

# As the Show Ends, One Who Danced In 'Cats' Looks Back

By CHUCK SLATER

**MAMARONECK**  
JOE ANTONY CAVISE, who has danced the dances, is not surprised that "Cats" is closing in June. He's surprised it's still running.

"When I left, I gave it a year," said Mr. Cavise, who performed in the show from 1983 to 1987. "Don't get me wrong, the show is great, but it's so expensive and SO incredibly difficult, so demanding physically. I never, ever dreamed it would run this long."

Mr. Cavise, a Pound Ridge resident who runs the Dance Cavise studio here, tried out for the show in December 1983, just after it completed its first year. "It was already replacing 'Chorus Line' as the show

**'Now and Forever'? 'I never dreamed it would run this long.'**

every dancer wanted to be in," he said between phone calls at the studio. (Incidentally, he is in the movie version of "A Chorus Line.") "Not many made it on the first audition, but I did."

And he took on the double role of Coricopat and Mungojerrie, two of the cats that dance through life's vagaries in "Cats," Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical adaptation of "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats" by T. S. Eliot.

Of the 2 hours and 30 minutes that the show runs, Mr. Cavise was on stage for 2 hours and 15 minutes.

"It was so challenging physically," he said. "I had to climb the theater wall to the balcony every night as Mungojerrie, then I balanced from the edge of the balcony - about the width of a balance beam in gymnastics - every night. It had the audience oohing."

He was rewarded for his risk.

"The Equity pay was \$790 a week then," the dancer said. "I got \$20 extra as hazard pay."

Even practices could be hazardous. "The dances were so demanding that we practiced all the time, hours at a time," Mr. Cavise said. "We were aching and exhausted. Everyone had some problem physically. It made for a very close company: misery loves company."

"I pride myself on being one of the few who never missed a performance. My girlfriend, now my wife," he said of the dancer Lori Biscardi, "used to say, 'Can't you at least have Thanksgiving with us?' But I never did. I also think I'm one of the few who left the show while totally healthy."

From the beginning, Mr. Cavise was the understudy for the leading role of Mistoffelees. By the time he left the show, he was a semi-regular in the lead, performing the role up to a month at a time.

But nothing matched the emotion of the first time.

"I was absolutely terrified," he said.

"In the first act, the actor playing Mistoffelees, I think it was Herman Sebek, got injured," Mr. Cavise explained. "So I had to takeover for the second act, which opened with Mistoffelees entering by being lowered 50 feet down a rope."

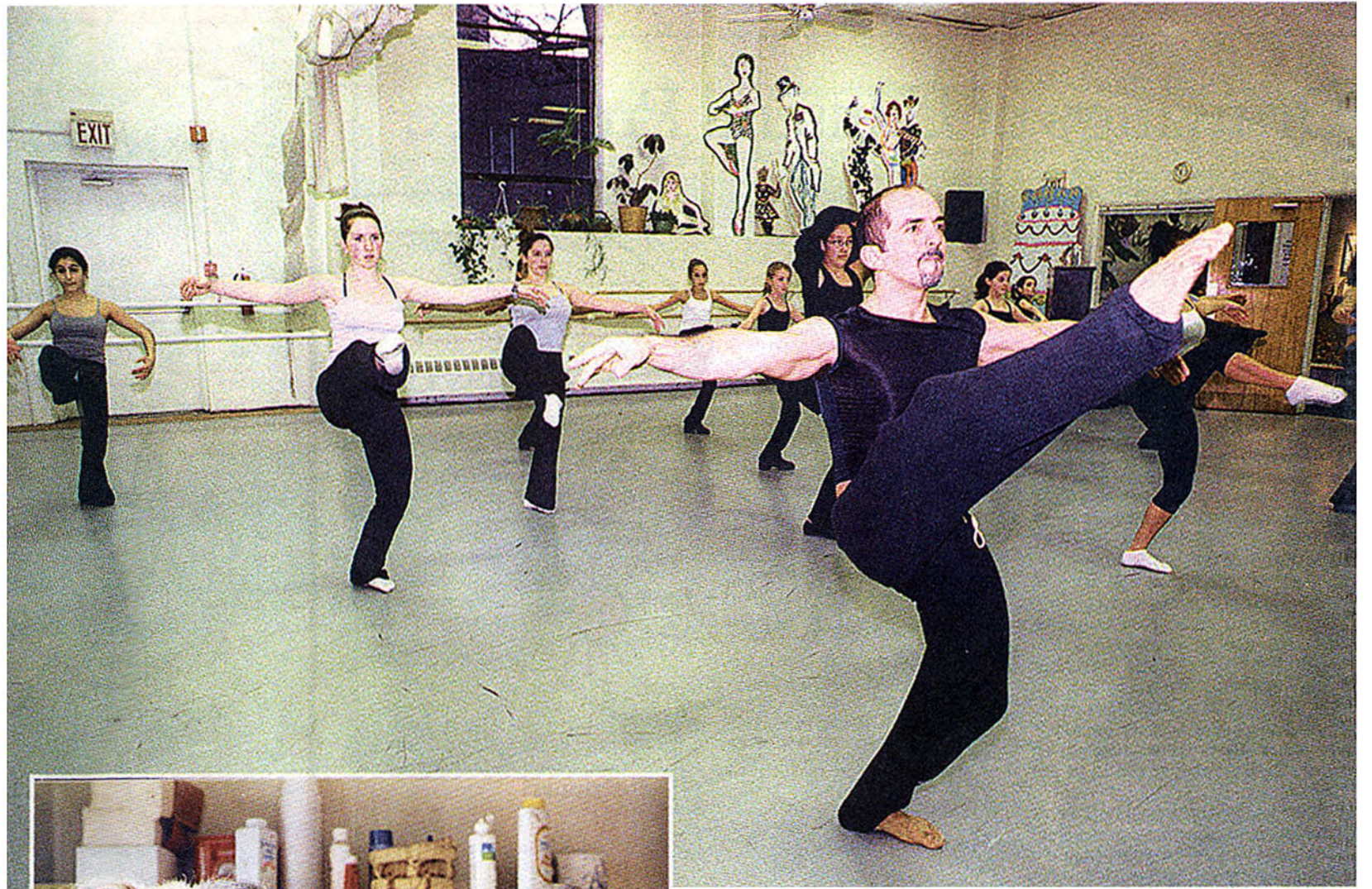
"I had rehearsed the part plenty of times but never with the floodlights on, and I was totally blinded. All the lights in my face, it was like looking into five suns, and I had to do 36 consecutive spins."

