

Claire Bataille, founding member of Hubbard Street Dance, dies at 66



Claire Bataille at Lou Conte Dance Studio in 2015. Bataille was a founding member of Hubbard Street Dance Chicago. (Todd Rosenberg photo)



By **Lauren Warnecke**
Chicago Tribune

DECEMBER 31, 2018, 11:00 AM

U pdate: *The public memorial service for Claire Anne Bataille of Hubbard Street Dance will be 3:30 p.m. Jan. 29 at the Goodman's Albert Theatre, 170 N. Dearborn St.*

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Claire Anne Bataille, founding member of Hubbard Street Dance Chicago and director of the Lou Conte Dance Studio, died Sunday morning with her two sons at her side, according to son Isaac Sorsa. She was 66 years old.

Born in Elmhurst in 1952 to parents Joseph and Marie (Boivin) Bataille, Bataille first stepped into a dance studio in Barrington at three years old and never stopped dancing.

But it was her very first class with Lou Conte which would result in a brilliant performance career and, later, a dedication to teaching.

“I had just started teaching at a couple of studios by the hour, and she came and took my class,” said Conte in a phone interview. “It was Oct. 10, 1973. We both remember the date very well. All of a sudden I saw this really talented dancer in the class. It was definitely an impression,” he said.

In 1975, Bataille began teaching at the newly formed Lou Conte Dance Studio, and in 1977 she became a founding member of Conte’s company: Hubbard Street Dance Chicago. Their first season, Conte and his four dancers toured the city’s assisted living centers, performing for senior citizens in break rooms and cafeterias thanks to a grant from Urban Gateways.

“It was only supposed to be for six months,” said Conte. “It was called Hubbard Street right away, because that’s the name we put on the paper we had to have so we could get paid from the City of Chicago — not thinking that anybody would ever hear of it.”

A glance out the windows of the Lou Conte Dance Studio’s original location at the corner of LaSalle and Hubbard Streets inspired the name that wound up on that form, and Hubbard Street Dance Chicago was born.

Little did any of them know that Hubbard Street would rise to become a nationally and internationally-acclaimed contemporary dance company, raising the profile for dance in Chicago with an aesthetic that was as entertaining as it was technically rigorous.

“She set the bar for the dancing in the company,” said Conte of Bataille. “Her enthusiasm and her talent, combined, are what made it work.”

Conte cites many dinners at [Ann Sather](#) on Belmont as the place where a lot of the brainstorming happened, but neither found the work arduous.

“We worked very hard, but it evolved effortlessly,” he said, adding, “It’s very probable there would not be a Hubbard Street Dance Chicago had it not been for Claire Bataille.”

By the time she [retired in the spring of 1992](#), Bataille had choreographed six works for the company and performed repertoire by Conte, Twyla Tharp, Lynne Taylor-Corbett, Daniel Ezralow, John McFall and Margo Sappington, among others.

Tharp’s “The Golden Section” marked the final moment of Bataille’s performance career, a blisteringly fast and unforgiving jazz dance which ended with Bataille dancing a solo and climbing a human ladder of colleagues to dive into the wings. Former Tribune critic Sid Smith said he particularly remembers that moment, and more importantly, the impact she made on dance in Chicago.

“Claire was an emblem of Hubbard Street, second only to Lou Conte himself,” said Smith in a phone interview. “She was a much-beloved figure, mainly because of the quality of her work. On top of that, she was just a lovely,

graceful person. Obviously, she was a beautiful and terrific dancer, but she was really an important figure in the early phases of the dance explosion in Chicago.”

In 2011, Bataille worked as Tharp’s assistant on the choreographer’s most recent original work for Hubbard Street, “Scarlatti.” Of Bataille, Tharp said, “Claire stood by what she believed in without stint. Her generosity as a dancer, as an assistant, as a teacher, as a friend, and as a mother was complete. We will miss her, and we will remember her as exemplifying what we all want dance to be: whole-hearted.”

Upon retirement, Bataille spent the second phase of her career teaching. She remained on staff with Hubbard Street until 2001, serving as ballet mistress and the company’s rehearsal director, and taught ballet and jazz for studios and companies across the metro area. In 2003, Bataille earned a teaching certificate in Pilates and from 2008 until late 2018, was the director of the Lou Conte Dance Studio.

Universally loved and acknowledged as one of Chicago’s finest dance educators, Bataille’s impact on the high caliber of dancing in this city cannot be overstated. Moreover, she loved dancers — their tenacity, compassion and grit.

Bataille was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2017, opting to end treatment Dec. 27. She died in her home in Oak Park, surrounded by her sons.

“We’ll go on, of course,” [said Conte](#) to former Tribune critic Richard Christiansen in reference to Bataille’s 1992 retirement. “But it’s an understatement to say that things won’t be the same without her.”

Claire Bataille is survived by sons Isaac Sorsa and Jack Sorsa, their father Don Sorsa, and her brothers Abbot Vincent P. Bataille and retired Maj. Gen. Emile Bataille. A public memorial service at the Goodman Theatre is being planned for a later date. In lieu of flowers, gifts may be sent to the Claire Bataille Memorial Fund at Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, 1147 W. Jackson Blvd. The fund will support training for dancers ages 17-23 on the cusp of professional careers.

Lauren Warnecke is a freelance critic.

lauren.warnecke@gmail.com

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