

MUCH MORE THAN A COBBLER

IN MEMORIAM BEN SOMMERS 1906 –1985

A dancer's shoes are the medium through which the artist touches reality. They are the intermediary between his inner person and the objective world, represented by the stage floor. Too much friction, too little resistance and his brilliant virtuosity is tarnished, his technique flawed. The humble shoemaker is his hidden assistant, unseen friend or foe. Even the modern dancer, who a generation ago discarded the slipper as one of the manifestations of tradition and the confining iron rules of ballet, is nowadays seen shod onstage.

Ben Sommers – prophetically born Schusterman, “shoemaker” – became much more than just the president of a world-famous manufacturing firm of dance-wear, Capezio. He and his second wife, Estelle, became an institution-of-two, without whom no premiere, no ballet competition was complete.

At the age of 14 Ben joined old Mr. Capezio, a maker of ballet-slippers who knew all the important little secrets of the art of Italian toeshoes, in the humble capacity of stock boy. He was practically adopted by the Capezios, learned the trade in the old-fashioned way of apprenticeship and it was Ben's commercial acumen that made him president of Capezio Inc. in 1940.

Ben Sommers' interests went much further than making profits. In 1952 he persuaded his associates to establish the Capezio Award, which became a prestigious honor conferred annually on a leading personality of dance in America; in 1963 he became the organizer and later director of the National Association of Regional Ballet. After retiring in 1976 he devoted his time and energy to another brainchild of his: the Capezio Foundation.

Ben used to talk non-stop about his projects to his many guests, whom he invited to his reserved table at the Russian Tea Room, in a sort of stream-of-consciousness flow of ideas. It was he who persuaded the U.S. postal service to print four beautiful stamps to celebrate the dance revolution of the 70's. He was instrumental in proclaiming Noverre's birthday as International Dance Day, which is celebrated by



a growing number of states all over the world. Shortly before his death he founded the Dance Alliance and worked hard to make the International Dance Day into a Dance Week.

His connections with Israel were strong. Ben and Estelle were among the founders of the Israel Dance Library. Once or twice a year the Sommers would come to Israel until they became an integral part of the dance scene in Tel Aviv just as they were in New York.

Ben, being all his fertile life a doer, would, one hopes, have appreciated the Israel Dance Library's decision to plant 10 trees in his memory in one of the Jewish National Fund's forests in Israel.

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