deploying your pedagogical  
**HOCHSCHILD:** style and everything. So at some point, did you start reconnecting with the conservatory? Or how did that all--

**YASUKO** Yeah, we had a dance studio in New York. And we were training professional dancers. And we lost our space in  
**TOKUNAGA:** '85. And that was when all the rezoning in New York was going on. And there was the controversy between residential and commercial. We had our studio on the third floor, and the resident on the second floor was going to be commercial, but then he decided to be residential.

So that meant that we couldn't have a commercial studio on the third floor. So we lost our space. And it was great. The city of New York really tried to help us find another one, but it was prohibitive at that time. Then I was invited to Boston to come back to the conservatory and teach full time. So I did that.

**ROB** So at that point-- earlier, you had been just teaching summers and doing residencies. But in '85, you full-on joined  
**HOCHSCHILD:** the faculty, right?

**YASUKO** Yes. We did residencies at several universities all across the country.  
**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** OK, right. So when you joined at that point in time, what was sort of your approach to teaching? What was your  
**HOCHSCHILD:** kind of plan as a teacher then?

**YASUKO** Well, I think when I came there, it was a curriculum similar to Juilliard. The dancers were good. It wasn't quite as  
**TOKUNAGA:** classical as I wanted. It was more of a jazz kind of program. I mean, Ruth Ambrose was doing a marvelous job. They still studied ballet and modern.

But I remember in my interview for the director, being chair then, they asked me my goal. And I wanted to really have an integrated program of ballet and modern because I felt that that was really the roots.

And I remember asking the director at Juilliard, Martha Hill. And I said, why did you choose these three techniques? And she said to me, they're different. Ballet emphasizes line. Graham and Limon are both based on the breath. But Limon uses the fall recovery and the fall rebound, suspension of the breath. And Martha Graham uses contraction release.

And so they're very different qualities. And if you can learn all three, you can do anything. And she was right. We all went on to various disciplines and things.

**ROB** So then what you were trying to-- or what you were proposing was that the conservatory take the same approach  
**HOCHSCHILD:** and that students would be required to do all three or--

**YASUKO** Yeah. They were required-- well, Jan had it as well. But we were requiring them to take ballet every day and  
**TOKUNAGA:** modern every day. At one point, we had majors. I won't say majors. I should say an emphasis program. We had a ballet emphasis and a modern emphasis.

When we did the modern approach, we always had-- I was very fortunate because Jennifer Scanlon, with whom I danced a little bit-- but she was a principal with Jose Limon-- was moved to Western Mass in Pittsfield. She commuted-- can you believe this-- from Pitfield to Boston every day.

**ROB** That's a drive, yeah. Five days a week.  
**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Yeah, for the first years.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Oh, my. That's a couple of hours.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And then I condensed her schedule to two days.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Yeah.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And she taught Limon. And Emi and I taught Graham. And I taught ballet as well, and Ruth Ambrose. I decided  
**TOKUNAGA:** that those were important techniques to developing a solid foundation.

And then I added eclectic approaches, which was where dance was going today. So I always-- every modern class was-- the ballet has a set vocabulary. There are different schools that you could portray, whether it's the Russian school, the Italian school, or the French. But modern, we decided to have a codified technique with an eclectic approach.

So I remember having my modern faculty sitting around the room. And I asked them what their philosophy was because that helped me team up the teams so that they would be complementary, not antagonistic, to each other.

**ROB** Was that partially about the styles? I mean, because you were talking about diversity of dance styles.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Exactly.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** So what were some of the styles that were in play?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Well, so what we did was we did ballet. Well, I had-- the codified techniques were Limon, Graham. I had Taylor for  
**TOKUNAGA:** a while. When the teachers were available, I had Cunningham for a little, very short period. Horton, we have a Horton teacher. And then people who had just taken their philosophy from all the teachers they studied with, so I called it an eclectic approach.

So we always had a codified technique paired with an eclectic approach. So one was three days a week. One was two days a week in the modern.

**ROB** So this meeting you just described, that was once you became director of the division and of the theater--

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And I was trying to utilize what best would fit. I have a huge faculty. I had, like, 26 people. And my philosophy  
**TOKUNAGA:** there was to have specialists rather than generalists. So I wanted-- because I was at Juilliard, and I remember being a snotty student. [LAUGHS] And I really felt strongly about people knowing what they were teaching and knowing it well, not having to teach something just to quantify hours.

**ROB** Right.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** So I really worked hard at getting specialists in their individual courses. That's why I had such a large faculty.

**TOKUNAGA:** And that's one of the reasons-- with the resources of the faculty, I had I decided to pair them up.

**ROB** I see.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And that worked out really, really well. So all four years, they studied two different--

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** So you did a lot of hiring. What were the qualities you were looking for in addition to being an expert or a

**HOCHSCHILD:** specialist in a particular field? What makes for a good dance teacher?

**YASUKO** Well, I'll tell you, first of all, I had to decide what kind of a program we were going to be. And in dance, there are,  
**TOKUNAGA:** right now, I think, over 550 dance divisions in the United States. And most of them are coming out of universities because when the university programs, most of them are modern dance. Modern dance really was born out of the university programs.

Very, very few really good ballet programs because that's a specialty. Generally, as a ballet dancer, by age 18, you're approached either to be in a company, a second company, or-- you know by-- I knew by age 14 I was on company track. They were pushing me very, very hard.

**ROB** I see.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And by age 18, after which is when you graduate from high school, most of the ballerinas went on to companies.

