

Secret:

My Life with the Secret Service

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I was a freshly-minted Company Manager in 1975 when I found myself part of a gala benefit performance at the (then) Uris Theater in New York for the Martha Graham Dance Company. It was entitled “Martha, Margot and Rudy,” referring to Martha Graham, Dame Margot Fonteyn, and Rudolf Nureyev. They were good friends –Nureyev had been quietly studying with Graham after his defection, and Fonteyn was Nureyev’s frequent star partner, but it was their first time on stage all together—and their only time. It was to be quite the affair: the fiftieth anniversary of the company Martha had founded, celebrating a newly revived young corps of dancers that had played to rave reviews the prior year on Broadway and had gone on to a whirlwind tour of Asia under the aegis of the State Department.

During preparations and rehearsals at the Graham studio, one of our interns, organizing old files in the basement of the company’s studio on East 63rd Street, came across a mid-1930s dance class attendance sheet that included the name of Betty Bloomer. It didn’t take Martha long to recognize the name and then to realize that her married name was Ford, and that she was now the First Lady of the United States, wife of President Gerald Ford. It also didn’t take Betty long to agree to serve as Honorary Chair of the event. That of course meant involving the Secret Service, and part of my function at the time was coordinating our heavy security presence: The Secret Service for the First Lady, Pinkerton’s for the quarter-million dollars’ worth of jewelry borrowed for the event from Harry Winston, the theater’s own security, and the New York City Police, who couldn’t be left out of an event like this. This was my personal introduction to the Secret Service.

I can’t resist inserting a side note on the folly of relying on someone else’s security, spectacular as it may be. One of our principal dancers had managed to marry the chairman of one of the world’s most fashionable cosmetics companies, and he had rewarded her with a diamond ring of a suitable size. On the night of the Gala, having to pass through successive waves of New York City Police, the Pinkertons and the theater’s security, and finally the Secret Service, she felt quite secure and failed to use the traditional theater custom of securing personal valuables with the stage manager. She left the wedding ring on her dressing table, only to find it missing when she came offstage. The security, after all, was not for her.

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Fast forward to the spring of 1980. I was employed as the Company Manager for the Joffrey II Dancers, then the farm team for the Joffrey Ballet, housed in the City Center Theater in New York. The presidential season that year also saw the national political debut of one Ronald Reagan, sometime movie star, former president of the Screen Actors Guild, former Governor of California, and shortly to become the 40th President. At one of our blind open auditions in 1979, the company's Artistic Directors had seen a promising young dancer on the west coast and signed him up for the company. His name? Ron Reagan, son and namesake of the presidential candidate.

Shortly thereafter, I was the recipient of a visit from two very dapper men with whom I was to become familiar over the next year: the head of the protective detail for Ron Reagan, as one of the family members of the soon-to-be presidential nominee of the Republican Party. Given that we were based in the heart of mid-town Manhattan, had an extensive touring schedule, and that a dancer's life was then a somewhat unorthodox vocation for a presidential scion, this confluence presented distinct challenges for the campaign strategists, the Secret Service, and for the Joffrey II Dancers.

This visit of two agents in three-piece suits to a rather scruffy dance company office juxtaposed two very different ethos and the way they ultimately came to fit together in a spirit of mutual respect: that of the gypsy dancers of New York, and the institutional world of the security detail of the Secret Service.

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The Secret Service was formed just following the Civil War to combat the counterfeiting of the paper currency which was rampant at that time, and one arm of the service has always had as its charge the investigation of financial crimes involving US currency, Treasury securities, identity fraud, and major financial crimes. In the years following the Civil War, the Service expanded into domestic intelligence and criminal investigations—duties later taken over by the FBI and other agencies. Following the assassination of President McKinley in 1901, Congress added a second arm to the duties of the Service: the physical protection of the person and office of the President of the United States, since expanded to include the immediate family of the President, the Vice-President, retired Presidents and their spouses, presidential candidates, visiting heads of state, and any other important foreign visitors. This even led to an assignment to protect a 500-year-old

Italian lady of some note on her first visit to North America, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art: the Mona Lisa.

