

## **Roland and Romaine - Then and Now**

Deanne Kearney  
York University  
Dance MA2 210935245

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## **Abstract**

In 1951, Betty Romaine Nicholson was the first North American woman to win a gold medal in an international ballroom competition. She went on to teach at Toronto's Arthur Murray's dance school where she met Roland Kirouac. Together, they created a legacy across Canada and toured internationally with both ballroom dance and commercial jazz choreography featured on television, films and large live performances, such as the Canadian musical Television show, *The Pig and Whistle*. In Toronto in 1960, they opened up their first dance studio, *Roland and Romaine*. The family-run dance studio is currently in its fifty-eighth year, having been passed down through the family. Although Roland and Romaine were internationally recognized Canadian dancers in their successful ballroom and choreography careers, little is written about the pair's accomplishments. In this research essay, I trace the history of the Roland and Romaine studio through its generations and the legacies of its co-owners. The studio maintains a small archive of its past and is currently operated by the two daughters and granddaughter of Betty Romaine Nicholson who provide oral histories of the studio's past.

## **Roland and Romaine - Then and Now**

In 1951, Betty Romaine Nicholson was the first North American woman to win a gold medal in an international ballroom competition. She went on to teach at Toronto's *Arthur Murray's Dance School* where she met Roland Kirouac. Together, they created a legacy across Canada and toured internationally with both ballroom dance and commercial jazz choreography featured on television, films and large live performances, such as the Canadian musical Television show, *The Pig and Whistle*. In Toronto in 1960, they opened up their first dance studio, *Roland and Romaine*. The family-run dance studio is currently in its fifty-eighth year, having been passed down through the family. Although Roland and Romaine were internationally recognized Canadian dancers in their successful ballroom and choreography careers, little is written about the pair's accomplishments. Over the past three years, I have been a teacher at this warm and welcoming family-run studio. Throughout this time, I have heard surprising tidbits of information about the history of the school, such as 'Mike Myers was a student here!' or 'Roland was the Ritz cracker dancer!' I decided it was

time to dig into the archive and find out more about this place that I consider a home. As I dug, I found that many through its history felt the same way. Through the small archive contained at the studio and through oral histories of the two daughters and granddaughters of Betty Romaine Nicholson, who now operate the studio, I trace the history of the Roland and Romaine studio through its generations and the legacies.

Betty Romaine Nicholson was born in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada on May 2, 1928. She was adopted at nine months old and raised in Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire, England, where she took a tap class at the age of five. During World War Two, Eve and Len Folger, dancers from the *Sadler Wells Ballet Company* left London to Welwyn Garden City where Romaine received weekly training from them at the local community center. At the age of 18, she returned to Toronto where she fell in love with ballroom dance. At the age of 20, she joined *Arthur Murray Dance School* as a secretary to the manager. She continued working for the studio for twelve years in which she was promoted to teacher and then Dance Director of the Toronto location. In January of 1951, Romaine won the first gold medal in ballroom by a North American in a competition put on by the Arthur Murray Studio franchise. She went on to win endless first place cups in dance competitions across Canada and the United States. Notably, she won first place in an amateur competition in Havana, against competitors from three hundred different dance studios. Romaine became the youngest member of *The Dance Board of America* in 1951. The board consists of five dancers in the United States and Canada whose job it is to set up and supervise the standard of dancing in these two countries. While in Toronto, Romaine was teaching at *Arthur Murray's Dance School*, where she met her future partner, Roland Kirouac.

Roland Kirouac was born in Quebec City, Quebec, Canada on November 22, 1937. Kirouac had four brothers and went to school at a strict Catholic school run by nuns and

brothers. At a young age, he started training in ballet, modern jazz, Spanish dancing and ballroom. By the age of sixteen, Kirouac began teaching at a local dance school and was recognized in the city for his talent. With the goal of learning English, Kirouac planned a short trip to Toronto, yet the short stay was extended to a lifetime as he was hired to teach at Toronto's *Arthur Murray's Dance School*, where he met Romaine.

The pair did not start dancing together until Kirouac's wife called Romaine to say that Roland needed to make more money in his teaching position at *Arthur Murray's Dance School*. Dance teachers in those times were paid according to level – winning bronze, silver or gold medals. Romaine began training Roland, and they quickly learned that they were perfectly matched. In a video interview presented in a DVD of the *Roland and Romaine School of Dance* fiftieth year anniversary, Roland refers to himself as being a rough diamond before training with Romaine.