**TOKUNAGA:** So I decided that that was important to have a performance-oriented program because a lot of them were pedagogy and just general dance education programs. And there were very, very few conservatory special pre-professional programs at that point.

So I marketed it that way, that we were going to be a performance-oriented curriculum. And that meant that hopefully, by the time you graduate, you're ready to go on to a professional company. Your training is that.

So that's why the specialists came. I wanted people who had had careers in performance so they could train the dancers to perform. If they just graduated from college, and they'd never been on international tour, never done that, how are you going to train dancers who want to do that?

**ROB** So the dance division was founded in 1943. You became director in 1989. These days, the division is seen pretty  
**HOCHSCHILD:** widely as one of the best, if not the best, contemporary dance programs in the country or the world. At that time, did it have that reputation as well?

**YASUKO** Yeah. When it was lauded as one of the best contemporary programs, they used one of my videos. [LAUGHS]

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Oh, is that right? Well, there you go.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Yeah. It was lauded in 2015. And the video that they used was 2008, which is clearly when it was--

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Ah, 2008 was the video. OK. Go ahead.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** I don't know how that happened. But anyway, that was the video they used. And at that time, I had tremendous

**TOKUNAGA:** dancers. So we were always-- I think what I said to the president in my interview-- he said, would you? I said, I'd like to be second to Juilliard. And we got there. We were second. And I was very happy to get the Juilliard rejects because--

**ROB** Yeah.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** No, they were good dancers. And for some reason, they were not the Juilliard type. And we got many kids, if they

**TOKUNAGA:** didn't get into Juilliard, they would come to us, which was exactly what I wanted.

**ROB** Right. So in preparing to talk to you, I read some articles and watched some videos. And one of the things that I

**HOCHSCHILD:** came about or learned was that there was this emphasis on the division to sort of teach in a holistic way, in a sense--

**YASUKO** Oh, yeah.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** There's the physical demands and the technical demands, but also emotional and artistic.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Exactly.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** And I wonder if you could talk about that approach to teaching.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Sure. I'm very proud to say that I brought the wellness program to the conservatory. I think in 1998, I started

**TOKUNAGA:** having physical therapy on campus, which was really important.

And then I worked with the top orthopedic surgeon, Dr. Lyle Micheli in town. And I decided we needed a wellness week. So we kind of suspended regular classes, and we had a wellness week, which changed over the years. I tried various different things. At one point, we had lectures where we had Dr. Micheli come and did an overall lecture. Then we did the spine, the ankle, foot, the knee, the hip.

So we had lectures from the doctors. And there was Ruth Solomon, who's one of the forefront people in dance medicine, helped me organize all of this. The dancers would come in and attend the lectures. And we worked closely with Dr. Micheli's team.

Now, I think towards the end of my tenure there, we were able to get a part-time orthopedic fellow to come be one day a week to help. And Sue Kinney, who's the physical therapist there, is wonderful. That was really, really important. So we started developing a wellness component.

Through Dr. Micheli's advice helped me even redesign my curriculum to make it more efficient for energy. And having gone through such a rigorous curriculum, I knew what the demands were.

**ROB** Yeah.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And then we always had-- I decided to put some somatic techniques into play, which I brought in Alexander  
**TOKUNAGA:** technique and Pilates and Gyrokinesis. The beautiful thing about that was that the people teaching these somatic techniques were former principal dancers.

**ROB** Oh, no kidding. OK.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Yeah. So my Gyrokinesis teacher is Adriana Suarez, who was a principal with Boston Ballet. Jennifer Scanlon, the  
**TOKUNAGA:** Limon principal, taught the Alexander technique. And Donna Silva taught my Pilates. She was with the Joffrey.

**ROB** So they really understand where these students were coming from.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Exactly. And that was a second tier that a lot of dancers today are doing-- a second track of Pilates, Alexander,  
**TOKUNAGA:** Gyrokinesis, Feldenkrais. There's a whole bunch of somatic techniques now that--

**ROB** Actually, yeah, and I'm glad you mentioned that. You used the term "second tier." Is that what you just said?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Uh-huh.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Because it does seem, though, like a dancer has a-- there's a certain period of time where a dancer is at their  
**HOCHSCHILD:** peak. And I wonder if you could talk about how long that is and what are some of the strategies that you try to teach students about so they can plan for long term as well.

**YASUKO** Yeah, good. I think-- I instituted a course called the senior seminar. And the students-- it was basically for the  
**TOKUNAGA:** seniors. And they could request different things.

One of the things that's important, I maintain that every dancer has to have two careers. You can only dance so much when you're physically at your prime. And then there's a time we should gracefully exit the stage.

**ROB** So what is that prime period?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** That's usually-- in Western dance, most commonly, people say you reach your peak at age 35. That's your  
**TOKUNAGA:** physical and emotional peak.

**ROB** OK.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And then from there, you can dance on. I mean, I saw Margot Fonteyn dance at 47. I saw Alicia Alonso at 63 do  
**TOKUNAGA:** Dying Swan. She's now 90-something.



**ROB** And how about you?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Well, I retired fairly early. I danced-- I became chair when I was 40. And I did take a tour to Japan and dance with  
**TOKUNAGA:** the company. But I retired.

And that was part of my philosophy was when I could-- I loved to choreograph, and I could have choreographed more. But I had too many starving dancer friends that needed work, too, that were really good. So I wanted to support their choreography. So they came. But usually, it's around 35. Now, whereas in Japan, if you take classical, it's in the 50s.