This is a dichotomous position that requires the protection of the office—but not the interests of the person occupying the office. The Secret Service is extremely careful not to become embroiled in the politics of the person, to the point that individual agents would not discuss which candidate they voted for or what policies they preferred, not even over informal coffee on the tour bus. The recent comments of the lead agent in the Denver office in 2017, and the furor it caused, only call attention to this tradition. The retirement of the director of the Service, announced shortly after the recent anointment of Donald Trump, is almost certainly an unstated political comment, given the timing of the announcement.

The dual nature of the Service leads to some interesting contrasts. The protective and law enforcement functions mean that each agent is required to carry and be well-trained in the use of firearms; but as Treasury agents they must have access to the working floor of the US Mint. As such they are the only persons allowed to carry firearms into the Mint.

The protective function requires them to be in excellent health and physical condition—which the Treasury function would not—since in motorcades they may be required to run alongside the Presidential limousine for some distance. Most active agents run several miles a day to stay in shape. The agents do not specialize in either the Treasury or protective functions, and seem to find that the differing duties keep them more flexible and mentally alert.

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The Joffrey Ballet started life in the back of a station wagon in 1956 when Robert Joffrey and his associate Gerald Arpino took a small group of dancers on tour. The young company's first engagement in a major city was Chicago in 1957, and it quickly expanded to tour internationally, with a base in New York. Following a falling-out between Robert Joffrey and a major benefactor, Rebekah Harkness, in 1964, Joffrey rebuilt the company as the Joffrey Ballet in 1965, and it became New York City Center's resident ballet company in 1966. The company became bi-coastal from 1982 to 1992 with homes in both New York and Los Angeles. Following the death of Ruth Page in 1991, her *Nutcracker* was mothballed, and her company shrank drastically, leaving what is now known as the Ruth Page Center on the north side. Chicago dance aficionados sought a

company of note; the Joffrey was again in financial duress in the early 1990's and the company moved here in 1995. Joffrey shortly mounted a *Nutcracker* in Chicago, which remained the gold standard until the company replaced it in 2016. The Joffrey has enjoyed great success in Chicago, and the dance community has thrived.

The episode referred to in this narrative occurred from 1979-1981, when the Joffrey was one of three major ballet companies resident in New York, the others being the New York City Ballet, brainchild of George Balanchine, Russian emigre and resident genius, and American Ballet Theater, or ABT, showcasing a range of classic and modern styles.

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The Secret Service had, first, to wrap their institutional mind around the concept of protecting a *dancer*. Dance is an ephemeral art form, existing only in the moment and until the advent of film and video, without a means of effective recording, unlike the book to literature, or musical notation to the composer. Even dancers themselves cannot remember their parts after the work goes offstage. Dancers are the perennial gypsies of the performing arts, carrying huge duffel bags that contain many of their worldly possessions, from clothes to food, water, passports and wallets. They are also the consummate athletes of the arts, with careers shortened by injuries, just as sports figures. Dancers believe ferociously in the art they practice. Male dancers were viewed by the public as effete and largely homosexual (although Ron was not), and this in a time when homosexuality, particularly for a Republican offspring, was not easily accepted. That impression was soon overcome within the Secret Service when the first agents watched a few rehearsals to get familiar with the genre and the lifestyle of their new charge. They were universally impressed with the athleticism displayed—and this from men accustomed to running five miles before breakfast – and the effete impression was soon dissolved.

For Joffrey II, this was the opportunity of a lifetime. Dance, being a somewhat obscure art form, lives on the financial edge most of the time, and now one of our twelve dancers turns out to be the son of the presidential nominee? Under most circumstances, you would count your blessings all the way to the bank.

