



Episode 9 ,2005: Broadway Ballet Shoes Port Washington, Long Island

Elyse: Our final story dances us into the world of pirouettes and Pointe shoes. It's 1887. New York City is emerging as America's cultural capital. In the shadow of the metropolitan opera house, a young Italian cobbler, Salvatore Capezio, opens his shop. His ultra-strong and featherweight shoes become the footwear of choice for a generation of top dancers, and Capezio becomes one of the most famous theatrical shoemakers in history. But who taught the master? Mariel O'Connell, an aspiring ballerina in Port Washington, New York, and her mom have a patent and a family story that they believe casts their relative as Capezio's mentor.

Mariel O'Connell: My grandmother told me that my great-great-grandfather had a store on 42nd street, and that he made dance shoes for all these famous dancers on Broadway, and that he taught Capezio how to make Pointe shoes.

Elyse: I'm Elyse Luray. I've come to Port Washington to meet Mariel and her mom and to hear more about their family's story. Okay, guys, what do you have for me?

Pam O'Connell: well, my great-grandfather, Michele Savino, made dance shoes, and he had a store on 42nd street, and the story goes that he was a mentor to Salvatore Capezio.

Elyse: Capezio, as in the world-renowned shoemaker?

Pam: That's the one. That's it.

Elyse: So tell me, what exactly do you want to know?

Pam: Well, we have this patent, and we'd like to know if this patent proves that he is an important figure in dance-shoe history and if he was a mentor to Salvatore Capezio.

Mariel: We also want to know if the story is true that he made shoes for a dancer named Marilyn Miller.

Elyse: Marilyn Miller was one of the biggest stars on Broadway in the 1920s. If Mariel's great-great-grandfather did make shoes for Marilyn Miller, he climbed to the very peak of his profession. All right, so let's look at the patent. It says here "April 3, 1934. M. Savino, ballet slipper." And then it says here, "Michele Savino, west New York." So what makes you think that this is your ancestor?

Pam: Well, my mother recognized the address on the patent in West New York, and we think there's probably no other M. Savino from West New York who made dance shoes.

Elyse: Okay, fair enough. Uh, do you have any other information for me?

Pam: We have very little. I mean, we do have a photo, and that's about it. This was taken in 1922.

Elyse: Oh, nice. What a beautiful photograph.

Pam: It was at his daughter's wedding. This is, you know, a man who is almost lost to time unless you can find something to pull him back.

Mariel: He's kind of a mystery man.

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Elyse: Well, you ready to go sleuthing?

Marie: Yeah.

Elyse: All right, great. I'm a little skeptical of the family's story. It seems strange that the mentor to the great Capezio wouldn't be better known. I took the liberty of getting some books on Capezio, and I thought, as we're driving into the city, we could actually learn a little bit about him.

Marie: Okay.

Elyse: Like many shoemakers of his day, Salvatore Capezio was born in Italy. He immigrated to America in 1887. At the age of 17, he opens a cobbler shop on 39th street and Broadway. His reputation grew, and in 1910, Anna Pavlova, the world-renowned Russian ballerina, bought Capezio's shoes for her entire company. By the 1920s, Capezio's clientele included many of the biggest names in ballet and on Broadway. But in the books we consult, there is no mention of Michele Savino. We've come to the New York studios of American Ballet Theater to show our patent to Judith Weiss. She's been custom-fitting Capezio's shoes for over 30 years. Judith explains that a Pointe shoe has a tiny box frame which allows the dancer to stand on their tiptoes without the toes bending. The shoe creates an illusion that the dancer is escaping gravity.

Judith Weiss: Girls, when they have Pointe shoes on, it lifts them right up out of their hips and almost into the air. Pointe shoes become part of their bodies. It's like an extension of their leg. It makes them just rise right up and just gives them an ethereal look. And I can actually show you.

Elyse: Oh, good.

Judith: Nicola?

Elyse: Hi.

Nicola: Hi.

Judith: This is Nicola, and she's going to go up on Pointe.

Elyse: Dancing on Pointe is one of ballet's most graceful forms, but the shoes also generate a clear drumming sound. The Holy Grail for many cobblers is to create a ballet slipper that combines strength and beauty with near-perfect silence.