**ROB** Wow, OK.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Because it's not as strenuous.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Right. So in the senior seminar that you started, you talk about a second career.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Yes. That was something that I had them write their goals, their immediate goal and long-term goal. So the  
**TOKUNAGA:** immediate goal was what they're going to do when they graduate, which most of them wanted to perform. And then the long-term goals, when you no longer perform, what do you want to do?

And then we opened up the whole thing. I listed a whole bunch of professions they could. And we talked about, OK, if you know you want to be a choreographer, what are your outlets? Where are you going to go?

So when you're dancing in companies and you're touring to colleges, make a connection. Let them know your choreography. You might be able to choreograph for that company.

**ROB** Right.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Know that this is where you're going to go. If you're going to be in arts administration, maybe you want to intern  
**TOKUNAGA:** at a company and learn that. So we talked about that-- costume design, lighting design, any of those things that dancers have gone on to.

**ROB** And now since you started teaching a while ago and became director 30 years ago this year, have you seen some  
**HOCHSCHILD:** of these students move on to those second phases of their careers?

**YASUKO** Oh, yeah. I'm still in touch with many of them. I have several that have their own companies, one in Italy and--  
**TOKUNAGA:** well, Alison Beatty-- Cook Beatty has a company in New York. Tong Dao is one of our wonderful ones. He's the choreography that was used in that video that I talked about in 2008. And he won two Princess Grace awards in choreography and has done several commissions for Ballet Austin and Philadanco. And he's made a career as a choreographer.

Kurt Douglas, who's on the faculty now at the conservatory, went on to Limon, danced with Limon, Lar Lubavitch, and other companies. We have dancers in major companies-- Graham, Limon, Taylor, Twyla Tharp. And on Broadway-- many of them are on Broadway.

And then we also have some that have gone on to have their own companies. Dam Van Huynh, who's from Vietnam, from California to Pier has his own company in England-- London, England. He danced with Richard Alston prior to that.

**ROB** Well, that's definitely a sign of success. I suppose having the degree from Boston Conservatory in dance is  
**HOCHSCHILD:** something that really helps open doors for some--

**YASUKO** I think that the reputation of the conservatory has grown. And we certainly-- I even remember when there was a  
**TOKUNAGA:** time when I was a student at Juilliard that we weren't sure that the dance division was going to exist in my senior year. That was the move to Lincoln Center. And there was a whole political uproar about that.

And so I remember writing a letter to Ruth Ambrose thinking that I would come here because it was a similar curriculum. And it was an intensive. Those who were looking for conservatory-like programs would certainly look at this.

**ROB** I see. To go back to the wellness emphasis for a moment, what prompted the beginning of that? Were you seeing  
**HOCHSCHILD:** students get injured or what sort of--

**YASUKO** No. I think I've always been aware of that. I mean, when Emi and I developed our pedagogy and our own  
**TOKUNAGA:** techniques, warm-up-- it was funny because one-- excuse me-- an alum from Walnut Hill just wrote on their website that our warm-up reminded her-- she's now Pilates. She said our warm-up reminded her of a Pilates class. And that was something that I'd never thought of.

But Emi was always involved in medicine and wellness. And it's important. I realized I was lucky. I was one of those dancers that never got injured. I just was really, really lucky.

But I was always conscious of the stress and the strain that a dancer has to go through per day. It's a lot of stuff. And so what I decided was we added nutrition in the freshman year. I decided that that was part of wellness. So all freshmen have nutrition-- I don't know what the curriculum is now, but they had nutrition in the first semester, first year. And the teacher would bring them to the cafeteria and help them choose wisely what choices they had.

And anatomy, Jan Veen always had an anatomy class. We had anatomy. I decided to put that in the second year. And then they had to take some form of somatic techniques every year. And I encourage the dancers-- the teachers all had sessions with the wellness team, the doctors and mostly the physical therapists.

I had the modern teachers meet specifically with them and the ballet people. And we talked about common injuries, what was happening. What do we need to do in our training to fix this so that dancers don't get injured so much. So we had intensive sessions in that, and something I was very much aware of.

**ROB** And did you have that kind of training in a formal way when you were a student?  
**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Well, I worked with an anatomist, the famous anatomist Dr. Lulu Sweigard at Juilliard. And we all had to take  
**TOKUNAGA:** there. And she developed what she called the constructive rest position.

And what it was, it was kind of a somatic technique. And you had to lie on the table and do mental vision.

**ROB** I see.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And imaginary action is what we called. So I took a lot of her principles. And that helped me. When I was strictly  
**TOKUNAGA:** ballet trained, I was very tight because I was strong. I could jump, but I had no extensions.

And through having our own studio, we were able to develop our pedagogy. And I remember I had a principal dancer, Alistair, with whom I danced for 15 years. He was with Ailey.

And he came in, and he said to us, I need to get more stretch. I'm dancing tready. And Alvin wants the legs up. So will you help me?

So we developed this stretch together. I did the stretch twice a day, and I got a 6:00 penche. I got the benefits of the stretch, and I realized, wow, it's amazing that I thought I was one of those dancers who was always going to be tight. But I was able to get this through very long but very easy stretching.

So I developed that from personal experience. And that was important. And yes, listening to the dancers who sustained injuries-- I would call Ruth Solomon, and we would talk about why they got these injuries.

**ROB** So as the artistic director of the Dance Theater, you put on a lot of productions every year. I wonder if you could  
**HOCHSCHILD:** talk about your approach to that, some of the highlights, if there were some particular productions that really stand out for you.

**YASUKO** Absolutely. One of the things that as a dancer, we stand on so many shoulders of those people who have gone  
**TOKUNAGA:** before us. I felt very strongly-- I had the opportunity at Juilliard to dance choreography of the great icons of dance. And it's like every classical musician learns Bach, Beethoven, Mozart. That's the standard.