But this was the farm-team that came into the limelight of national politics and attention. Reporters neither knew nor cared about the distinction of Joffrey II and the Joffrey Ballet. They just knew

that Reagan's kid was a *dancer*. Ron-the-dancer was not yet ready for the senior company, and both our director, Sally Brayley Bliss, and Robert Joffrey, agreed that it would be improper to use his name as a publicity stunt, or to promote him to the main company before he was ready, not to mention the negative impact on morale that such a move would have for both companies.

The press, the booking agent, and many potential sponsors, all wanted a piece of him, whether to put in a story, or to feature onstage. With an election looming, Lyn Nofziger, Reagan senior's campaign manager, was very leery of any negative publicity for the son and namesake that could rub off on the main event. There were many early morning telephone conversations between Sally Bliss and Lyn Nofziger, and evening discussions with Robert Joffrey.

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We have, in the past year of a Presidential election, gotten used to mud-slinging and name-calling, but I would argue that the issues raised are petty next to the issues of the late 1960s, 1970s, and the drama of the 1980 election. The assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr, were still fresh wounds. Viet-Nam was an open social sore, which had touched off major economic repercussions by the late 1970s. Watergate and President Nixon's resignation put Trump's current tweeting in perspective. Some here will remember the gas lines during the Arab oil embargo. 'The entire 1980 Presidential campaign was carried out while 444 American hostages were held captive in the embassy in Tehran, despite a daring but failed rescue attempt by American Special Forces. The issues then were not trumped-up.

Against this backdrop, the Secret Service now had charge of the person of the teenage son and namesake of the Republican nominee, living in the heart of New York City, traveling frequently, in an unconventional occupation and lifestyle. This could be considered a challenge, not matched in the later recollections of senior officers since Margaret Truman became a concert pianist in the 1950's.

What, after all, was their charge? They were not in charge of his lifestyle—that was the purview of Nofziger and the political experts—to the extent that anyone could oversee a carefully groomed youth in the full flower of his teenage rebellious independence. What is the logic of the protective detail, particularly for the *family* of the President? For the President, it is clear—they must protect his-or her- physical well-being against harm, and thus the continuity of the government of the

United States of America. For children of the President, it is less clear. Physical harm from an assailant would be embarrassing or tragic, but would not destabilize the government. On the other hand, control of the person of the child—kidnapping—could easily be used to pressure the President and hence the policies of the government. It was that—kidnapping—which always loomed largest in the concerns of the Service. Again, recall the tactics of rebels in Nicaragua, or the revolutionaries in Iran.

I have been involved with heavy Secret Service protection—and it is impressive. The detail that we came to know was nothing like that. There is no such thing as “lite” protection, but our detail was light on its feet and adaptable, as was required for their situation.

Each individual protectee, starting with the President, has their own detail, each with its own lead agent, an assistant, and cast of agents assigned. The size of the detail will depend greatly on the activities, locations and travel schedule involved. In our case, there were always three agents, 24/7, two in his immediate vicinity, and one who stayed at a close remove, in charge of ‘baby’, should additional firepower be required. “Baby” was an Uzi machine gun, capable in a pinch of firing 500 rounds per minute, the most advanced portable weapon available at the time. As we traveled or had special events, additional forces were deployed, but more of that shortly.

I noted the constant nature of the detail. The Secret Service does not sleep—they are on duty twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. That’s three shifts every day, plus days off and holidays, while traveling or sleeping—or performing. So, while I mentioned three agents on duty, given those parameters, the basic detail amounted to some twenty agents. The Service recognized the stress these men were under, so they were constantly rotating replacement agents through our detail given the travel schedule we maintained.

