

Booked for Travel

Edited by David Butwin



The author firewalking—"The rock surfaces felt like sandpaper and made my feet tingle. I saw no one. At last I had stopped reasoning!"

Bucky Fuller and the Firewalk

R. BUCKMINSTER FULLER came waddling off the flight from Australia, tired, smiling, and loaded down with curios. I was as intrigued about spending four or five days with him as I was about seeing the ceremonial firewalk of Raiatea.

From the Faaa Airport in Papeete we took an inter-island DC-4 to Bora Bora, 120 miles northwest. Raiatea, the legendary homeland of early Polynesia, is only 12 miles from Bora Bora but far less developed and commercialized. Tanetoo, the priest of Raiatea, had consented to bring his firewalking troupe to Bora Bora as a favor to Fuller, a man who has contacts at some of this planet's most far-flung places. The firewalk, practiced at only four locations in the Pacific, is rarely done because the religious pressure for performing the ritual has diminished with time and sectarian adulteration.

Fuller and I had decided on taking

the trip three years earlier, but it took that long to make our schedules coincide. Buckminster Fuller has one of the busiest itineraries since John Foster Dulles. We have been good friends for years. I have visited him at his geodesic-domed house in Carbondale, Illinois, participated with him on panel discussions of the World Affairs Conferences at the University of Colorado, and entertained him when he came to San Francisco. I have read all his books, listened to many of his lectures, and have come to admire his comprehensive wisdom. This, however, was the first time we had been so far removed from an academic milieu.

Bora Bora never fails to enchant. I once made a landfall there at dawn and watched in awe as the blunt-topped, toothlike volcanic mountains emerged from the morning mist, revealing the lagoon sharply stratified in three shades of blue. The hour was different now, but the sight just as spectacular. The plane put down on a sandbar, and

we took a launch to the pier at Waitape. There we waited for a rickety bus to ride the few kilometers to the hotel.

For three days the firewalk was not discussed. We swam in the warm sea and talked, ate in the gigantic umbrella of a dining room and talked, walked the white beaches and talked. Fuller has the ability to make a man feel more than he is. He can distill the most complicated mathematical ideas into crisp, incisive language. He ranges over geography, history, economics, and politics, weaving gossamer patterns, but always comes back to his fundamental thesis. He radiates a simple humanity and continuing innocence.

Because Fuller believes that Utopia is within reach, he has totally committed himself to that goal. "We have about fifteen years to choose between Utopia and oblivion," he said. "If we choose the latter, we can go right on leaving our fate to political leaders. If we choose Utopia, we must get busy very fast."

We talked too about Tahitian girls, about the Maori, about people in general. Once at twilight we noticed the palm fronds and ferns dancing madly in the wind. Fuller remarked that Tahitian babies probably begin the patterns of their ethnic dances by imitating the flapping leaves. He said the Maori are water people who regard islands as holes in the water. Their ear cavities became enlarged, because they were the only orificial pocket in which one could keep little objects while in the water. He taught me to tell time by the Southern Cross, outlining the two nearby stars that form the hour hand. He separated the magic from reality, yet made reality magic.

Finally, as the day approached, we talked of the firewalk. There were questions to answer. Why was the firewalk practiced only in New Guinea, New Britain, Fiji, and Raiatea? Why was it that no Occidental had heard of the firewalk until eighty years ago? We were most curious to discover how one walks over the incandescent rocks without getting burned. There has been a long list of answers scattered over the last half-century: the firewalker is under a hypnotic trance; the firewalker smears his feet with some solution or ointment which protects him from the heat; the soles of the firewalker's feet produce a coating of sweat which cools the skin; he practices autosuggestion or heterosuggestion induced by the priest; he is very brave; his feet are heavily calloused from walking barefoot; and on.

All afternoon a strong, insistent wind, the *Maraamu*, chopped the sear-top and whipped the cocoa palms into a frenzy. A distant, black cloud bank began to close in and erase the dancing shadows. The tropics without sun take

on a melancholia which on this day was ominous. The threat of rain, visible and felt, might force Tanetoea to call off the ceremony. Here and there a coconut thudded down with a startling, dull thwack that forced my arms over my head in a ridiculous gesture of protection. I spent a few minutes in the Fare Raititi, a Polynesian recreation-library full of local artifacts, and then walked down to see the preparations.

The four corners of the fire pit had been lit at the same time; the big hardwood logs, burning briskly, were then covered with large rocks. I had thought the rocks would be flat, but they were irregular and angular, like those in American brooks. Tanetoea had planted a stalk of ti leaves at each corner. His men began to poke at the flaming logs with poles of giant hibiscus, trying to arrange a bed of glowing embers beneath. The crew was dressed in white shorts, which did not diminish the mystic atmosphere. I walked away, restless, resenting the delay, sorry that I wasn't sleepy. Fuller was snoring.

We were served a great dinner on a flat, shelflike patio from which the sea was a cinerama screen. Fuller didn't eat very much, because he had decided to diet. I didn't eat very much either. I was toying with the idea of making the firewalk.