And we have those choreographers in dance. I felt very strongly that the dancers should know these great icons because their works speak very loudly to us today. They still have strong messages to give us.

And also, these were people that I was very fortunate-- they were my mentors. I was able to work with them. And I came in dance at a very, very special time. So that was important to me, was not only to bring the classics to the students and also bring contemporary choreographers. So I did choreographers today. We did always a premiere. On every concert, I had a premiere.

First semester or one of the two semesters, I would have a ballet premiere, and the other one modern premiere because we were a split program. And I felt very strongly about that, too, because it's a different experience being a dancer and having a work created on you, versus trying to do a work that was already created.

So that was very, very-- we were very fortunate because we were the first college allowed to present four Graham works, four Limon works, four Sokolow works. And that was-- so I'm very proud of that. And we did a whole program on Alvin Nicholais and Murray Louis, a whole program on Murray Louis. We did four Taylor works, Paul Taylor works.

So those are a variety of things that was really important. And then in addition, we would have premieres from Sean Curran and Laszlo Alberto in ballet, Viktor Plotnikov in ballet. So that was important, too.

**ROB** And so as the artistic director, what would your role be in a particular production? Would you get involved in  
**HOCHSCHILD:** rehearsals and everything?

**YASUKO** Oh, I was always involved. I designed the program, and designed the program because when you join a company,  
**TOKUNAGA:** you're limited to the repertory of that company that presents. Very rarely does a company present an-- Juilliard did this, too-- an integrated program of ballet and modern.

So that was a goal. I always had a ballet, and I always had a modern. That was one of the overriding factors. And then to balance the works, you had to know the repertoire of works. And then to have in mind the orchestra, because the orchestra always played.

So that was important. We did a Copland celebration. And so that would be-- we did a French Impressionist concert, things like that that would help. But that was a real critical point.

The same thing with the Dance Theater-- the productions were of high quality. At one point towards the end, we got so good that-- usually in pre-performance programs such as ours, only a few get to perform. You have to audition, and they get selected. We got to the end point where I felt like every student should be on that stage.

So the first year, we had four choreographers, one for the freshmen, one for the sophomores. Each class did their own piece. And then we did another concert where they had to audition. So most of the dancers-- every dancer would come out of that school with a performance experience. That did not always happen before.

**ROB** Right.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** That was something I changed. And it was really important.

**TOKUNAGA:**

Also, to have that integrated and experience-- and I have to say that the repertoire that I chose, once I started choosing the classics from Graham and Limon and Taylor, the master choreographers, the trickle-down effect. I did a presentation at one of the conferences on choreography outside the classroom.

This was a typical-- their choreography improved tremendously because they understood structure, they understood form, they had musicality, phrasing. They danced it in the masterwork. So in that context, they implemented it into their own choreography. It was a hand down. And that's what I mean when I say dance is handed down from generation to generation.

And I think when you do the reconstructions of these, the reconstructor is critical, for me. I handpick my favorite reconstructions.

**ROB** What does that mean, reconstructors?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** They're the people like-- Jennifer Scanlon is a master reconstructor. And she staged all of the Jose Limon works.

**TOKUNAGA:** She danced-- she was a principal dancer with the company. And she knew Jose, and she knows the work and the aesthetic.

Yuriko, the famous Martha Graham dancer, set all my Graham pieces. Donald Mahler set the Tudor pieces. They worked with these-- I felt strongly that the people work with the choreographers. I was very fortunate to work directly with them. And you hand it down.

And Murray Louis himself came and coached my dancers. So--

**ROB** Wow, that must have been a great experience for the students to work with those folks.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** It was. And also on the resume, when they leave, to put down that they performed the works of Martha Graham.  
**TOKUNAGA:** And you can't do that with any other-- I don't think you can do it in any other place. That's what a conservatory is for, I think, a program such as ours, where we could afford to have them come in and do that.

The other thing I did do was I formed another satellite company. I revived it in 1993 for the 50th anniversary. It was called Boston Dance Theater. It was a performing group. I based it off the similar program that Juilliard had. It was called the Juilliard Dance Ensemble, of which I was a member.

And what we did was we toured schools, secondary schools, from way back to kindergarten to high school. And we did a lecture demonstration. And we presented dancers. We presented excerpts of ballets and modern.

And then we used our company-- Tokunaga Dance Ko Company-- format, where we worked very long for young audiences in New York. And we were one of the pilot programs there in music and dance. And we would bring the teachers and the students up on stage to learn the dances. So it was more of an arts exposure arts education program, which was really important.

**ROB** And were conservatory students involved in that as well?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Oh, yeah. They were all involved. As a company, I think I had six dancers that I would tour. And Richard Malcolm,  
**TOKUNAGA:** who was a percussionist, would come and play the warm-up that we did. And we talked about how a dancer has to warm up.

And each dancer actually talked, I think. And they also brought the students up and taught what dance they danced.

**ROB** That's great.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Yeah.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Good experience for them. What about choreography? So do some students come in where their emphasis is  
**HOCHSCHILD:** really learning choreography more than performance?

**YASUKO** Yes. I have a person now who's teaching at the Elliot school in Massachusetts here, Sean Murphy, who actually  
**TOKUNAGA:** got his undergrad and graduate. We had a master's program for a very brief time in choreography. And he's brilliant.

And he's your nontraditional dancer. He has his own style, and a very innovative. Part of our audition process is, yes, we do have a ballet class and a modern class. But the interview is important, too, because I like to interview each student. You could tell from the interview how passionate they are about their art form.