When our travelling circus came to rest in a town, the Service beefed up their numbers with local agents. The Secret Service, like the FBI and other agencies, maintains offices in every State and many larger cities. All the agents have served in protective details during their careers, and some of the bureaus are regarded as routes to retirement, but all are qualified—and many have valuable local knowledge. One such was Harley, an outsize Oklahoma character who met us at a gas station outside our destination. He usually served under cover disguised as a hippie, and had dressed up for our visit to Enid by removing the earring from his ear and combing his flowing tresses. The

agent in Montana apologized that he couldn't bring more manpower, but the other agent had to cover the rest of the state during our visit.

The Joffrey II Dancers customarily traveled by bus, very occasionally supplemented by air travel. This was a large over-the-road bus, redecorated to our needs by removing several rows of seats, and installing a wardrobe rack, a desk for the Company Manager, a large screen television with tape player for entertainment, refrigerator, a popcorn popper, and a couple of tables, each with one row of seats reversed for socializing. The bus had two luggage bays, one for the dancers' personal gear, one reserved to the company for dance floor, scenery and other necessities. Whenever Ron was aboard, the bus also had a Secret Service agent, always seated in the first row to control access to the door.

What of the rest of the detail? The Service always considers backup plans, so everywhere the bus went, the follow-up car went. This was not just a follow-up car, but a Chevy Suburban, in the days before SUV's became popular, and the biggest passenger vehicle available. In that were packed the balance of the detail on duty, the backup weaponry, and the personal gear of the entire detail.

One of the advantages that a bus contains that a Suburban does not is a bathroom. Thus, our range was limited only by the bladder of our driver or the hunger of our dancers. On several occasions a radio call came from the chase car to make a stop—they had noticed an errant cow or oil well as we crossed Texas or Oklahoma—only to find the occupants of the chase car making a dash to use our bathroom on the bus.

One of the rituals inflicted on new agents riding as the bus agent for the first time was the bathroom "wobble". Dancers can sleep in almost any position, especially after they've been on the road for a couple of weeks. Some liked to drape themselves over the seats, others on the floor or in the aisle, so that in many cases getting to the bathroom on the moving bus was a challenge, best accomplished by teetering on the armrests of the seats remaining, and keeping one's balance by using the overhead rack. Our bus drivers enjoyed allowing a 'newbie' to get about halfway to the rear with a full bladder, and then giving the steering wheel a brief but sharp 'wobble'. I leave to your imagination some of the comments uttered by these novices on their return to the front of the bus, and some of the radio crackle from the chase car, the more experienced agents, who knew precisely what had happened.

I mentioned the ‘rest of the detail’ a moment ago, but that only included the shift on duty. That left two shifts of agents to get to the next destination on their own. When travelling with candidates, this is not as much of an issue, since they generally stick to larger cities. We in the farm team had to leave the major cities for the main company of the Joffrey. Thus, it was not unusual for us to travel 200-400 miles in a day, from a town the size of Kankakee to Youngstown, Ohio, for example, and then perform that evening. This kind of travel for the agents, using commercial air services, required complex planning, so that to get, for example, from Kankakee to Youngstown, Ohio, they would drive to Chicago, fly to Cleveland, and a final jump to Youngstown. For those on the third shift, this did not allow a lot of time for sleep, nor a lot of room for error by airlines or uncooperative weather.

Ah, weather. One of my favorite memories of the trips on the bus was enroute up the spine of the Rocky Mountains in February. As we started north from Dallas one day in early February, headed for Raton Pass, New Mexico, the predictions were for snow, but the sky and ground were clear, so we piled into the bus and set off from Texas across the plains, headed west, into the teeth, as it turned out, of a white-out blizzard. After we had travelled for an hour or more, we came to a state police roadblock, closing the road due to weather. We elected to keep going (and the Secret Service convinced the State Police to allow us). We had a schedule to keep, and the show must go on after all! After another hour, we started seeing small groups of cars coming toward us with snow “whiskers” obscuring the entire front of the car. We eventually hit the storm as well, and there the bus proved itself. Despite the weather, the bus rolled on—it turns out that buses have a very stable geometry and are one of the most stable vehicles on the road. The chase car, on the other hand, was barely able to stay on the road despite four-wheel drive, and the Secret Service driver looked a bit haggard when we arrived at Raton for the night. What of the dancers, you ask, in all this weather? They were happily ensconced in their seats, watching *Mary Poppins*, and only noticed the weather outside when they surfaced for more popcorn. To this day, I cannot hear of that movie without thinking of the blizzard at Raton Pass.