"I started too close to the front of the stage and kept spinning closer - I didn't know where I was. I ended up almost falling off the stage. The other cast members later told me they were holding their breath and wondering in whose lap I would end up."

Now he can laugh. " 'Cats' gave me so much besides a job," Mr. Cavise said. "It put me on top of the dancing world. It opened a lot of doors."

While in the show, he was also hired to do "Backstage on Broadway," bringing the theater to youngsters, and vice-versa, and confirming what he wanted for his life's work.

"I wanted to be a positive influence with kids," said Mr. Cavise, who



Susan Farley for The New York Times

Joe Antony Cavise of Dance Cavise in his Mamaroneck studio. Mr. Cavise, center, as a member of "Cats" in 1986 with Jamie Patterson, left, and J. Poindexter. The show, he said, "put me on top of the dancing world."



did graduate work in dance education at New York University while in "Cats." "And I knew I was going to marry my wife, even if Lori didn't yet. Plus I'm a motivational type. I have so much energy."

Indeed, he gives the impression of constant motion even when sitting almost still and talking.

So he left "Cats" "to work with kids."

Dance Cavise is actually three different organizations in one. There

are the lessons given by a staff of professional dancers at the studio here. There is Cavise Talent Management, which sends promising youngsters to dance auditions - "We've placed four girls in 'Annie,'" Mr. Cavise said.

And there is Off Center Dance Theater, a nonprofit organization that spreads the message of dance through performing senior and junior troupes. Cavise, 42, still dances with Off Center Dance Theater.

Paramount in the whole troika to Mr. Cavise is the outreach program in which junior troupe members mentor and dance with youngsters from public housing. Once a month the youngsters, age 10 to 17, travel to East New York in Brooklyn to work with youths from the Genesis Homes. Once a month, the Genesis Homes youngsters are bused up to Mamaroneck to use the Cavise Studio.

"It's more about self-esteem and positive experiences than dancing," Mr. Cavise said. "You have to reach the kids. When I deal with the boys, I may say, 'A layup is a soté.' When I go to pat a youngster on the shoulder for a job well done, they often flinch the first time."

Mr. Cavise, who has worked with children at the Ronald McDonald House and Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in Manhattan, has also taught dancing at Pound Ridge Elementary School in his hometown.

"As part of the school's 60th anniversary celebration," he said, "we have a Dance to the Decades. Imagine getting 300 kids on a stage."

But wherever he is dancing or teaching, the subject often turns to "Cats," which opened in 1982 at the Winter Garden Theater and has been there ever since.

"I've been back twice," Mr. Cavise said. "For a 'Now and Forever' party on the ninth anniversary, Oct. 7, 1991, and for the record-breaking performance No. 6,138 on June 19, 1997. I hope there's a last reunion before they close."

Even if there is not, Mr. Cavise plans to be at the theater at least once before "Cats" has its 7,397th and final Broadway staging on June 25. "Fiona is 5 and Phoebe is 3," he said, beaming as he talked of his daughters. "I've got to take them to see 'Cats.'" ■