**ROB** You mean in terms of admissions--

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Yes. And so if they're not so good in ballet or modern with the technique, but they have a passion for creation,  
**TOKUNAGA:** and you can see that, because they do present a solo as well. And if they do their own solo, you can see it. And then, of course, we're not going to close the door to that. So we have had that, although they still have to conform to the curriculum. They just get better.

**ROB** Yeah, yeah. So what are some of the other ways that you work with students and that your faculty worked with  
**HOCHSCHILD:** students to develop them all around? I mean, you talk about the wellness program, and there's learning dance and performance techniques. What are some of the other things?

**YASUKO** Well, one of the wonderful things about-- I used to, before I went into massive curriculum meetings, I always  
**TOKUNAGA:** asked the students what they wished they would have, what they would not like, or what was wrong with the curriculum. One of the students gave a brilliant idea of they would like a mentoring program.

So I'm proud. We're one of the first places to start a mentoring program. And I decided to have a two-level mentoring program. So each faculty mentored at least five students for the four years. So I would pair up the faculty.

And then the seniors, we did a big brother big sister program, and they would mentor the freshmen. And that was great because they could tell them the best pizza place in town and all the other things that the faculty wouldn't.

**ROB** Was that part of the nutritional requirements for the program?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** No. It was just a mentoring advice for any kind of career advice or injury advice. And I was the second mentor to  
**TOKUNAGA:** all the students. I had about 75 to 80 students maybe. So I could be-- it was important to me to have an open-door policy. So my office was never closed.

If there was an emergency, if the physical therapist called me and said somebody's in trauma, I would immediately go to the physical therapy. And I always worked closely with them. And I had a real hands-on approach that way and a real open communication with the students.

**ROB** That's great. So you just said you had 75 or 80 students. That was generally the number of dance students  
**HOCHSCHILD:** altogether in the program at one time?

**YASUKO** Yeah.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** OK. Did that number change over time?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Well, when I first joined the conservatory as a regular faculty-- or became director, chair at that time, it was '89.

**TOKUNAGA:** And we were in the old building. And we only had five studios, and they were really tiny studios-- I mean, really tiny. Like, the biggest studio was maybe half the size of a regular dance studio. It's where the costume shop is now, if you've ever been over there.

And so I talked to the president, and I said, I would come aboard on one condition, that-- I said, I know that you can't give me new facilities. So if you would allow me to match the enrollment to the facilities-- so I went down to 60.

**ROB** I see.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Because I didn't think it was-- I still don't think it's safe to have a bunch of kids in a studio. There's injuries. You get in the way. There's not effective teaching. There's a whole bunch of reasons.

**TOKUNAGA:** So I was able to do that. He said OK. We reduced the curriculum-- I mean the number of students. And I limited the class numbers to 20, no more than 20 people in a class. That was max. And that was pushing it.

**ROB** What had the max number been before?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** I don't-- it could be any number.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Oh, OK.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Yeah, and then musical theater kids would come in to take classes sometimes. But I just felt it was too-- it was just not safe.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Yeah.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And it's not productive.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Yeah, the teachers must have appreciated that, too.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Yeah. And also, if you're worried about other people, you can't really dance effectively. You can't use the space.

**TOKUNAGA:** So we did that. And that was one of the criteria in which I took over the department. And the administration was very supportive about that. So we reduced it.

**ROB** Did the facilities evolve? Were you able to be a part of changes in the facilities?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Well, yeah. I helped-- I was instrumental in helping them design the studios and in giving them the proportion of adequate studios. My last year was the first year in that new building on Hemingway. And then I saw that in the building, and then I retired. I left the school.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** So that was a big part of your sort of capstone, you're finished--

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Well, yeah. It was sorely needed. And when I recruited students, I got the really good students because I was  
**TOKUNAGA:** very, very honest about that.

And on the road, I would say, we have small studios. It's not the size of the studios. It's what goes on. And then I would go on to explain the pedagogy of how we did it.

I mean, in New York, my sister and I had-- we team taught all our classes. So there were two teachers. And we had a smaller studio-- not a tiny one, but a small studio.

And in order to do it, we had instead of going-- usually in dance, you go two by two across the diagonal. What we did-- because two by two was a little crowded, it was a narrow studio, so we did one by one. And we passed them. And one of us would watch each one on the diagonal.

**ROB** Interesting, OK.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And so we did some of that. And I emphasized the fact to the faculty and to the new students that if you're  
**TOKUNAGA:** working in a small studio, you can't just go across the diagonal. You have to go in a circle. You have to change directions. So you learned a lot about that, which was important. And I don't think we suffered from applications in that.

**ROB** I imagine it's gotten to be a more and more competitive program and harder to get into over the years.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** I'm not sure the enrollment has increased tremendously. I worked very closely with a lot of high school  
**TOKUNAGA:** performing arts. I knew the directors well, and they would recruit students to us. And we got some of our best students from that.

Yeah, there's a lot of-- there's 550 dance programs or more in the United States. So there's a lot of choices out there. That's why one of the things I felt strongly about was to market it as a conservatory. I was very-- I wanted to have a strong ballet program, and we did.

I don't know whether that's the emphasis now is to be as strong of a ballet program as well, because there are very, very few colleges that had that, a handful that have a serious ballet program where your alumni-- we had dancers that went on to-- I have one in National Ballet of Portugal, Ballet British Columbia, Boston Ballet, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, Alberta Ballet, Atlanta Ballet. I wanted them to be able to go to these companies. And they have.