The tropical sun sets rapidly. On the horizon it looks like a giant orange dropping into a vast pool of blue-black oil. Then it is dark—as dark as it will be unless the moon takes over. We passed by the firebed; the area now resembled a theater in rehearsal. The men were polling out the last few solid pieces of wood. They pounded the rocks to make them steady so that the walkers would not trip and be roasted on the embers. Then they swept the surface with large pandanus leaves. All the top-lying cinders had to be swept off. The cinder bed was white-hot, and the bottom two-thirds of the rocks were beginning to show a constant, ruddy blush.

There was a group of people, islanders and visitors, milling gently about. The firebed was an orange ruby, darkly radiant. There was instant mystery. Someone tossed a coconut leaf onto the rocks; it flared into flame and quickly shriveled. After a sudden admonitory shushing, the crowd became silent.

Tanetoea limped up to the head of the firebed. He was wearing white shorts and a white cotton hat, and carrying a cane in one hand and a ti plant in the other. He began to murmur a prayer. As he did, the silence which had been disturbed by the wind song became pure. The clouds picked that moment to separate, revealing an enormous moon which shone so brightly the color

of the water and the sea floor beneath were clearly visible. Tanetoea had *mana* (magic); he didn't need a costume.

In the distance, the wavering light of bamboo pitch torches signaled a procession. Six Tahitian males wearing grass skirts, and six Tahitian females wearing grass skirts over *pareus*, moved in two solemn columns into the arena. The raised torches, the ti fronds, and the silent, dignified movement created a palpable spell. The participants gathered according to gender on opposite sides of the fire and sat down. A pleasant tension pervaded, as involvement unified us all. Lost in the spirituality, my own cultural restrictions loosened. I could make no predictions. I could only react.

Tanetoea said a short Christian prayer, and then, waving his ti stalk, he looked upward and prayed in Tahitian—a prayer asking for the favor of the gods of the wind, the trees, the water, and the plants. He called upon a special goddess to hover protectively over the firewalk.

The walk began. The couples stepped onto the rocks. They moved rhythmically and confidently, keeping their feet flat against the rocks. There was no special path. There was no sign of pain. As they stepped off the firebed, they resumed their former positions. They seemed serene and composed.

After a silent pause, the priest turned toward us. He welcomed Fuller and me, and the other visitors. With much grace, he invited us to join in the ceremony. There was no implication of challenge or expectancy—simply an offer of hospitality and religiosity. For a moment, no one said anything.

I suddenly found myself reaching down to take off my sneakers and socks. Some lingering remnant of my own culture led me absently to put on my glasses. Tanetoea greeted me, blessed me, and I felt myself grasping the palm of one of the initiates as he helped me step onto the firebed. From my legs up, I was aware of a frighteningly intense, though bearable, heat; my legs and feet felt cold. I moved along steadily, looking down, unaware of any special pathway. Unluckily, about a third of the way across, I stepped on a hot cinder which the sweepers had missed. I raised my foot instinctively and felt a momentary burning pain under my arch. I kept on, step by step. The rock surfaces felt like sandpaper and made my feet tingle. I saw no one. At last I had stopped reasoning! I stepped off as if awakening from sleep; then I recognized Fuller. "Bring me some water," I said, "and I'll turn it into wine!"

It was after the Tahitians thanked me for participating that I realized I was burned. I had felt very little for

ten or fifteen minutes, but now the pain was severe. My foot was a mottled, moist gray-brown in the center of the sole. I was taken to the clinic in Wai-tape. It turned out to be a little shack barely lit by a carbon-arc lamp that sputtered shadows over the walls. The nurse washed my burns tenderly and covered them with a soothing ointment. Somehow she knew just how long the pain would last. She spoke sweetly and with much confidence, tapping the trials and errors of her own and of her forebears. I decided not to tell her I was a surgeon.

The next night the whole population turned out in native dress and sang the *himene*, Tahitian responsive singing, and danced the ceremonial *otea*. Fuller got up and did a flamenco dance, full of rhythm and joy, and it touched the islanders' hearts. I entertained with ventriloquy, proud that my dummy talked French, until I learned that most of the group spoke only Tahitian. When I shifted into my meager Tahitian, they laughed at every word. They kissed us and bedecked us with shell necklaces, and Fuller made a simple, loving farewell speech. It all must have resembled a 1937 South Seas movie travelogue, but none of us, I am sure, was acting.

—G. M. FEIGEN.

Surgeon, writer, lecturer, G. M. Feigen moves about the world as often and as long as he can manage to stay away from San Francisco, his home.

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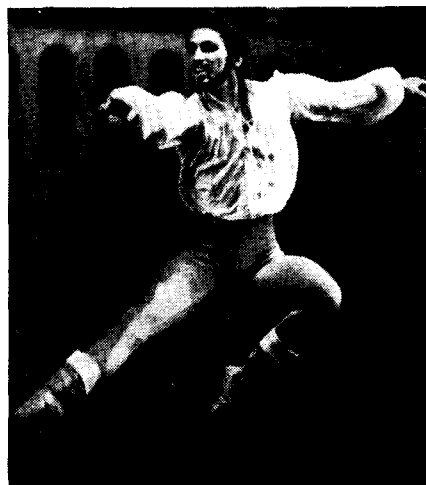
Susanne Hanke as Juliet in Cranko's full-length work for the Stuttgart Ballet—"wonder from Württemberg."

