

# THE DANCING MASTER

by Sekhar Bahadur, MCI



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At first glance, Christopher Rownes and Duncan Rownes don't have much in common.

Christopher Rownes, MCI, is one of Europe's best-known teachers and fly casters. An Englishman who lives with his wife Simone and their family in Basel, Switzerland, he has for many years mentored and tested FFI instructors, particularly in German-speaking countries.

He works full time in sales for Guideline, the Norwegian fly fishing equipment business. He is also a popular demonstrator, regularly giving his trademark "fully caffeinated" interactive performances at events like the London, Madrid, Irish and Danish Fly Fishing Fairs and the EWF in Germany. He is a noted trout fisherman and the one and two-handed casting videos on his website have fellow instructors in awe.

The Dancing Master *continued...*



He is, in addition to German, also fluent in Spanish, and he travelled with and translated for the late Mel Krieger, MCI, on several of his visits to Europe. He also translated Mel's classic book, *The Essence of Flycasting*, into German.

Duncan Rownes was trained at the Royal Ballet School in London and then danced with the Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet. He later joined the Komische Oper Berlin where he danced from 1989 to 1999 as a soloist and toured around the world.

In 2000 he started his teaching career at the Ballet School of the Basel Theater in Switzerland. He has taught classical and contemporary dance worldwide. In 2013, he became professor of contemporary dance at the prestigious Prix de Lausanne ballet competition.

As a freelance choreographer and teacher, he created numerous works and taught for several ballet companies and schools including, The Royal Ballet School London, The Basel Ballet, The Luzerner Ballet, The Beijing Dance Academy, and the Escola de Dança do Conservatório Nacional Portugal.

## The Dancing Master *continued ...*

Since 2014, he has taught contemporary dance at The Dance Academy of Zurich.

Christopher and Duncan Rownes are not brothers -- they are the same person.

I spoke with Christopher about his fascinating journey.

### ***Chris, were you always interested in fishing?***

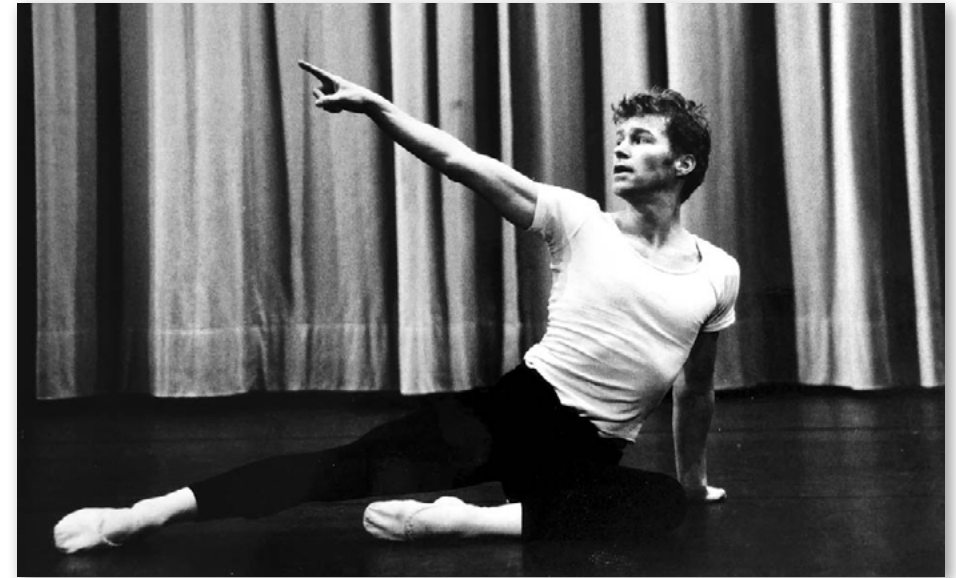
"I have always been drawn to active movement since I was a kid, and I loved sports of all kinds. I always looked for challenging movements.