Judith: Beautiful.

Elyse: Great! That was beautiful!

Marie: It was great!

Elyse: Now I want you to look at that patent I was telling you about. All right, let's go.

Marie: it's a patent filed by my great-great-grandfather, Michele Savino, for a ballet slipper.

Judith: It looks like he was trying very hard to make a Pointe shoe that didn't make noise, because this part underneath here, it's very thick padding. If that's what he was trying to do, it's funny because there are

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shoemakers still today trying to get rid of the noise that Pointe shoes make. You come down on -- off of -- if you're jumping in a Pointe shoe and you hit the ground, shoes make a lot of noise. So that's probably what he was trying to do with this.

Elyse: It seems that Michele Savino was years ahead of his time as a designer. Did Mariel's relative teach these advanced techniques to Salvatore Capezio? With 30 years' experience with the Capezio shoes, Judith is well qualified to compare them with the Savino design. Mariel's grandmother believes that Michele Savino was a mentor for Capezio. And I'm just wondering by looking at this patent, does that indicate that to you?

Judith: I don't really think so; because I'm looking at things here that don't look anything like Capezio shoes.

Elyse: Judith has brought a period Capezio shoe to compare with Mariel's patent.

Judith: And if you look at them and you compare them, and you'll just see -- they just look very, very different.

Elyse: So you don't think that Savino was Capezio's mentor?

Judith: No, I really don't think so.

Mariel: No?

Judith: Mm-mm, sorry.

Mariel: Oh.

Elyse: Is that disappointing to you?

Mariel: Yeah, pretty disappointed.

Elyse: Although Mariel's great-great-grandfather filed a patent, I wonder if he really ever made dance shoes. The New York Public Library at Lincoln Center houses one of the most extensive performing arts archives in the world. If there is any record of Michele Savino in the dance world, we should find it here.

Mariel: While researching in the archive of dance magazines, we make a discovery.

Elyse: Hey, look! "M. Savino, toe dancing slippers."

Mariel: I can't believe it! There's my relative's name, Savino, and the ad looks like the shoe in the patent.

Elyse: You think that's it?

Mariel: That's probably it.

Elyse: Look, here's a patent number. Get your patent number. Let's see if we can connect them. What do you got?

Mariel: "1,953,659."

Elyse: What's it say here?

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Mariel: "1,953,659."

Elyse: So what does that mean?

Mariel: They're the same.

Elyse: And look, it says here that his shop is on 324 west 42nd street.

Mariel: The library is just a short walk from the address listed in the ad, along one of the most famous streets in the world: Broadway, New York City, the great white way.

Elyse: All right, 324 West 42nd Street. This is where your great-great-grandfather had his shoe shop. This is where it all began. Any trace of Savino's store has long since vanished, but the discovery of the advertisement has breathed new life into grandma's old story. Savino did make dance shoes, and his store was located in the heart of the theater district. Grandma also claimed that Savino made shoes for the Broadway superstar, Marilyn Miller. I wonder if that part of the story is true. If Mariel's great-great-grandfather was making shoes for Miller, it would place him at the top of his profession.

Mariel: Elyse and I head back to the library to see what else we could find.

Elyse: Okay, our next challenge is to confirm your grandmother's story that Marilyn Miller was one of Savino's clients. So let's go through those Marilyn Miller books that we pulled earlier and see if we can find anything connecting Marilyn Miller to your great-great-grandfather. We discover a trove of information about Marilyn Miller. Born in 1898, she began her career at the age of 4, appearing in her family's vaudeville act, The Five Columbians. By her early 20s, Miller had won the hearts of the theater-going public. She also caught the eye of the mercurial Broadway producer, Florenz Ziegfeld. He presented the starlet as a showgirl in his Ziegfeld follies. Miller was especially known for dancing in Pointe shoes.

Mariel: She was a huge superstar.

Elyse: Yeah, she was big.

Mariel: She -- it was like amazing how much she danced on Pointe.

Elyse: Yep.

Mariel: Must have hurt.

Elyse: You know, the only thing that I'm worried about is there's really nothing here connecting Savino to Marilyn Miller. And I'm wondering, was he really just a cobbler or did he really make shoes for the stars?