Going east from Texas later in the spring, we had a travel day through Oklahoma, and so, wanting to waste no time, the agent in charge asked our driver if he knew how to modify the governor on the engine, so that we could travel faster and spend less time enjoying the scenery of that state. We were shortly passing much of the slower traffic, until we reached the outskirts of Oklahoma City,

when the flashing lights of a local state policeman indicated we should pull over. The agents from the bus and chase car got out with the driver to discuss the matter as a courtesy with fellow law-enforcement officials, but the local cop was having none of it. We on the bus finally declared lunch; our driver, who was the innocent in this affair, came into the restaurant after another hour or so, much relieved. The local state policeman had refused the orders of his barracks commander to drop the matter, and had been recalled by that commander after discussions with the Secret Service in Washington. We suspected that he had drawn the midnight shift in the Oklahoma equivalent of Nome, but we did watch our speed for the rest of the day.

There is a great feeling of power when flying and dealing with airlines when you walk up to an airlines podium (in the days before online boarding passes and the TSA), and dictating to the airline agent where the twenty-five or thirty passengers accompanying you are going to sit. Such is the feeling you get when travelling with the Secret Service. They have very particular requirements when it comes to seating on aircraft, and it trumps the priority seating of any other passenger. Not only that, you *always* get priority boarding!

The agents have dealt with the notoriously unpredictable world of politics long enough to have a rather jaundiced eye to the schedules put out by campaign managers and press secretaries. So, when late in the tour our booking agent added a new performance a month or so later, I duly produced a schedule for the day, which was met with some derision by the regular agents at the time, who didn't believe schedules for the next day, let alone a month later. The head of the detail, on the contrary, had gotten to know me, and said to them, "If he says we'll leave at 8am, believe it." We left at 8am that day, much to the astonishment of those agents. The performing arts have a certain time, and stick to it, unlike politics.

One of the perennial problems faced by the Service in dealing with their dancer-charge was their dress code. One of their goals, then and now, is to blend into the scene in which their protectee is participating. That means dressing like most of the guests. When protecting adult politicians, that usually means a business suit, or in casual situations, slacks and a sports coat. (You will rarely see agents without some sort of coat, since that serves to hide radios and firearms that they are obliged to carry.) When your protectee is a nineteen-year-old dancer who customarily wears leg warmers and a sweat shirt, the dress code falls apart. Not only that, given our unpredictable schedule, we

could be travelling in jeans in the morning, but be dressed up for a performance in the evening and then a casual reception following that.

After a few weeks of confusion—there is nothing more self-conscious than a six-foot-tall handsome young man in a business suit trying to blend in at a dance rehearsal with a gaggle of young, cute, semi-clad girls swirling about—the agents in charge of the detail finally reached a conclusion: dress in the style of the Company Manager. If he's dressed in a suit, match it, if he's dressed in jeans, you can dress casually. This worked well for the regular detail, but it was still amusing to watch agents new to the assignment trying to fit in for the first few days.

One of the issues faced by any security system is imposters. How are you to determine at a glance who is a real agent and who false if all are dressed in blue business suits? The answer, then and now, is badges. But, anyone studying the dress code of the Secret Service will soon figure out that the badge is the lapel pin they all wear, and simply copy that. The answer is elegantly simple and impossible to counterfeit: each lapel pin has a color background disk that is changed daily. Woe betide the agent who doesn't get the message about the day's color code. And heaven help the imposter!

