

Mike McKinley
*(onetime principal dancer with
“The Trocks”
Les Grands Ballets Trockadero de Monte
Carlo)*

•BIO

•PHOTOS

And

•CHAPTER ONE OF MIKE'S
MEMOIR-IN-PROGRESS:

**“Blood and Satin:
Confessions of a Drag Ballerina”**

*(Plus a Closing Statement
from Mike McKinley himself)*

HERE'S MIKE ON TOE IN PERFORMANCE

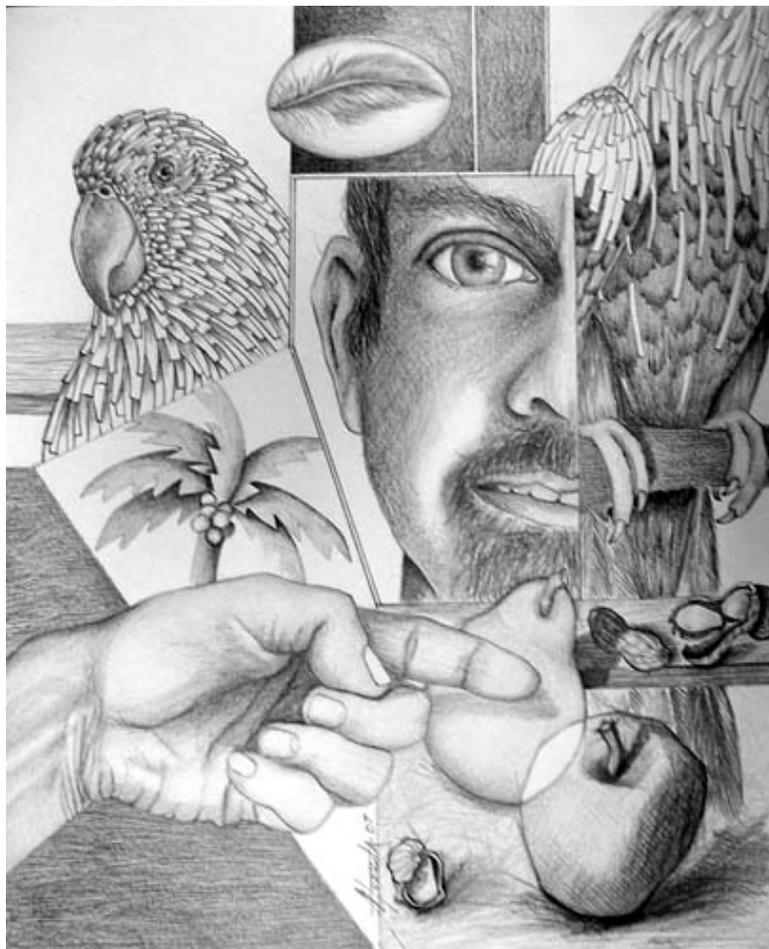


Mike McKinley, as the White Swan, in the pas de deux from Swan Lake, production of Les Grands Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo, Japan, circa 1986. Partnering Mike is Shannon Robbins

HERE'S THE INTRO TO MIKE'S BIO

Former international drag ballerina and principal dancer with Ballet Trockadero, Mike McKinley was once the Toast of the Continent, but now he's just toast. He lives in Austin, TX with his boyfriend, Alfonso Huerta who is an artist (<http://www.dosmundos.net>), their parrot, Lola, who was born in June of 1995, and their adorable Golden Lab mutt rescue dog, Zala, from the streets of Monterrey, Mexico, who was adopted and brought to Texas in 2007. Mike currently has a day job at UT and dances around town whenever someone needs a scary actor who can sing a high F and do a sissonne fermée.