I TOLD YOU so is, unquestionably, the most irritating expression (incorporating, as it does, smugness) in the English tongue. But one would be less than human if he did not relish vindication. When I was sent, by *SR*, in May to Germany to see the Stuttgart Ballet before its U.S. debut, I expected to find a very good ballet troupe, but I did not expect to be bowled over. I was. My reviews from Stuttgart (*SR*, May 31, June 7) might easily have led the balletomane to wonder whether I was babbling from one glass of beer too many. The Stuttgart Ballet, directed by John Cranko, has now completed its three-week season at the Metropolitan Opera House—it will be back for a coast-to-coast tour this fall—and it left the general public, balletomanes, and impossibly critical American dancers also babbling. I won't use that irritating expression, but may I be forgiven if I murmur "vindicated"?

The Stuttgart Ballet is not, numerically speaking, very big. We have seen larger companies from Russia, Denmark, Great Britain, Canada; but it filled the Met with artistry and showmanship, with superb dancing, with the genius of Cranko—whose choreography puts him in the company of Robbins, Ashton, de Mille, Balanchine; and whose direction, so firm, so tender, so ensorcelling, defines him as another Diaghilev or Kirstein.

There is no need to discuss the repertory again—on tour, this autumn, the country will see Cranko's *Romeo and Juliet* and *Eugene Onegin* and, in a very few cities, *The Taming of the Shrew* (production problems)—but I simply want to note that ushers at the Met had to dash down the aisles at the end of a performance, as they did for Fonteyn and Nureyev, to keep the fans from causing a traffic jam or tumbling into the orchestra pit; that Marcia Haydée and Richard Cragun, like Fonteyn and Nureyev, and Bruhn and Fracci, were referred to in awed tones as "them"; that the chic social set joined with today's ballet experts and yesterday's ballet artists to adore the new troupe. For example, Eugenia Delarova—remember her as the sexy flower-seller in the Ballet Russe's *Gaité Parisienne*?—was present at almost every performance; and one of the great ballerinas of the past, Vera Nemtchinova, could be heard almost daily ticking off five *prima ballerinas*, starting with Pavlova and ending with Haydée. In Mme. Nemtchinova's mind, there were only five ballerinas in the last seventy years.

S. Hurok, who imported the Stuttgart Ballet to America, knew what he was doing. In a small German city—and every German city has its opera and its opera ballet—a great ballet company, of world-wide potential, was found. However, what looked good in Stuttgart's adorable old theater might not look so well in America. But it did. Its U.S. debut was as electrifying as that of Britain's Royal Ballet twenty years before. At the start, no one could quite believe it. The box-office sales



Richard Cragun—an American star in a German company.

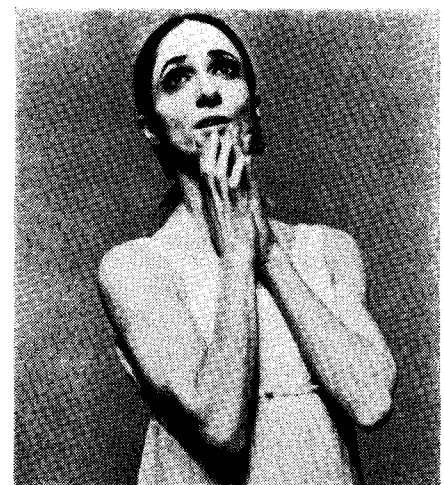
were hardly startling. Swiftly, the word got around that here was something special, and the lines of theatergoers, balletomanes, and dancers took form.

At first, perhaps, it seemed that Haydée from Brazil and Cragun from the United States were the magnets, but then other principals were seen and it was soon apparent that the Stuttgart Ballet did not depend upon any individual.

There are, possibly, several explanations for the marvel that is the Stuttgart Ballet, a company with a style quite different from that of any dance troupe in the world, a company that channels impeccable dance schooling into vivid theater, a company in which, miraculously, there are no rivals but only colleagues.

The chief explanation for this wonder from Württemberg is, of course, Cranko himself. As a choreographer, he is unmistakably a genius, but he is also an alchemist who has made, in a comparatively small, quiet German city, a ballet company of such beauty and force that it has literally shaken, on its first explosive success in New York, the entire world of dance. It is easy for most of us to join Mme. Nemtchinova in counting on the fingers of one hand the ballet miracles we have experienced and finding that the Stuttgart Ballet is one of them.

Not even Cranko himself can conceive of what has happened. "I guess I think I'm dreaming," he says. "And so I'm just waiting to get back to Stuttgart where I can read about what happened in New York. Then, maybe, I'll start to believe it." But what has happened to this German-based, international company with its British director is now history, for the Stuttgart Ballet need bow to no one in the highly competitive dance profession. I wouldn't presume to say "I told you so," . . . but I did.



Marcia Haydée—is she the finest ballerina of today?