After a trip to Philadelphia where the duo performed at a gala event, Romaine mentioned the idea of opening a studio to Roland. He instantly went to work on the idea and found some of his loyal students who were able to loan him a total of five thousand dollars to open a school. The first *Roland and Romaine School of Dancing* opened on July 15th, 1960. At 482 Yonge Street, just north of College Street, on the second floor of a Syd Silver. It had two danceable rooms, a tiny office and a two side-by-side washroom. The floors were slanted, and the linoleum tended to rise in little bumps. The pair would joke that you could tell a Roland and Romaine dancer by the way they leaned when they danced.

Within five years, the studio began to expand and moved to a bigger space at 719 Yonge Street at Bloor Street and remained there for many years. The studio developed to open more locations in Hamilton (1975), Victoria Park (1977), Mississauga (1979), and a secondary

Toronto location in (1984). The studio now resides solely at 508 Lawrence Ave W location, at Lawrence Ave and Bathurst Street.

With the expansion of space, also came the increase in dance styles offered at the studio. The duo, having both trained in different dance styles - combined their knowledge of ballet, modern jazz, Spanish dancing, latin and ballroom which made them the perfect combination for a high caliber dance team and studio. Roland and Romaine started to offer classes in not only ballroom but tap, ballet and jazz. Other teachers hired to work at the studio were required to be working professionals in the industry.

The Roland and Romaine studio opened during the pioneer days of professional dance in Toronto. Dancing on a professional level outside of ballet world was still a new idea and needed a home. The studio focused on professionals who worked in show dancing rather than the troupe work like the Canadian companies of The National Ballet of Canada, or Toronto Dance Theatre. On January 1, 1964, the duo officially announced the launch their second career - show business, by focusing its energy on nightclubs performances, industrial shows, conventions, and television. Many professional actors, singers, models and dancers began to attend the school. Through this time, Roland and Romaine continued to work as professional performers and choreographers while maintaining the studio.

Through their many accomplishments, the pair wrote a book and dance manual. *The Beginner in Social Dancing* (approximately written in 1965) describes the fundamentals of social dancing including information on the music, posture and possible exercises. The book teaches how dancers first have to learn how to stand and walk before learning different dance phrases. *Beginner in Social Dancing* includes a biography of Roland and Romaine as well as photographs of the pair to teach the exercises and movements. The book advises where to

take dance classes, comparing large and small studios and the benefits of each. A passage from the book states the range in classes and costs from the time:

“One place may be right for one person, but wrong for another. No matter where you take lessons, it being a class at home, or at a Club, in a small or large studio, if you pay 50c or \$25.00 a lesson, the important thing is that you are improving your dancing and social life, the result can only be rewards. Don’t let people put you off. You are a do-er. They are only the talker.”(The Beginner in Social Dancing 87)

Through my archival dig, I was surprised to see a newspaper clipping with the headline "*Romaine 'lucky to be alive' starts European tour*". The clipping is from the *Toronto Star* newspaper on October 3, 1964. Writer Marie Moreau writes the story of how a talent scout from the United States saw Roland and Romaine perform an interpretive jazz dance as a club in Windsor, Ontario and signed them up to be the only Canadian dancers invited to join a dance troupe to tour England and Continental Europe in the fall of 1964. The tour was scheduled for two months with the *American Motor Corporation* in a fast moving show titled the *Ramberlama* in which the highly entertaining and fast moving performances would entertain over 60,000 troops. While driving back to Toronto after the Windsor performance, Roland and Romaine were sadly in a terrible head-on collision on highway 401. Romaine awakened a few days after the crash in the hospital. The accident left her with a gash on her forehead from her hairline to her eyebrow. Romaine received forty stitches and a scarred forehead with half an eyebrow missing. Many thought the pair's tour dreams had been tragically shattered; yet Romaine decided that the show must go on. Covering her scar with heavy pancake makeup, an eyebrow pencil, and long swooping red bangs, she covered as much as possible, and continued on to perform the tour. The first stop was in Washington, United States to perform for President Johnson and other high-ranking officials before

continuing on to Europe. On Romaine's return to Toronto, she underwent a series of painful plastic surgeries.

Even though I never met Romaine, as she passed away in January of 2006, her presence is felt strongly at the studio. The image of her with her gold medal of 1951 is in the main studio hallway along with other pictures from her career to pictures of her being with her family. The similarities in features between her daughters and granddaughter are astounding as I look through photos of the studios past. Sometimes I am not sure who I am looking at in an image until I can decipher what year the photo was taken. Even though this car crash was many years before I was alive, reading the article was heart-wrenching as I worried for her children, now my superiors at the studio. Roland and Romaine, stronger than ever came back to the studio and continued their work in creating an incredible atmosphere for the commercial Canadian dance scene.