The agents of the Secret Service are under a great deal of stress and pressure given their responsibilities, and it is perhaps not surprising that they are very fond of practical jokes as a means of relieving some of that pressure. Two stories will perhaps suffice.

Once, they played a trick on one of their own. Being law-enforcement agents of the highest caliber, there are few locks that can hold them back. In this case, they removed all the set screws from the inside of the locks and windows in the victim's room, leaving the handles to simply spin in place once the room was entered, creating a locked cell. The agent was able to get out, finally, through a bathroom ventilation window while standing on the toilet, to the applause of the others awaiting him outside that window with a good drink.

Joffrey II was invited to Bermuda as a kick-off to one of our tours. It is a beautiful island, and we had been offered accommodations in one of the top hotels by our host (who also owned a classic Bermuda racer and was kind enough to take the entire company for a sail). It occurred to us that it would be fun to play a practical joke on our Artistic Director, Sally Bliss, but most of the company

had no idea how to accomplish it. But what, and how? After all, it had to be quick to execute, do no lasting damage to the victim or property, and have great surprise power.

Enter the Secret Service, old hands at such shenanigans. They helped organize every detail, including the cooperation of the hotel and its staff. Perhaps you have heard of the upside-down room trick, in which everything in the victim's room is affixed to the ceiling, appearing to invert the room against gravity? We did not have time for that, so instead, one evening, every stick of furniture was removed from her rather-spacious suite and secreted in the rooms of the company. The bed was remade, perfectly tucked in, on the floor. The other decorations were equally arranged, including her papers and personal effects, just as they had been, but without furniture. Where was the director? Discussing business with me, over dinner, to keep her distracted. The look on her face when she opened the door to her room was priceless, repeated the following morning when she received a faux bill at the front desk from the hotel for the missing furniture. The level of detail in this practical joke could only have been accomplished with the help of the agents on the detail, who enjoyed it as much as we.

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I hope that the experiences related in this paper reflect my enormous respect for the agents of the Secret Service, the work they do, and the pressures they are under. One last story will perhaps reflect that. During our travels, we came to Lincoln, Nebraska on March 29, 1981 for an engagement the following evening.

The next morning, March 30, John Hinckley, Jr. attempted to assassinate President Reagan. By the time most of us heard about it, the Secret Service had set up a war room for Ron and were in intense discussions of the best way to get him quickly from Lincoln to Washington to be with his father. Shortly after that the entire entourage departed, and the rest is history. The show went on, but it felt strangely empty without Ron and his detail, while knowing that the President was fighting for his life. Timothy McCarthy, one of the agents who had ridden the bus with us earlier in the spring, was the Secret Service agent wounded in that attack. It brought the danger of their job very close to all of us. Fortunately, he recovered, and after a stint as a congressman, is now the chief of police in Orland Park, just southwest of Chicago.

There is an intensely professional quality to Secret Service agents. They are never off duty, always vigilant and scanning the crowd, whether 20, 200, or 2000. They may be a fun-loving bunch, quick with a joke, but they all possess an instant-on capacity. The moment they detect a threat, they close ranks and are in full battle mode in a split second. It is an impressive trait, and not to be trifled with. It was fully in evidence in Lincoln.

We were honored, later that spring, when we visited Washington, DC for an engagement at George Washington University in early May, where President Reagan chose to return to public life at his son's performance. Although we had been working with the protective detail for Ron, this was the first time we had worked with the full staff, since we had the President's full detail, the First Lady's detail, and Ron's. There were lists, special access pins, metal detectors for the audience and backstage, bomb-sniffing dogs, and agents everywhere. Throughout this, we ran into agents we knew well from the bus, but while they were friendly, they were now all business, focused and watchful.

The rich and powerful came to Lisner Auditorium that evening. The dancers, reunited with Ron, performed with energy and intensity. This was not just another college gig. The closure for us came at the end of the evening, when President Reagan came backstage and greeted each of the company members individually. It was a fitting end to a long, eventful tour.