(Here's Alfonso Huerta's pen and pencil drawing of Mike and their parrot Zola)



HERE'S MORE OF MIKE'S BIO

Mike McKinley got his first professional job as an apprentice in 1968 at the Houston Music Theatre working with Rita Moreno, Henny Youngman, Regis Philbin, George Gobel and Edward Everett Horton. The following summer, he worked in Los Angeles and painted scenery with a then-unknown Mark Hamill. After finishing Austin High School, Class of 1972, he attended University of Texas (UT)-Austin and was cast in his first dancing role by Igor Youskevitch in a production of Aida and continued to dance, sing and act in a wide range of musicals, plays and ballets. He studied with Mr. Youskevitch, Barbara Barker and Michael Sokoloff in Austin until he was spotted in a master class given by Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo. Six weeks later, he received a job offer from the "Trocks" to replace an injured dancer and within two weeks he had moved to New York City and went on to tour of Latin America. He continued with the Trocks, becoming a principal dancer, touring internationally on every continent but Antarctica and studying with Finis Jhung, Alexandra Danilova, Leon Danielian, and David Howard. Mike also returned to UT and got a Masters in Film and Video Production and won a student "Emmy" for his thesis project. He spent the last six years working with Austin Dance Ensemble where he danced character roles and choreographed extensively. He also guests occasionally with Ballet Austin, works at UT and spends as much time as possible in Mexico.

HERE'S PART ONE OF THE MEMOIR MIKE IS WRITING

***"Blood and Satin:
Confessions of a Drag Ballerina"
(A Memoir in Progress)***

*by Mike McKinley
(onetime principal dancer with
"The Trocks"
Les Grands Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo)*

Chapter One: The Phone Call

The call from New York came while I was setting my tables at the dinner theatre. I was paying my dues in the bargain basement of show business as a singing, dancing cocktail waiter at the Country Dinner Playhouse on a farm-to-market road outside Austin, Texas. They called us "The Heymakers," and only Mao's Cultural Revolution made a finer art of public humiliation.

We Heymakers took drink orders from the audience members during the buffet hour before the show began. It was not a clientele of theatrical sophisticates. I actually had a little old lady with way-big hair order a glass of "rose" (one syllable) wine. After inundating the hapless audience with liquor, tea, and coffee, we would run onstage and sing and dance, run back and take more drink orders, run off to the green room (showbiz-speak for the actor's lounge), try and add up our tickets, and run back to push more drinks during intermission. We smiled, said "Sir" and "Ma'am" a lot, and made ingratiating conversation about our little actor hopes and dreams. We were young, endlessly perky, and it was unbearable.

Our pre-show number consisted of songs that ranged from Tin Pan Alley to Nashville. Since this was Texas, a rural, down-home theme was emphasized. The boys wore blue gingham shirts and jeans, and the girls wore blue gingham pioneer dresses. Our show was a medley of musical numbers like "Y'all Come," "The Wichita Lineman," and "Old Rocky Top." The bales of hay and wagon wheels onstage inhibited even the minimal dancing that was required. Every table had old-fashioned lamps with chimneys on them. I always sang to the lamps. Making eye contact with the audience while singing "When you live in the COUNTREE-EE, everybody is yer NEIGHBEE-EER!" was more than I could bear. Except for me, the group was what is known in the business as "singers who move" -- which means that no one could move and no one was expected to, especially since any movement required negotiating the bales of hay and wagon wheels strewn about the stage. I, on the other hand, was a "dancer," which in Texas at that time was a very relative term. I think many of us stayed in the theatre because it was an ideal environment for not having a real job, getting laid and staying loaded. It was still the seventies. I mean, we had to be fucked up back then to wear those awful clothes and platform shoes, but it was the only life I had ever known.

The main-stage attraction was an endlessly bland comedy about a struggling actor in Manhattan working as a waiter who after two hours of painfully weak yucks gets his big break in a soap opera and, just incidentally, the superannuated

ingenue. The optimistic irony was not lost on us, but it did not mitigate our servile condition. Bob (Gilligan) Denver starred in this gobbler, and he was only about thirty years too old for the part. But he went on gamely, especially for a television actor. And as we were all in waiter drag in a darkened backstage area, we would sometimes run up to him with our tray and ask him to coffee our section. Like the playlet within Hamlet, the commentary on my own impending twist of fate now seems ironic to say the least.

The people I worked with were decent enough. The manager of the operation was a short, stout Texas lady named, unbelievably, Bea Day, and there was indeed a vitreous, fixture-like quality about her. At the time I did not appreciate the commercial value of her name, but when my career as a drag ballerina began and I was christened "Gerd Törd" (pronounced "gurd turd"), I learned exactly what's in a name.