On return, in 1966, Roland gained attention of Producer and Director John Johnson. He was an Englishman with the idea of doing a half-hour musical comedy that takes place in an English pub. The show was called *The Pig 'N Whistle* and Roland was hired on as the choreographer. Romaine danced on the show, as well as her daughter and now owner of the Roland and Romaine studio, Wendy Nicholson. Wendy was only fifteen at the time of the show but was already an Ontario junior gymnastics champion. The show was incredibly popular. With a two-year waiting list for tickets, *The Pig 'N Whistle* was on the air for ten years. For the full ten years (1967-1977), *The Pig and Whistle* remained in the top ten of the television ratings, just under *Laugh In* and *Wednesday Night Hockey*. The cast of the show toured from coast to coast, having to perform in hockey arenas, as they were the only places with a big enough audience space.

In the 1980s, Roland's choreography career began to take off. Roland went on to choreograph for the *The Miss Canada* and *Miss Teen Canada* pageants, as well as the opening ceremonies for the Calgary Winter Games in 1988 and the opening of the Dome in Toronto in 1989. Romaine would take care of schools while Roland was away on choreography jobs.

During my second year of teaching at Roland, teacher Lindsay Nicholson, granddaughter of Romaine started to choreograph a tap dance to a remixed version of *Putting on the Ritz*. She pulled out her iPad and showed the young students in the class a commercial of Roland Kirouac dancing and singing in the Ritz Cracker commercial in 1985. Dressed in a black suit and top hat, Roland sings a song about eating Ritz crackers with champagne and caviar as he suavely dances on a box of Ritz crackers. This call back to the studio's history within performance is common with Lindsay Nicholson's choreography as she grew up dancing in the studio and is able to bring back dance numbers from her childhood to teach to the current student body.

Over the studio's fifty-eight seasons, there have been many students and teachers that have gone on to have amazing careers in the performing arts. Notable alumni of the studio include actor, comedian, screenwriter and film producer, Mike Myers. Myers started dancing at the school at the age of eight. He began in tap and jazz and then ended up taking all the styles the studio offered when joining the Junior Dance Company. Many years after Myers success, he wrote a letter to the studio in which he states: "I'm proud to be an alumnus of Roland and Romaine Dance School. Much of the joy of Austin Powers is reflected in the dance numbers, and in working those dance numbers out. I had many fond memories of those Saturday mornings on Bloor Street"(Myers). Myers responded to Romaine as she sent photographs



from his time as a child at the studio by saying "In seeing those photographs, I remember that I was in love with all of those girls. Such Pain" (Myers).

Other notable alumni from the school include Leeyan Granger, soloist for the National Ballet of Canada, actress in *Jesus Christ Superstar* and dancer in NBC's *Follies*. As well as Ken Atkinson, Emmy nominated choreographer. Atkinson was CTV's resident choreographer from 1977 to 1981. Atkinson was a dancer with *Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers* under Rachel Browne, partnered Romaine on the *Pig and Whistle Television* show, and worked with luminaries such as Jim Carrey, Johnny Cash and Rich Little. Canada's gymnastics and figure skating teams were both given dance training at the school before the Munich Olympics in 1972. During Romaine's time teaching at Arthur Murray's Dance School, she notes her twice weekly, two-hour lesson over a two-year period with Edwin "Ed" Mirvish. Mirvish is a Canadian treasure as a businessman, philanthropist and theatrical impresario. After taking lessons he continued to support Romaine by sending more students her way.

A treasure trove of information on the alumni of the studio come from the responses to letters sent out by the studio for the fiftieth anniversary. Letters were sent to alumni and asked them to join in on the fifth celebration as well as send their favorite memories of their time in the school. The stories from the 1960s and 1970s are relatable today, as are the feelings of love and a place of home.

"One very exciting moment I will never forget happened my first showcase in June of 1977. The opening number that year was "Its Don't Mean a Thing" from bubbling brown sugar. They also repeated the whole number again for the finale. At the time the show was run on reel to reel tape. Less then halfway through the number the tape broke. Everyone in the number just kept going like nothing had happened. The audience was on their feet and counting in 8's right along with the dancers. It was truly magical. The energy flooded the room. That was

33 years ago. From that moment on I knew I was in the right place, I was home." Shari Robinson-Coulter

Robinson-Coulter went on to run her own performing arts school for thirteen years and continues to choreograph and teach to this day. As I research the names of headshots kept by the studio of dancers of its past, I am amazed at the number of dancers who opened up dance studios after their time at the school. The influence that Roland and Romaine have had on dance education in schools is Canada-wide as performers left to open studios in Vancouver, British Columbia to Niagara Falls, Ontario.