But you have to have a strong, strong program. And there were only three private conservatories in the United States. I think it's Juilliard, it was Boston Conservatory, and Cal Arts. And now more and more, people are getting affiliated with universities. And Cal Arts is subsidized by Disney, [LAUGHS] so they have lots of money.



**ROB** Oh, that's useful. So when you got ready to retire in 2011 and looked back-- we've talked about some of this. But  
**HOCHSCHILD:** when you reflected at that moment or even now, what really stood out as far as the big changes or accomplishments that you were able to achieve? And what were some of the biggest challenges also that you overcame?

**YASUKO** I think the biggest accomplishment was that I was able to assemble a tremendous faculty, professional faculty.  
**TOKUNAGA:** And we were able to present, and be the first college and university to present, some of the masterpieces of choreography from the great icons of dance. And many of them came to the conservatory to coach the dancers.  
And I think to have an integrated program, and we really did get it to be really well up there in terms of being selective. And that was important to me. I somehow, in my mind, not to be-- I always said, in the opinion of this faculty assembled here. It's hard to look at a parent who will pour a quarter of a million dollars in there for four years to know that maybe that student may not have a chance in the performance career.

**ROB** Yeah.  
**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** That was really hard for me to look into the eyes of parents. So that was a criteria. That was something I was  
**TOKUNAGA:** really happy to be honest about it, what the criteria was. And I think working with Dr. Micheli and helping restructure the curriculum so it was more balanced, and injury prevention was critical.

The other part-- the hard challenges were budgets.

**ROB** Yeah.  
**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Always. I mean, when I first came, there was hardly any budget. And that was when having really good friends  
**TOKUNAGA:** come for a fraction of the cost. And we'd donate.

I remember the great Ulysses Dove, who unfortunately passed away. I approached him, and I said, Ulysses, will you come create a piece? He said, I'd love to, but I said, we can't pay very much. He said, well-- I quote him all the time. He says, you know, Yasi, I look at it as charity work.

[LAUGHTER]

**ROB** Oh, wow. Well, that was nice.  
**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Yeah. Unfortunately, he passed away before we could get him up there. But that was what a lot of people did.  
**TOKUNAGA:** And friendships and connections, I used a lot of my connections. And they came because of that.

And I treated them fairly. They helped me. Really, the other thing we designed the curriculum so as the dancers got better and better, they were only in one piece. So they could devote focus to it.

Augmenting the curriculum so that they could perform those works well, because if you don't study Graham technique to do a Graham work, you're not going to do very well. Same with Limon.

I added hip-hop. We had-- Jan Veen had implemented ethnic dance. And I put in East Indian, flamenco, African.

**ROB** And you would have to hire teachers for all of this.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Yeah. And those teachers, I had to go with whoever was in the area. There was a standard that I didn't want to  
**TOKUNAGA:** just hire anyone to do it because I feel very responsible having studied Japanese dance that you don't want to misrepresent a culture. It's a whole culture you're learning, not--

**ROB** Yeah, of course.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** So I was very particular in the teachers. And I had a tremendous thing that I'm really proud of is, the community  
**TOKUNAGA:** we had and the faculty and the students was wonderful. And the people that I worked with to set all my masterpieces were the top rate and the top people that I owe so much to.

And I was fortunate the kids could study with-- I remember having Mr. Corvino, Alfredo Corvino, a famous ballet teacher, come in. I brought him up. And I virtually had tears streaming down my face when I introduced him. I said, do you know how rare it is for me to be able to give you the experience of working with one of my teachers? And he was wonderful.

**ROB** Wow. That must have been incredible.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** But those are important and things I'm really proud of. The master classes, we always had the master classes,  
**TOKUNAGA:** and I always tried to get the directors of the companies in to teach the master classes. So Alonzo King came. Robert Battle came. There were a lot-- Sean Curran.

**ROB** And were these mostly people who were based in New York?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Some of them were based in New York. Alonzo King's in San Francisco. Yeah, they were from all over. But having  
**TOKUNAGA:** them come-- I'm extremely proud of that. That was a time when I feel like it's so important because if we don't preserve the works, the classics-- I think we're one of the only ones that have done that.

Juilliard is going back now and presenting more classics. For a while, they weren't. Hartt School, where Stephen Piers is doing-- they have the same philosophy of Limon, ballet, Graham.

**ROB** When you were telling the story about the conversation you have with parents, it's interesting because your  
**HOCHSCHILD:** example yourself of being somebody who started as a dancer and then very quickly became a teacher and has gotten into choreography and then college administration, artistic director. So you've seemingly hit every possible career path in the dance industry. Correct me if I'm wrong. Maybe there's some other things in there.

So that's a good example, I think, for parents to see and for students to see. Do you see students who look at what you've done in your career and say, like, oh, I kind of want to go on Yasi's path?

**YASUKO** Well, they do. A lot of them say, I want to direct a program. They don't know what--

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Yeah, yeah.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** I think a lot of times, having gone to Juilliard, I went to a very academic high school, and academics was an  
**TOKUNAGA:** important part of our family. So that kept me grounded. And I remember when I was asked to join the ballet company at age 18, and my mother-- that was the only time my mother and father said anything to me. They said, in this family, you go to college. OK.

So I was lucky I went to Juilliard.

**ROB** Right.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** But yeah, it is that. You never know. A lot of times, opportunity knocks, and you have to take advantage of that. I  
**TOKUNAGA:** never in my right mind ever thought I would direct a program. It just happened.