I started fishing with my dad when I was eight years old. He started my brother and me on worm fishing and then we got into fly fishing too - tying our own flies and everything. But then I took a long break to learn ballet."

### ***How did you get into that?***

"I discovered dance when I was 14 - body popping, hip hop - nothing classical, and I really got into it. My mom then said I should take ballet if I was that interested in dance. There I was at age 14 (which is very late to start serious dancing), beginning my training in Walsall in the English Midlands, a long way from the bright lights. It was the most challenging thing I had ever done, working super hard every day for 6 or 7 hours.

When I was 16, I travelled to a workshop put on by the Royal Ballet [one of the world's leading ballet companies] at the Hippodrome Theatre in London, and one of their dancers encouraged me to audition for the Royal Ballet School. So, I did. The process was unbelievably rigorous - not just dancing but all sorts of physical tests



and measurements too. Given how late I got started I never thought they would take me, but they did, so I moved to London.

I spent two years away from home studying at the Royal Ballet School, and then toured around the world with the Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet. It was a fantastic experience. I started to broaden my horizons and I became more and more interested in contemporary dance. So I looked at moving abroad, where there were more opportunities.

The uncle of a Swiss classmate at the Royal Ballet School was in charge of the opera in the former East Berlin. So, in 1989, right after passage across the Berlin Wall was allowed, my classmate and I went out to audition. She didn't get the job, but they asked me if I could start the next day. It was quite a start, especially since everyone spoke only German and/or Russian!"

## The Dancing Master *continued...*



### ***Quite a story! So where does fly fishing come back in?***

"We worked incredibly hard at the ballet. We had classes from 9 to 10:30 am, then rehearsals until 2 pm. We then had to be back in the evenings for either performances (220 per year) or for more rehearsals.

But we were free from 2 to 6 in the afternoon, and since Berlin is such a huge spread-out, green city it wasn't really practical to go home. So I would go hang out at the fishing shop at Kleist Park in the former West Berlin. We would talk about all sorts of things, and every now and then about fly fishing. I eventually started going fishing during my lunch breaks, and that's how it all re-started.

I met a Spanish ballerina in Berlin, and I went home with her to Valencia, married her and learned Spanish. I took a break from dancing when my first daughter was born, but I missed fly fishing. So I went to my first FFI meeting in 1999 in Spain and met Mel Krieger."

### ***Tell us about that.***

"Mel and I hit it off right away. Mel asked me to take the CI test, and he and Rhea Topping tested me near Madrid. Mel's wife Fanny asked me to translate his book, *The Essence of Flycasting*, into German. It had already been published in Japanese, Chinese, Russian and other languages - it took me two years to translate together with Dr. Peer Doering-Arjes! I gave lots of workshops and translated for Mel in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Wartime Europe held many difficult memories for the Kriegers and their families, particularly for Fanny, and so getting Mel to come over sometimes took a lot of persuasion. He was almost like a father

figure to me, we shared the same sense of humour and I think he had a lot to do with how my teaching style for both flycasting and dancing developed."

### ***What did you learn from him?***

"I was fascinated by how he could convey movement in ways that could reach everyone. He was just a genius. I believe the lessons from his piece, *Observations on Teaching Flycasting*, would be equally applicable to golf, dance and tai-chi - basically to anything involving movement. It is an absolutely brilliant work which can help a teacher distinguish between style and substance to get to the underlying essence.

## The Dancing Master *continued...*



Mel could reach people who thought they couldn't do things, and he would soon have them doing what they thought was impossible. The last course I did with Mel must have been in Zürich in around 2008. I could tell he was unwell and sadly he died shortly afterwards."

### ***What was the next step in your journey?***

"I moved to Switzerland and joined a small innovative dance company in Basel, and that's where I met my wife Simone. Later, I spent 13 years working in the Basel Ballet School teaching classical and contemporary dance and I also worked as a choreographer."

### ***What is the most important thing you tell your dance students?***

"Jean-Paul Sartre said, "to do is to become". If you really want to do something, become it. When you are frustrated, keep trying until you become the movement."