The director of The Heymakers was constantly stoned, and like many men in show business, he stared at my crotch during conversations. Of course, this was back when I had a great crotch to stare at. I was flattered, certainly, even more so that he hated to see me leave. He paid me the ultimate compliment, stating that the next guy he hired would be a little, gay tenor who could dance and smoked pot -- just like me. Let me state here that I never slept with anyone to get where I had gotten. Perhaps that's why I never got too far. Perhaps it's why I got anywhere at all. I've always believed that you can fuck your way to the bottom as well as to the top. It's one of the gold-plated rules of show business, and it was something my mother instilled in me, though not in so many words. Ultimately, this sexual inactivity was truly a blessing and the main reason that I'm still alive.

We had to be at the theatre at 4:30 in the afternoon to set our tables. As I was arranging the silverware, someone from the box office called me to the phone. On the line was Peter Anastos, who, at that time and after the first of many purges, was the artistic director and prima ballerina assoluta of Les Grands Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo. He told me that one of their dancers was sick (hepatitis -- it's still the seventies), and he wanted to know how soon I could be in New York City. I was floored. Since I had never been to New York before, I asked if I might call him back. Suddenly, the Red Sea parted, and the Midnight Express had arrived. I think that my mouth hung open for the three days that it took me to quit my job, pack up a few things, and fly to New York. It still hangs open in disbelief as I write these words.

They had come through Austin several months before. Les Grands Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo was a company of male ballet dancers that

performed satirical send-ups of the revered warhorses of the classical ballet world (Swan Lake, Giselle, Les Sylphides and so on), with the men taking all the female as well as the male roles. What set this company apart from cheap lip synch acts was that the ballets were well danced, en pointe, with the majority of the original choreography intact. The dancers shaved only their faces and, in most cases, were big, hairy, muscular guys. The comic element was created by adding an occasional pratfall, making small changes in the choreography, and pushing the overwrought 19th-century conventions of emotional excess a bit higher than a "straight" company. With the intrinsic histrionics of balletic melodrama -- wizards bewitching women into birds while mamma weeps a lake of tears or the ghosts of dead virgins dancing men to death -- it doesn't take much to go over the top.

The company had received some funding from the National Endowment of the Arts (remember them?), and to maintain some semblance of redeeming social value, they were scheduled to give a series of master classes, lectures, and other educational activities at the University of Texas, my alma mater. I attended the first event, a lecture for music students on the history of composing for the ballet. Peter gave the talk, and though he was an accomplished musician himself, he dismissed the subject breezily, saying that the music had been written to accompany the ballets and that was that. The music students were underwhelmed to say the least. Then he talked about his work, hi life, all the stars he knew, and being famous. I showed up with my dance clothes on underneath my jeans, leotard visible under my open shirt, just in case. I sat with myballet shoes folded neatly on the desk in the lecture hall -- I must have looked a sight! Afterward, I introduced myself. He was charming and gracious and he urged me to come to company class and watch their rehearsal. This was not an event scheduled for the public. But, as he said, "We'd love for you to take class with us. We're sick of looking at each other!" The wheels in my little brain were whirring away. I had heard from a teacher of mine with considerable professional experience that dance companies would, sometimes, pick up a guy on the road in a master class. Girls, never, but guys, yes, occasionally. I was intimidated, but I had smelt blood. I was, after all, a guy, so I went to company class. The Trocks were performing at a barn of an auditorium that had been built duringthe fifties and looked like a flying saucer that had just landed next to the river that runs through downtown Austin. Class was held in the cavernous offstage areas, and I was literally waiting in the wings. Eve Harrington had nothing on me. That was when I met the ballet mistress, Betteanne. In retrospect, things were falling into place like a Fellini version of The Red Shoes. This woman was to mark me with some good training and emotional scars that I will carry to

the grave. But to give the devil her due, she was the one that launched my career, and for that, I am eternally in her debt.