"My time at R&R truly transformed me. Without a doubt, the guidance and the confidence in me, that Roland and Romaine displayed, enabled me to reach for my dream and step outside my comfort zone. They gave a shy person, without a wick of confidence the opportunity to dance in shows, to teach and to make everlasting friends. I still have friends that I made there years ago and have many fond memories of the laughter and excitement, the friendships and lessons learned. I am eternally grateful for the life changing experience I underwent when attending this school. To this day I smile every time I think of Roland looking up to the ceiling in the big room for inspiration for the next step and us all looking up to see what he was looking at. Let's not forget Romaine walking into class and dropping right down into the splits. I love Roland's energy. When he entered a room, it pulsed with his energy. Romaine was all love, warmth and elegance and I miss her. The air was electric when we were all preparing for a show. It simply said was "... a time like no other!..." Penny

The same love, warmth and energy as noted above is still felt within the studio today. As I read about both Roland and Romaine's personalities and support of the dancers, I see the same within all the teachers currently teaching at the studio.

In decline in health of Roland and Romaine, the studio began to change hands. Roland had had a heart attack in 2000 and decided it was time to close the studio. Wendy Nicholson, daughter of Romaine, agreed she would like to buy out Roland's shares and continue running

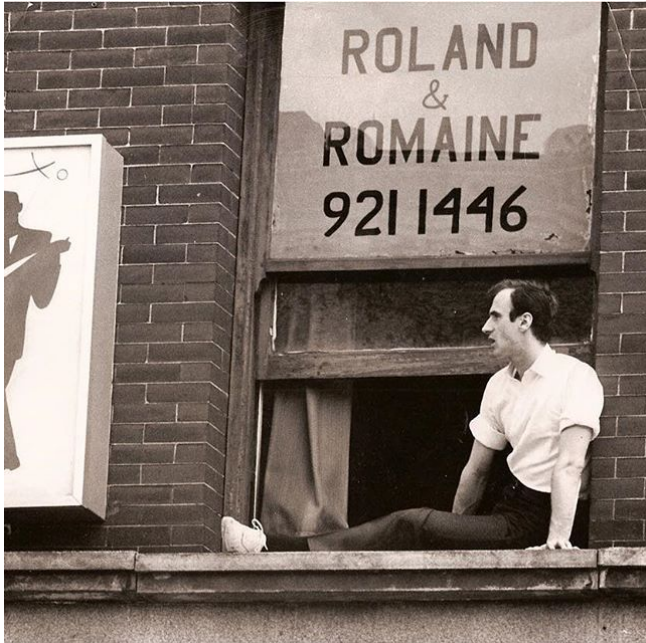
the studio with her mother. In July of 2005, Wendy was named co-owner of the school. Romaine at the time was in a wheelchair and wanted to be involved in the administration and feel apart of the business, so daughters Wendy and Nancy Nicolson used to take all the paperwork to her house and have meetings there. In January of 2006, at the age of 77, Romaine passed away from ALS, leaving the studio in the hands of Wendy Nicholson with Nancy Nicolson continuing in her role in studio management. The daughter of Wendy Nicholson, Lindsay Nicholson is currently a teacher at the studio.

Later in my research, Wendy Nicholson was so grateful to give me an autobiography written by Romaine that she had at home. The well-written document provides such a fantastic glimpse into the life of Romaine through her entire journey. When I approached Wendy Nicholson about writing on the history of the studio and asking how much information was kept, she assured me that her mother kept and documented everything. As I researched through the amazing archives kept by Romaine – newspaper clippings, photos, letters, programs, resumes and contracts, I continuously wish to meet this beautiful dancer yet felt like I had through reading this document. I found so many similarities between her personality and that of her family working at the studio today. Little notes and passages in the autobiography made me laugh – such as her strong allergy to perfume, which gave Romaine dreadful headaches – as shared by her daughter Nancy Nicholson at the studio.

