

HISTORY OF VACANI

Vacani School Betty Vacani Betty Vacani (1908-2003) was the principal of the Vacani School of Dancing, the foremost social dancing school in England. The school, in Brompton Road, Knightsbridge, taught the sort of dancing that was a necessary accomplishment for young ladies - and gentlemen - of quality, who were expected to know the ballroom dances of the day and to learn the curtsy needed when a debutante was presented at court. The Vacani connection with royalty began with the young Earl of Harewood, followed by an invitation from the then Duchess of York - the future Queen Mother - to teach the young princesses Elizabeth and Margaret Rose.

A weekly class was held at Buckingham Palace for them and other children of the royal household; later, Prince Charles apparently excelled at the Highland Fling. In the late 1970s, Lady Diana Spencer briefly taught at the Vacani school, and studied ballet. Betty had introduced the Cecchetti syllabus and employed Cecchetti teachers, as the school does to this day. She chose to use the name Miss Vacani throughout her career, although she was born Elizabeth Burch and her married name was Hankinson (she was married in 1938, but soon divorced). Vacani, as she was well aware, carried enormous social cachet, thanks to the connection built up by her aunt Marguerite and mother Pauline.

Born in Bombay, the daughter of a British engineer, Betty lost her mother when only a few years old and, with her two brothers, was sent to boarding school in England and the care of relatives. On leaving school, she begged to be allowed to work with her aunt as a dancing teacher, and rose from being a young assistant until she finally took command. She continued Marguerite's policy of arranging charity matinees, at which her smallest charges performed in their best party frocks before being collected, first by nannies and, later, by fond parents. The first matinee had been at the Savoy hotel in 1915, in aid of the Royal Waterloo hospital; others followed at the Ritz, St James's Palace, and in various theatres. I well remember, when the Dancing Times offices were in Covent Garden, and backed on to the stage door of the Adelphi theatre, seeing these pretty tots emerging after the show, wrapped in shawls or velvet coats, before being bundled into waiting Rolls Royces and Bentleys to be whisked westwards home.

The Vacani school in Betty's day (she retired in 1980) did not train professional dancers, but if she noted a natural aptitude, she was quick to encourage a transition to a vocational school. With the need for proficiency on the ballroom floor, let alone court curtsies, waning, the school strengthened its connections with the Cecchetti Society, entering pupils for examinations, courses and competitions - but maintaining its social status.