



"If Robicheau was under the illusion that he was welcome on Beacon Street, he had quite miswagered."

Boston, 1944: Adolphe Robicheau and Arthur Vaillancourt purchased Fanny Longfellow's childhood home on Beacon Hill. The deed was signed in December 1943, transferring the property jointly to the two gentlemen. The Appleton Manor was derelict, overrun with pigeons and in need of extensive work. News that it had been purchased for preservation was well received... *at first*. This was to change when the two gentlemen started to convert the ground floor into a ballet studio.

“One did not simply buy a house on Boston's sunny street and immediately become one of its elites. There was outright opposition on this principle to the establishment of this business on Boston's most sacred street!” states a manuscript signed by the late 'Lorita', a dancer and teacher at the Robicheau Academy.

The fact that the two gentlemen's business was a ballet school evoked nightmarish visions for neighbours of budding Sylphs, Willis and Nijinskis, dancing licentiously around the sidewalks. The Boston papers, always on the lookout for an interesting headline, ran stories and photos; and cartoons featured flamboyant dancers soaring in *grand jesses* over the Common. The streets of Beacon Hill lit up with rumours of *men-in-tights* prancing around.

Hornblower Susan H. Nash convinced the Beacon Hill Association to vote unanimously against a rezoning that would allow the renovation at 54 Beacon Street. The Association files a lawsuit against the master dancer to save *their neighbourhood* from his “Academy”.





"ALL THOSE OPPOSED . . ."—West End group at hearing express disapproval of proposed ballet school. Romney Spring, counsel for Beacon Hill Associates, is at right.

Attorney Romney Spring registered the protest and a hearing was held by the City of Boston.

More than 50 of Beacon Hill's residents packed into a small room on the ninth floor of the City Hall annex to register their disapproval.

"...some of the speakers even suggested that something was '*morally detestable*', which is currently perplexing members of the Boston City Appeals Committee, who listened for an hour and a half this morning to arguments for and against the creation of a ballet school on Beacon Hill," according to Boston Globe coverage.

One neighbour called ballet an art form and said she liked to see the legs treated well; just not near her front door. The real estate agent who sold the house said he couldn't imagine why residents complained because they don't object to street parties until 2 and 3 a.m. The objectors argued that "*education is about the other end of the body*". Robicheau protested, "*It is unfair to call my ballet a burlesque show!*"

Robicheau's attorney stated "Ballet is not about showing legs, as some of the opponents of this petition have argued. Moreover, the display of legs is nothing new in Boston and Mr Robicheau certainly cannot create a furor in this way. But the art of maneuvering the legs is precisely another thing!"; he argued that the zoning already permits educational facilities and that the Association had never objected to any other dance school in their neighborhood.

Puzzled by the strange procedure, the appeal board chose to reserve its decision, but did not issue any resolution.

"*Beacon Hill has no objection to ballet: except on Beacon Hill*" said a Boston newspaper.

The protests continued for weeks, interfering with the work and forcing the opening to be postponed.



ADOLPH ROBISCHEAU
Says ballet school "educational"

With nothing left to lose, Adolphe presented himself to then 88-year-old former mayor of Boston, "*Honey Fitz*"; John F. Fitzgerald (this is Rose Kennedy's father!). This same man had been getting Adolphe the job of organizing the Fourth of July pageants on the Boston Common for three or four years, so the two knew each other well. The City of Boston granted the necessary permits on April 12, 1944.



The Robicheau Academy was finally open... but the entire affair is kept clandestine. No sign on the building will indicate its existence. No inauguration marked its opening. Adolphe had a strict code of ethics for his students: no groups lingering outside, no costumes visible under coats, no ballet shoes on the feet when entering or leaving. When the writer Virginia Pearson rented a flat from the two gentleman, the rules were extended to include the corridors and the main entrance.

As for the bad press, Robicheau said several years later. "*It bothered me at the time, but it turns out I couldn't have bought the publicity it brought me.*" In 1959, Adolphe choreographed a satirical comedy encapsulating the turbulent early days of the "bohemian group of artists on Beacon Hill".

For nearly forty years, the mansion at 54 Beacon Street was a gathering place for Boston Acadians and transients alike; a virtual cult venue, frequented by some of the most legendary artists.

The Robicheau Ballet Academy became a true institution and was considered a Master's School in Ballet until its closure in 1981.