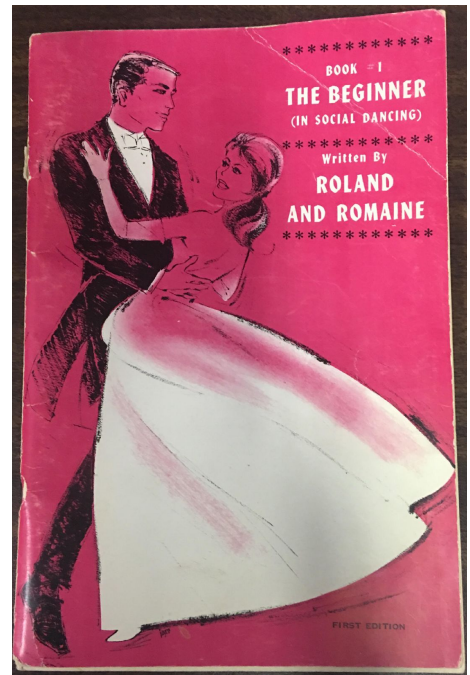
In my interview for the teaching position at the studio in 2012, I was told that the school had opened in 1960 and I in the moment expressed my love for dance history and wanting to learn more about Roland and Romaine. I could never have imagined how large of a legacy the pair have left and the mark that they have left on Canadian dance studios from coast to coast. As the studio goes on, the school continues to test new dance ventures, such as joining the competitive dance world as is currently the dance trend in Toronto, and on television

made popular by the show *Dance Moms*. Within Romaine's biography, she leaves a note saying that she knows that Wendy Nicholson will do a fantastic job in running the studio and how it is time get some new management to reinvigorate the school. I feel honored to teach at the Roland and Romaine studio and continue on in the legacy of these two amazing Canadian dancers who changed the landscape for dance in Toronto, Ontario. I hope to inspire students in the way that these two have throughout their lifetime and remain apart of the Roland and Romaine family.

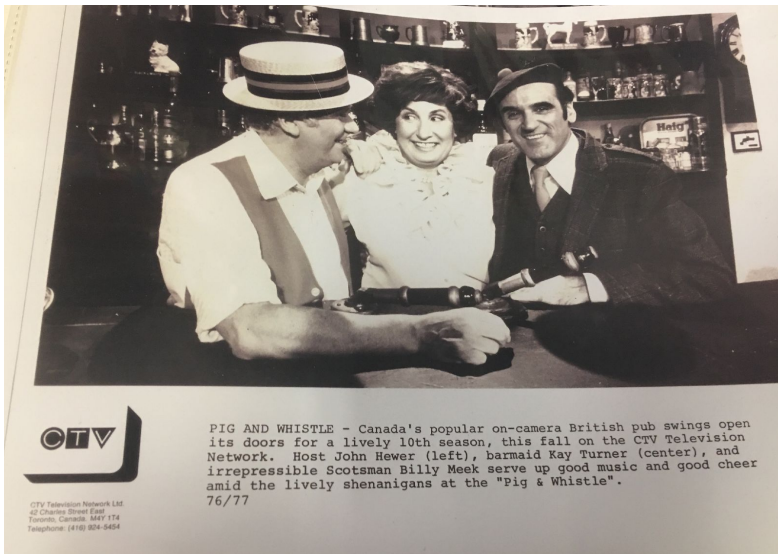




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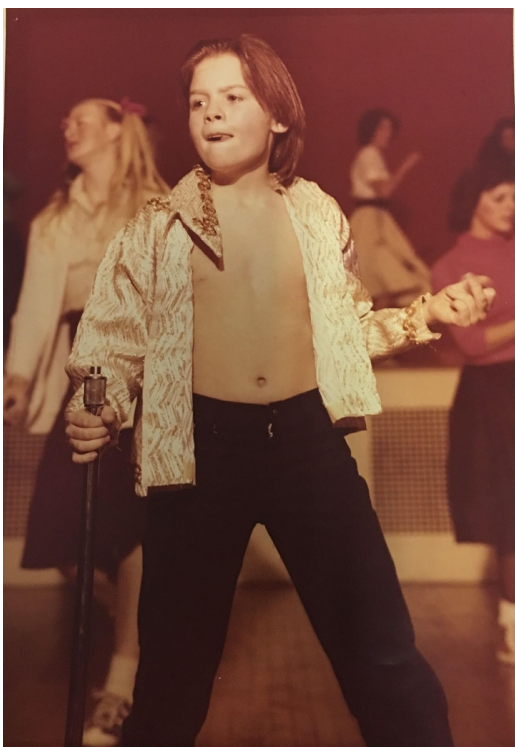
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