Betteanne was a petite, cadaverous lady with enormous green eyes. She conducted class in blue jeans and red cowboy boots. I was from Texas, but I'd never seen anything like this before. All I can remember about the first part of class (which, in ballet, is a series of warm-up exercises done holding on to a barre) were those boots and the fierce, New York queens that comprised the company. They were a sight. But when we got to the center and the dancing began, the reality of the situation nearly stunned me: none of these guys could dance! I mean, except for one guy, no one had decent, let alone impressive, technique. In some cases, they had almost no technical ability at all. I couldn't believe it. This was the famous Ballet Trockadero? Of Dance Magazine, the Shirley McLane Special, the Palace Theatre in New York? We had better dancers in Austin. Betteanne gave a standard pirouette combination and though I was rough and unpolished, I could crank out consistent doubles and frequent, solid triples. I had been trained by Igor Youskevitch and others from the real Ballets Russes, and they gave lots of turns. The Trocks were all over the place -- several looked like rag dolls with the stuffing pulled out. After class, Betteanne came up to me and asked me if I had ever danced in toe shoes. Of course I had (I lied). I did have a pair of pointe shoes that a girl with big feet had given me, though I was unsure how to put them on. I sensed that, maybe, this would get me out of dinner theatre hell, and as God is my witness, I was ready to lie, cheat, steal, roll around in the dirt, eat a root and barf. Betteanne told me to come to the master class the next day and bring my shoes.

After class, I sat in the auditorium and watched them rehearse a ballet of Peter's called Cheopsiana. It was very interesting and left out little, if any, shtick. Set in ancient Egypt, the ballet has a maypole dance to unwrap a mummy, a slave princess (every ballet needs an enslaved woman), and a corps de ballet of Grecian drag queens called the Helenettes, all with matching wigs and tunics. The ending is fabulous. A four foot-long rubber snake is served to the slave princess in a basket of fruit in the final moments of the ballet. She dies after clutching it inexplicably to her throat. After her protracted death throes, during which she bourrées en pointe into the afterlife, the entire cast pulls little rubber daggers and, out of some unknown, antique feeling of solidarity, commits mass suicide. Anytime you have a higher body count than King Lear, you've got a hit.

But Peter wasn't happy. He was screaming at the prima ballerina, a slender American Indian named Zami, to do double and not single pirouettes.

Unfortunately, these were beyond Zami's technical limitations, but no matter. He attempted them, spinning out of control dramatically as he suffered for his art. Peter also danced the role of the fierce, old mummified harpy who is unwrapped by the Helenettes. They almost rolled his sarcophagus into the orchestra pit, and it looked like it would at least fall over onstage with him in it. The lesson herein is if the entire corps de ballet hates the director and he is onstage in a precarious position, it can be a dangerous situation. Peter then said that even during one of their "quasi-decent performances" they did not resemble a real ballet company. No shit. This was my first clue that the directors were in a parallel universe from the rest of humanity. No one was buying tickets to see a real ballet company and nothing's funny about boys that look and can dance just like girls, but the directors thought they were the real thing.

That afternoon I went to buy my ticket. As I stood in line, looking at the glossy publicity photos of the glamorous drag queens with lashes for days and pink toe shoes, I thought to myself, "I'll pay for this ticket; it will be an investment." This is typical of my manipulative mindset. I am always expecting the next audition, the next script submission, the next boyfriend to be the one that will push me over the top into great wealth, happiness, or, at least, endless notoriety. This proved to be the one instance when my dream would actually not just come true, but spin so far out of control that I barely escaped the vortex of tulle, vodka and rosin.

I attended the performance alone. I was single-minded, and for whatever reason, the thought of going with someone just did not occur to me. The first ballet was the second act of Swan Lake with Peter as Odette the White Swan Queen. Peter was a big girl with mediocre feet, weird line, a frightening visage and low extensions, but he was funny with a face like a giant Woody Allen. Whatever else might be said of him, he was a great comedian and a very talented choreographer. A few in the audience were not amused, however, and after Peter's first entrance, a white-haired couple sitting in my section got up and left in a huff. They were shocked, shocked, at the blatant drag-queenery. Their outrage went unnoticed. The performance was impressive. The audience was screaming in hysterics, and I mean screaming. It was the first time I can ever remember, no, the only time, that my hands hurt from applauding by the first intermission. And there were two more acts to go.

The funniest piece, to me at least, was entitled Phaedra Monotonous, choreographed by Shawn Avrea. This was a Martha Graham parody to music by Aaron Copeland, and after the modern dance performances that I had had to endure in a provincial university town, it hit the spot perfectly. The protagonist was terrorized by vicious girls with brooms, egg beaters, and toilet brushes in a

feminine frenzy of domestic oppression. There was a birth, a death, heavy gynecological contractions, histrionic movement, and bare feet. In the program of a legitimate modern company, the exact same dance would be taken seriously, very seriously. Later, I made the mistake of praising it to Peter, who was incensed that I would like Shawn's choreography better than his own work. I had a lot to learn.

