

Loabelle Black Mangelson-Clawson

April 14, 1937 ~ May 21, 2023

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“Loa” “Nan” “Grandma Great”
April 14, 1937 – May 21, 2023

Dancer, student, teacher, mentor, choreographer, writer, actor, friend, wife, mother, and grandmother: These are just a few descriptors of performing arts legend Loabelle Black Mangelson-Clawson who passed from this earth in her sleep on May 21, 2023, after a years-long battle with Alzheimer’s disease.

A pioneer and luminary in the expansion and evolution of dance in the state of Utah and well beyond, Loabelle held the distinct honor of having been a founding member of every major modern dance company in the Salt Lake area.

Born in Delta, Utah, on April 14, 1937, to Golden Holt Black and Loa Baker Black, Loabelle was the middle of three children.

Loabelle’s first dance inspiration came in the early 1940s, during World War II, when she took dance lessons from a Japanese woman interned at the Topaz War Relocation Center located 15 miles west of Delta. This early exposure to movement when she was just five years old sparked something within her that served as a lasting influence in what became her lifelong pursuit of dance.

This profound formative experience led Loabelle to a local studio where she took dance classes for the next nine years until, at the young age of 14, she opened her own dance school to serve Millard County. With the money she earned, Loabelle traveled by bus to Salt Lake City every Saturday during high school to study with choreographer William Christensen, founder of Ballet West and the San Francisco Ballet Company. This early focus on and dedication to her passion resulted in her being featured in the Salt Lake Tribune’s “Top Teenagers” column.

After graduating from Delta High School in 1955, Loabelle attended the University of Utah where she graduated with her bachelor’s degree in dance education in 1959. She also studied for a time at both Colorado College and Connecticut College. She then spent three years on the Olympus High School faculty and was a dance instructor at Westminster College. In 1964, she began her career as an instructor, and later as full professor on the faculty, in the University of Utah’s modern dance department. Loabelle then completed her Master of Fine Arts in Modern Dance 1968.

Loabelle continued performing during this time, earning lead roles in the University of Utah's Orchesis dance concerts. In 1966, she was selected as one of the eight founding members of the Repertory Dance Theater (RDT).

In 1978, Loabelle founded the student-comprised Performing Dance Company (PDC) in the University of Utah's School of Dance. She served as the company's Artistic Director until 1989. Under her leadership, PDC won national and international awards and acclaim, performing throughout the U.S., Europe and Asia. To this day, PDC remains the crowning gem of the School of Dance and one of Loabelle's most enduring legacies.

During her esteemed career, Loabelle was a prolific choreographer, creating over sixty major dances which have been performed in almost all 50 states as well as in Europe, Africa, Australia, China, Taiwan, and the Middle East.

While teaching at the University of Utah, Loabelle received eight research grants for creative projects, including a three-year Southwest Gas Distinguished Artist Grant to choreograph for the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. She also earned a David Gardner Fellowship to study abroad and a National Endowment for the Arts Grant to choreograph for the Ririe-Woodbury Dance Company. She served as President of the Performance Division for the National Dance Association, was the Northwest Coordinator and Adjudicator for the American College Dance Festival Association, and was selected as a Movement Specialist for the National Endowment for the Arts. Throughout her dance career, Loabelle authored countless articles on dance history and technique.

In 1990, Loabelle received a Dee Fellowship for "Ladies of the Dance," a performance and film in which she reflected on the history and living legends of modern dance at the University of Utah. Her creative project honored individual contributions to the department by Elizabeth R. Hayes, Joan Woodbury, Shirley Ririe, and Anne Riordan, as well as Loabelle herself. It also recognized the "third generation" of major dance educators Phyllis Haskell, Abby Fiat, Susan McLain-Smith and Donna White.

The Salt Lake Chamber of Commerce celebrated Loabelle in 1991 during its ninth annual Honors in the Arts dinner for her outstanding contributions to Utah's rich cultural arts heritage. The Chamber further recognized her by enshrining her photo and biography in Salt Lake City's Abravanel Hall.

Loabelle married Ramon H. Mangelson of Nephi, Utah, on June 19, 1959, in the Salt Lake LDS Temple. Loabelle and Ramon had three children during their marriage: Scott Mangelson, Kelie Ann Van Geesbergen and Cory H. Mangelson. The couple divorced in 1979.

On April 14, 1987, Loabelle's birthday, she and Jack Clawson eloped under a full moon in Sedona, Arizona. The pair enjoyed many wonderful years of travel and time spent together with their families in Salt Lake City, Utah, Carmel, California and Driggs, Idaho.

After her retirement from the University of Utah in 1997, Loabelle continued to pursue her creative passion for dance by writing, choreographing, and acting in a one-woman theater performance. A tribute to the mother of modern dance, Isadora Duncan, "Done into Dance" was later produced by KUED as a video special for the University Utah.

In 2012, Loabelle received the prestigious Merit of Honor Award from the University of Utah Emeritus Alumni board.

In 2016, Loabelle completed her final artistic production with the publication of a romance novel. "Internment and Survival in the Great Basin Desert" brought her full circle to her childhood in Delta, Utah, the internment camp of Topaz, and her first and longest love: Dance.

Loabelle was preceded in death by her parents, Golden and Loa, her husbands, Ramon and Jack, and her brother Barth Black.

She is survived by her children, Scott (Charlene), Kelie, and Cory; her sister Golda Jane; her sister-in-law, Laverne; her brother-in-law Rich; three grandchildren, Zenobia, Mindy, and Bailly Ray; and three great-grandchildren, Jayvion, Malikai, and Zayden.

Loabelle loved her feline companions. She was preceded in death by Ralph, Ernie, Oprah, and Annie. She is survived by Tig-Tom, her loyal feline companion who remained by her side for nearly two decades of “great comfort.” Tig-Tom was present with Loabelle in her final moments.

Tragically, Loabelle was robbed of her later years by the cruel disease that is Alzheimer’s. Her final goodbye was long and certainly not her choreography. Loabelle was able to spend some cherished time together with her daughter Kelie, before she declined. During the later years of her illness, Loabelle’s sons, Cory and Scott, shared in her care. As the disease progressed, Cory moved into Loabelle’s home and made certain she was comfortable, safe, and loved during her final nine months. Dedicated to her wellbeing, he honored her wish to remain at home to the end of her extraordinary life.

The entire family offers its deepest appreciation and gratitude to Dr. Carol Osborn of Evolutionary Healthcare, the University of Utah Health Imaging & Neurosciences Center, and Heidi and Brian at Larkin Mortuary Sunset Lawn. We are so very grateful to the many caregivers at Elevation Hospice, particularly Alissa, Jocelyn, Liz, Dina, and April, who never held back in dispensing kindness, care, and dignity. We also extend a special note of gratitude to personal care aid Rosario Gill who was indespensible.

Loabelle asked to be cremated and have her ashes spread, as dancers move, “into space.” In preparation for the cremation, Cory chose the iconic Isadora Duncan dress and mantle Loabelle wore during her one-woman-show.

In keeping with Loabelle’s wishes, her family is planning an Irish Wake for close friends and family that will be announced at a later date.

In lieu of flowers, please donate to the Alzheimer’s Association of Utah, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals or, of course, your local performing arts organization…especially one that celebrates dance!