**ROB** What are the skills and character traits you have that have made you succeed at it?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Well, I think a lot of times, I did work-- although our family was very supportive, our parents had the philosophy  
**TOKUNAGA:** that you need to support yourself through college. So we did. It was all on our own. And I had to work jobs--

**ROB** When you were an undergraduate.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Uh-huh. I worked in work study. And I always did an administration. So I was good. I typed 120 words a minute. I  
**TOKUNAGA:** mean, it was easier for me to do that, so I floated into those jobs.

And it was sit-down jobs. I couldn't go waitress after dancing all day. There's no way I could. My friends did. I couldn't. And so I learned how to do those jobs.

And running a company-- I learned-- I was laughing yesterday with a friend at Juilliard, the alumni reunion. And I said, I learned through the school of hard knocks because I really didn't have any experience. I was very fortunate to have tremendous mentors like Martha Hill at Juilliard mentored me also when I became director. And also Ruth Ambrose, the former director, worked side by side with me for 10 years. She shared my office for 10 years, and she advised me and helped me and supported me. And that's really important, I think, to have that advice and to take that continuity of the legacy of that is important.

**ROB** Yeah, to have a mentor and to be a mentor, then--

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Yeah. And to acknowledge those who passed before you and how they helped you. And you want to take what  
**TOKUNAGA:** they have and move on and do your own voice. I watched the student choreographies yesterday, and I was amazed at what they have to say and how creative they are.

And we had that whole thing. Oh, that was another thing I did with the students. They would create a piece. And instead of putting it on the concert-- because it's hard enough to create a good work by one year.

So what we did was, we did-- the first semester, I took it off the concert stage, but we did a workshop. And what they did is, they presented the choreography on the stage, but no lights, no costumes. And I brought in a guest choreographer to critique.

**ROB** Oh, wow.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And we had a panel. There was faculty that gave them feedback. Then the students could then go ahead to the  
**TOKUNAGA:** second semester, choose to work on it or begin a new piece. And then they would audition their works for the student choreographer, fully produced--

**ROB** Oh, that's fantastic.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** That, to me, was important.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** It's kind of like the way songwriting workshops work sometimes and other master classes on the music side of  
**HOCHSCHILD:** things. So that can be really super challenging but so rewarding for the students.

**YASUKO** Yeah, and to also know that it takes a certain amount of work and effort to create a piece ready for audiences.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Right.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** I mean, so much of the stuff that goes up on stage, I just cringe. Sometimes I close my eyes.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** You mean that you see on actual stages--

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Yeah. And people-- I don't think-- it's a privilege, not a right, I think. When you ask people to come see you and  
**TOKUNAGA:** pay you for your thing, I always tell the students, it's a privilege, not a right. You have to earn that privilege. And you have to work on it to excel. Juric always said, you strive for excellence. Don't strive for perfection.

**ROB** So how do some of these pieces get to the stage when they're not really achieving that-- hitting that level?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** They do, most of them, because I-- towards my last few years, I had the students only in one piece except for  
**TOKUNAGA:** very few exceptions. But they rehearse only in that thing. And I brought them back for 10 days before the second semester in January.

And that was an all-day. They took company class from 9:30 to 11:00 and then they rehearsed from 11:00 to 1:00 and 2:00 to 5:00. And then that was all-day rehearsal in that period.

So the choreographer or the reconstructor would teach the class. So they would be involved in that way of moving. So it wasn't foreign. And that's something I felt very strongly about.

And that's why-- one of the reasons I brought in hip-hop, because I served on a panel with Rennie Harris, who's the great famous hip-hop choreographer. He works out of Philadelphia. And I said to Rennie, I said, Rennie, why don't you come and do a piece? I'd love to have that because we were so classical.

But then I said, on the other hand, I can't bring you now. We're not ready for you because-- and then I found a teacher, Wyatt Jackson, who came and taught hip-hop. The dancers had to train in hip-hop before they-- I think they could perform it well. I don't think you can just put on a coat and go out and--

**ROB** Right, yeah. That makes a lot of sense, yeah, get grounded in the principles.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** One of the things I didn't do that I wanted to do-- and really wanted to do-- was to incorporate martial arts. And  
**TOKUNAGA:** that was that I studied aikido, which is the art of self-defense. And after I studied it, my partner work was amazing. It transformed my partner work. And I was ready to--

**ROB** Your partner work.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Uh-huh.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Oh, no kidding. OK.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Because when you partner--

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Sparring.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Yeah. And what they do is, the person attacks you. You take their energy, absorb it into yourself, and turn it  
**TOKUNAGA:** around. So it's all curves. There's no straight lines.

And as a dancer, you initiate everything. It's more like your thing. And so it taught me how to work with another person.

**ROB** Yeah.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And I loved it. I absolutely adored it. And I thought, this is what we need now. And a lot of dancers did. Like  
**TOKUNAGA:** Steven Paxton, who incorporated contact improv, which we have in the curriculum.

**ROB** Contact improv?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Uh-huh. He started it from aikido.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** What is contact improv? Should we try some right now?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Well, it's an improvisation. You learn trust, counterbalance, balance.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** OK.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And it's spontaneous, in a sense. And that's why it's improv.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** So you're able to get it incorporated in bits and pieces in--

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** I incorporated the philosophy.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** OK.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** The other part I liked about aikido is you start every class meditating. And every class that we taught the  
**TOKUNAGA:** Graham class, we had a period where the musician would play. I called it a paragraph of music. And the dancers had to just be quiet and make the transition from lunch to the class, because you can't just switch gears.