Mariel: That's a big question.

Elyse: Finally, at the end of a very long day, both grandma's stories have led us nowhere.

Mariel: It seems my relative was a cobbler who made ballet shoes, but that was his only claim to fame.

Elyse: We've exhausted all of our leads in New York, but there's still one final thread of evidence I want to

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follow. I've contacted my fellow history detective, Tukufu Zuberi. He's heading to a town just outside of New Orleans, where he's tracked down Marilyn Miller's grandniece, Sudee Campell.

Tukufu: Marilyn Miller was quite a star in her day, wasn't she?

Sudee Campbell: Oh, yeah, she was a, um -- I mean, star in big Broadway lights. She was a singer, she was an actress, and she was a dancer. My father told me she made \$5,000 a week.

Tukufu: That's a lot of money for back then.

Sudee: That's a lot of money back then.

Tukufu: So what can you tell me about your great-aunt's sense of style?

Sudee: She was very particular. Her costuming was all handmade. Her livelihood was made on her feet. Her shoes, kind of particular...

Tukufu: Sudee tells me some fascinating family lore.

Sudee: There's a family story that there was a person, a shoemaker, backstage.

Tukufu: Mm-hmm.

Sudee: And if her shoes needed tweaking or if there was anything wrong with her shoes or -- that wasn't quite right for the performance, he would be there and -- and fix her shoes.

Tukufu: It's an intriguing story. Was that cobbler Michele Savino? Do you know who that shoemaker was?

Sudee: I have no idea.

Tukufu: That's disappointing. But you have this case of her personal items, is that right?

Sudee: Yes, yes. This is my Aunt Marilyn's leather trunk. It's embossed with her initials, "M.M.P." And it was Marilyn Miller Pickford. And it has some of her costumes and things in it.

Tukufu: What's this?

Sudee: These are boots that she wore when she was Peter Pan.

Tukufu: Peter Pan.

Sudee: You can even see where she's marked on the bottom...

Tukufu: Mm-hmm.

Sudee: So she wouldn't slip.

Tukufu: And what is this?

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Sudee: Oh, she was a girl of the '20s. Every girl's got to have her fan. My Grandma Ruth, her sister saved this and sent this to me when I was a kid.

Tukufu: Mm-hmm, okay. Wow! Elyse and Mariel are not going to believe what was buried in this trunk.

Elyse: I just want to thank you both for letting us have Mariel be a history detective, and I had a great, great time working with her. Mariel and I share our discoveries with her mom and grandmother. Mariel tells them that Savino was definitely not Capezio's mentor. Then she shows the advertisement which validates the family's story about Savino's shop on 42nd street.

Pam: 324 West 42nd Street.

Grandma: That's it, 324 west 42nd.

Elyse: Now, what Mariel doesn't know is that this -- the whole time that we were investigating your story in New York, my colleague, Tukufu Zuberi, was in New Orleans, Louisiana, looking into the Marilyn Miller story. Marilyn Miller's grandniece lives in Louisiana and we were able to track her down. And Tukufu went there to go through her belongings and see what he could find, and he found... This.

Mariel: Oh, my goodness.

Elyse: That's Marilyn Miller's toe shoe, and look on the back.

Pam: Wow! Oh, my God, Mom, there it is.

Mariel: "M. Savino."

Pam: "Savino, New York."

Grandma: I knew it.

Elyse: Marilyn Miller's family would like to give that to you as a present, so it's yours to keep.

Pam: I guess Mariel's not going to let me have that shoe. She wants that shoe.

Elyse: Well, thank you. It was a pleasure working with you and it was a great story, and I really appreciate your time.

Pam: Well, thank you so much for giving this to us. We are so pleased to have this.

Mariel: Yes.

Pam: It's so meaningful to have it.

Mariel: It's awesome! It's not only one that he made, it's one owned by the famous Marilyn Miller.

Elyse: So it's true, your great-grandfather was a maker to the stars.

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Elyse: Often when we research history, we overlook invaluable sources available to us: our families. Family lore can be a very exciting starting point for some wonderful discoveries. If Michele Savino's great-great-granddaughter had not taken such an interest in her grandmother's stories, the whole family may have lost an amazing opportunity to learn more about their past.

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