Zami danced the Dying (and molting) Swan -- feathers flew everywhere, like a chicken-plucking contest at a state fair. The final ballet was a one-act version of Don Quixote. This ballet is famous for its bravura pas de deux and little else. It's seen on many programs as a vehicle for two stars, and was danced by Leland Walsh (Ida Nevešayneva) as Kitri and Natch Taylor (Alexis Lermontov) as Basilio. It has nothing to do with Cervantes, except in the most oblique sense. Rather it was created originally because Spanish dancing was in such vogue during late 19th century Russia. Unfortunately, the pas de deux was less than a show stopper. The ballet itself was funny enough -- there is a fairy scene in which all the trampy corps girls were bewitched and marched offstage and the Queen of the Fairies was played to the hilt by a big girl in a flowing blonde wig, crown, diaphanous blue gown and a wand four feet long. But in the pas de deux, Natch and Leland simply were not Fernando Bujones and Cynthia Gregory. Sanson Candelaria as Jacques d'Aniel, danced a solo (or "variation" in ballet parlance) as the Gypsy Boy which provided the most dazzling dancing in the entire evening and upstaged everyone else. He was a stunning technician with a stage presence that filled the biggest concert hall. The variation was filled with lots of serious tricks: double tours -- double everything (to both sides -- naturally), triple pirouettes -- the kind of stuff that you buy your tickets to see. The energy and comedic trajectory of the evening was such that by the end of the show the audience was so pumped that we were on our feet before the first curtain call.

Afterward, I just went home. I didn't go backstage or to the party that I heard they had. Even though I thought that Natch, the leading "male" dancer in Swan Lake and Don Quixote, and one of the directors, was very handsome in his tights, I just went home. I've never been much of a schmoozer. Besides, the master class, my date with destiny, was at ten o'clock the next morning.

The class was held in a lovely, sunny dance studio with warm wooden floors and mirrors that made everyone look much fatter than they are. My experience has been that all mirrors in all dance studios make you look fat. Why no genius has developed a mirror for sale to dance studios that elongates and thins the reflection, I'll never understand. However, this studio had been my Terpsichorean womb, and I felt very good here.

The Trocks straggled into class, and, in many cases, looked like hammered shit. A rough time had been had by all after the performance, but by God, they persevered. During the barre, Betteanne asked me if I had brought my pointe shoes, and I nodded my head. She had been trained in the old Russian school and liked the pedigree of my training. Igor Youskevitch, who was at that time the head of the Dance Department at UT, had been a major figure in Diaghilev's Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo. Unfortunately, he hated -- absolutely hated -- the Trocks. He thought satirizing the sacred cows of classical ballet to be sacrilege and he was a homophobe to boot. He lay very low during the few days of their residency. Years later, after he retired and moved back to New York, he taught in the same studio in which we rehearsed. I would run and hide, closing the studio door, deathly afraid that he would see me dancing (or, at least, attempting to dance) the role of the Swan Queen.

After the class, Betteanne asked me to put on my pointe shoes. I was completely ignorant of what to do, though I got them on. My fellow students and some of the company members, sensing bald ambition, not to mention provincial desperation, stayed around to watch the audition. This promised to be a most public moment. The shoes were much too tight, and I did not understand that almost immediately, on an uninitiated foot, a pointe shoe will make blisters or worse. I stuffed in some lamb's wool, but it was too little too late. Within seconds I had painful blisters.

"Okay, let's see piqué turns from the corner," Betteanne barked. This a basic though not easy step, a traveling turn on one leg that is repeated on a diagonal from corner to corner. It is one of a ballerina's bread-and-butter steps. Betteanne had noticed that I was a natural turner and wanted to get her money's worth. It was not until later that I realized that what she really liked was torturing people. But then again, when you think of it, ballet is an art form that grew out of a European culture that included the Spanish Inquisition, the iron maiden and the castration belt; so torture is a major element of the classical tradition. Betteanne was an exemplar of that tradition.

"Uh," dumbfounded, I asked, "could I do chaînées first?"

"Okay, from the corner!"

Chaînée turns are a spinning step that consists of walking and turning on two legs moving on a diagonal from one corner to another. They are easier than piqués, but since I had never done anything en pointe, I was still diving into an abyss. This was a quantum leap from what my training had prepared me for.