***I remember meeting you several years ago when I was just starting my instructor journey and you said some stuff I hadn't heard before, such as to dramatically exaggerate, even pantomime, putting my casting side foot forward and leaning toward the target on short accuracy tasks, how to breathe under pressure, and a couple of other wild things. Dance training?***

"You bet!"

## The Dancing Master *continued ...*

### ***Talk a bit about teaching dance versus flycasting.***

"They are very similar. The teacher needs to develop tools to convey very complicated movements in great detail to students. Let's not forget Joan Wulff was both a dancer and a dance teacher!"

Does teaching dance help your flycasting instruction?

"Hugely. Dance gives you all sorts of tools to reach students, and to help flycasters develop rhythm and finesse rather than relying on the raw power so many of them thrash the rod with."

### ***Which is more challenging?***

"Dance is an ancient, intricate and demanding art form and we really work at it. It seems normal to practice hard for 8 hours a day every day. It's our job. Few fly fishers practice that intensely."

### ***How would you compare the fine motor skills required for flycasting and dancing?***

"They are extremely similar. Both require correctly applying power in the most energy efficient way possible. Dancers have to conserve energy or else they won't make it to the end of their performances. When good dancers and flycasters realise they are using too much energy for the required movements, they apply similar fixes. Mel Krieger would ask students to cast a line without it straightening and they would invariably fail – it made them realise how little energy is actually required. Both activities also have beautiful rhythmic symmetry. I find dance movements very similar to the mix of delicacy, accuracy and controlled power that makes dry fly fishing so compelling."

How do you compare your feelings when you flycast to those when you dance?" "I think they both help us find ourselves. I think what you really catch when you fish is a bit of yourself and your childhood. In



dance we play different roles, perhaps a pirate one night and a prince the next. We find ourselves through role playing. In both activities we are in the zone and focused so hard that nothing else matters. It is solitude without loneliness. When everything comes together it is like you are in a tunnel!"

## The Dancing Master *continued ...*

What other parallels between dance and flycasting do you see? "In dance we learn the classical elements then branch out into modern and contemporary dance. In flycasting we learn the five essentials, similar to the principles of classical painting. But just as artists like Picasso, who started conventionally then spectacularly broke the rules to achieve greatness, flycasting branches off into wild and wonderful things like Spey and underhand casting, the Italian TLT style [highly innovative presentation casts] and so forth. Finally they are similar in that you never master either dancing or flycasting. Dance helps you push your limits and shows you you are able to do more than you think you can."

### ***And how did you balance flycasting and dance?***

"I always tried to keep both fires burning. My dance schedule was flexible, so I was able to teach casting almost every other day. In 2008 I took my MCI at the EWF show near Munich with Robert Gillespie, Chuck Easterling and Lasse Karlsson as assessors. I remember meeting many great characters along the way, like Paul Arden, and testing lines with him while drinking red wine until dawn in Berlin. I wanted to concentrate on teaching flycasting after the performing side of my dancing career ended, but it was unfortunately not lucrative enough to make a full-time living from. Now, although I continue to teach dance, around 4 years ago I moved into the fly fishing industry with a full time sales position with Guideline, and I feel exceptionally fortunate."

### ***Why do you go by two different names?***

"My real name is Christopher, but my mom later decided she preferred Duncan, which is what my family and friends have always called me. I have always danced as Duncan. But we never officially changed my name, and all my papers still say Christopher. So when I went into

that fly fishing shop in the former West Berlin on my lunch break to borrow a Doug Swisher video, which was like gold dust then, I had to produce my passport to be allowed near it. So everyone I met in the fly fishing world started off knowing me as Christopher, and I just sort of went with the flow!"



***About the Author: Sekhar Bahadur, MCI, lives in London and Greenwich, Connecticut. He also holds the APGAI advanced single handed qualification from the UK Game Angling Instructors' Association. He is a casting coach for the British Fly Casting Club, where for a brief shining moment he held a club age-group distance casting record. He and his wife Monique have two grown daughters.***