**ROB** Right.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** No human being can.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Yeah.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** So we always had that meditative kind of thing. And then we did-- I always did a pre-warm-up before the actual  
**TOKUNAGA:** Graham technique.

**ROB** You did that in all of your classes or in performance classes?

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** No, in my Graham classes.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** I see.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And then also in performance classes, I did different things. But in ballet, I have a certain warm-up loosening  
**TOKUNAGA:** because it's the first class of the day.

**ROB** Yeah.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And I still do it, even in my Graham classes.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Oh, that's great. It's got to be valuable for the students to learn that, that way and have it connected to the--

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** And I'm finding that the students at the Graham School, which are pre-professional-- I taught the second

**TOKUNAGA:** company-- they really appreciated that, because to make a transition.

**ROB** So a philosophical question before we wrap up. If I'm getting this right, I read that you called dance a, quote,

**HOCHSCHILD:** "living art." What do you mean by that?

**YASUKO** Well, it doesn't exist before or after you do it. It's only in the moment. It's very temporal. And you have to-- I

**TOKUNAGA:** mean, there are films. There are videos. But it's one interpretation of one performance.

And if you watch-- you follow any dancing artist, the performances change each time. And really, dance is so temporal, in that sense that it does-- I could do an arm gesture. It exists only during that time. It doesn't exist anymore.

**ROB** Yeah. Well, you've done a lot, too. Is there anything we didn't cover about your conservatory career or your

**HOCHSCHILD:** career in general that comes to mind?

**YASUKO** No. I think I feel very blessed. And I felt that the conservatory was my second home. I remember being there. But

**TOKUNAGA:** the atmosphere-- I think what attracted me to the conservatory more was the atmosphere.

Juilliard is very competitive. The atmosphere at the conservatory, which I tried to keep, was very supportive and nurturing. And Juilliard was, too, but not as nurturing.

For example, when somebody did something really wonderful in class, the whole class would break out and applaud and be happy for the student. And that's what I really wanted.

And the faculty was really loving. At the time I was there, I had a perfect-- the faculty were all very supportive of each other, incredible artists. And the people that we brought in were incredible.

I don't think I could have asked for a better time. The administration was supportive to me. So that was--

**ROB** That's great. So one last question-- this merger with Berklee happened a few years after you left. What are your

**HOCHSCHILD:** thoughts on the merger and the future of all of this?

**YASUKO** Well, we had talks of mergers before because the conservatory was financially a bet, as most independent

**TOKUNAGA:** universities are. I was excited.

I had a talk with Roger Brown a long time ago. I saw him at a Dana conference-- Dana Foundation conference. And he asked me then-- and it was something I really wanted to happen-- if we could coordinate a tap class with the percussionists here and the dancers. I wanted that so badly.

I worked hard. We had it in at noon. But the curriculums didn't gibe. That was something I felt really bad. So that was exciting.

I know George Wein, who produces the Newport Jazz Festival, is a good friend of mine. And he brings-- he lets me go to the Jazz Festival every year.

**ROB**  
**HOCHSCHILD:** How did you leave that out of the conversation? George Wein is a good friend of yours, OK.

**YASUKO**  
**TOKUNAGA:** Well, his significant other, Glory van Scott, is a dancer as well. And she danced with Katherine Dunham, Agnes de Mille. And she's our sister. She's a very close friend.

And through her, we met George. And George has turned out to be a good friend. In fact, we just had dinner with him last week.

**ROB**  
**HOCHSCHILD:** Yeah.

**YASUKO**  
**TOKUNAGA:** And he lets us come up to the Newport Jazz Festival every year. And I look at the musicians, and I think, yeah, they need to have some classes sometime in movement--

[LAUGHTER]

How to move. It would be nice.

**ROB**  
**HOCHSCHILD:** Yeah.

**YASUKO**  
**TOKUNAGA:** And the other thing, the dancers need more music classes. We have music classes. But one of the things I didn't do, which I wanted to do, was to create a choir of all the dancers so that they could sing-- it wouldn't be a professional choir, but just learn to sing parts so that all these many people can make a beautiful whole and relate to music in a different way.

**ROB**  
**HOCHSCHILD:** Yeah. Yeah, dancers learning music and musicians learning about movement. It seems like that might happen--

**YASUKO**  
**TOKUNAGA:** Yeah. And I had my dancers sing. They sing in class. And when I'm teaching musical theater, they did nine-part harmony. We'd balance singing, and that was something that at Juilliard, you had to have four years of music, and we never counted. You never count it. You just always sung the rhythm.

And you always sang when you danced. If you didn't-- I always said, if you count, you dance from your head. If you sing, you dance from your heart.

**ROB**  
**HOCHSCHILD:** Well, thank you, Yasi Tokunaga, for the conversation, for all of your work. And it's been huge. It's great that the conservatory and Berklee are coming together like this.

**YASUKO**  
**TOKUNAGA:** I think it's wonderful.



**ROB** All of these collaborations you just talked about, hopefully they'll deepen in the future.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Cross-pollinate it.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Exactly, yeah.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** I have to tell you, in finding one of my students who was a professional dancer and West Coast said, shall I say  
**TOKUNAGA:** that we had the collaboration? She married a Berklee musician, and they produced two children.

**ROB** Oh, there you go.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** So they've been collaborating a long time. Most of-- a lot of our dancers dated musicians from Berklee.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Well, that's a benefit, too, I suppose.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Yes.

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** Great. Well, thank you again.

**HOCHSCHILD:**

**YASUKO** Thank you

**TOKUNAGA:**

**ROB** OK.

**HOCHSCHILD:**