I ran to the corner next to a big wooden tray filled with broken bits and powdered rosin and prepared. The next thing I knew I was spinning across the floor like a yo-yo that had broken off of its string. I managed to stop before crashing into the wall. My fellow students applauded wildly. The Trocks sucked in their cheeks and narrowed their eyes into slits from which deadly rays could be emitted. I was jubilant.

"Okay, piqué turns from the corner."

I was so elated by the miracle of crossing the floor without crashing and burning that I ran back to start the next step. Something (one of the galaxy of things) that I didn't know was that pointe shoes are very slippery until they're broken in and rosin has been applied. So naturally before I reached the corner of the studio, I slipped and fell flat on my ass -- and I mean legs-in-the-air on my ass. The room roared with laughter and applause as I picked myself up.

"Now that's what we want!" Betteanne exclaimed.

I couldn't believe that I had just fallen down. It was then that the eternal, guiding principle of Trockadero dancing was been revealed to me, though I had yet to grasp it. Plainly stated, if they ain't laughin', fall down.

"Okay, Mike, piqué turns from the corner. Sometime today please!"

I prepared, posed, and, to my eternal astonishment, I did the turns. They were decent, acceptable, and en pointe. My fellow students went bananas.

Betteanne pulled me aside and said that this was all very nice. When she asked about my plans, I told her that I was hoping to go to New York in May to seek my fortune (it was February). Natch motioned me over and wrote down the company's address. He told me to call when I get to New York and they would put me on scholarship. Then, they left town, and as far as I knew, they were out of my life forever.

About six weeks later, Peter called me, and in an instant everything was transformed.

I left the dinner theatre early and went by my brother's house. Of course, Peter had first called my mother, and she had given him the number to the dinner theatre, so the news spread quickly among my family and friends. My brother and I made arrangements for him to drive my car, which had been a college graduation present, to New York before I left the country on tour. Such was the

whirlwind of the moment that I hadn't even asked where we were going to tour. I was sure it was overseas – Australia, I thought (it turned out to be South America) -- it didn't matter, as long as I wasn't a Heymaker at the Country Dinner Playhouse anymore. Hello! Frying pan to fire. A car would be a hideous liability in New York City, but that meant nothing to me at the time. I had lived briefly in California, driven all over L.A., and I refused to believe that I could not have my precious, one year-old, completely paid for, first car in Manhattan. I'd show those Yankees.

I had a boyfriend, too, named Jeffrey. He had watched my infamous audition and cheered me all the way. He was such a doll, looking like a young Ryan O'Neal, but unfortunately (or really fortunately), we had never fallen in love and so it was easy for us to say goodbye.

My mother was very happy for me. She had raised me on her own since I was six, and we were close, but she had cut the apron strings years ago. Really, I had chewed through them, but more on that later. My father, who had lived at the family farm since my parents divorced, paid for my air ticket. He had been a gymnast in small-time Texas vaudeville in his youth and had always been supportive of my career. My godmother, Bea, was a special case in every way. From a wealthy South Texas oil family, she had paid for my car and many other things. And, at this point all three -- mother, father and godmother -- were still young enough not to worry too much about either impending dotage or ill health, so I would be missed only in a sentimental way. I was off.

END: PART ONE

**Mike has completed 14 chapters of
“Blood and Satin:
Confessions of a Drag Ballerina”**

“The remaining chapters,” Mike writes, “will include: Nervous Breakdown in Green Bay, the Spoleto Festival in Italy, Lovely Australia, the 2nd South African tour where half the company quit and we had two weeks to replace them, the fleshpots of Rio, the return to Italy, my affair with one of the dancers (a big mistake), the second South American tour when all the new girls joined including the current director of the company, my epiphany and my return to Texas.”

FINAL WORD FROM MIKE

“Dear Friends, I am a gay icon who has yet to be discovered, though I’m sure that celebrity, great wealth and A-List invitations will start pouring in any day now. So, like Miss Havisham, I sit by the phone in my crown, toe shoes and swan feathers. And wait.

“If you are interested in learning more about the memoir, “Blood and Satin: Confessions of a Drag Ballerina,” and what it was like to tour the world in a tutu, feel free to contact me at crawlene@gmail.com”



Mike, backstage, made up as a Cygnet (little swan) in Swan Lake. Circa 1979.