

Camilla Williams &
Violette Verdy

Bloomington's

Grande ames

One is a ballerina, the other an opera singer. One was born and raised in northwest France, the other in the American South. On the face of it, these women would seem as different from each other as cassoulet and collard greens, yet they have much in common. Both survived poverty and devastating periods in history; one endured American racism while the other, 4,000 miles away, lived through the assaults of a world war. Both were guided to their paths by strong families and nurtured by stronger teachers. Both are intensely spiritual; one follows Indian philosophy, the other is a devoted Christian. Both are disarmingly humble and still convey an almost self-deprecating sense of wonder as they describe the trajectories of stellar careers. Both retired from performing and eventually came to teach their craft at Indiana University, and today both of these charming and elegant living treasures call Bloomington home. Here are their stories.

By Debra Kent | Photography by Steve Raymer



Violette Verdy with
Camilla Williams in Williams'
memento-filled home.



Camilla Williams

You cross the threshold of Camilla Williams' front door and just stand there for a moment to take it all in. From African art to framed photos of American presidents, every inch of surface area bears evidence of a globe-spanning career. There's also that painting—you know the one, you've seen it at the Uptown Café and Gallery North and published in this magazine—of the singing woman with mocha skin and a blue turban. Later she tells you that she just had to buy it “because it's me, and it's so alive!”

Williams greets you at the door looking fresh and pretty in a white eyelet dress and clear sandals like something Cinderella would wear, and you can't help but notice that she has the hands and feet of a much younger woman and the magnanimity of a queen. She fusses over the clutch of daisies and calla lilies you brought from your garden as if they are the most stunning flowers she has ever seen, and this is a woman who has held thousands of bouquets in her life, dazzling red roses by the dozens tossed up with shouts of Brava! Bravissima!

Camilla Williams is a rock star of opera. As the first contracted black singer at the New York City Opera in 1946 she created the role of Madama Butterfly and two years later created the first Aida. As a guest of Dwight Eisenhower she sang for the crown prince of Japan; Eisenhower was one of six presidents for whom she performed. She sang “The Star Spangled Banner” at the March on Washington only moments before Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke the words “I have a dream.” She is the first recipient of the Marian Anderson Award—an honor twice received—and was declared the First Lady of American Opera by

the Newspaper Guild. As a cultural ambassador she toured in Africa, Israel, and the Far East. She was awarded the “Most Outstanding African American out of all African-American Colleges and Universities” and sang for Bill Clinton during his presidency. She holds keys to cities and honorary degrees and has a park named for her in the town where she grew up in Virginia. And on September 4 of this year, she received the President's Medal for Excellence from IU President Michael McRobbie.

Perched on a sofa in the living room of her east-side condominium, Williams, 89, is endearingly matter-of-fact about her achievements. For instance, when asked what was on her mind when she sang on the momentous occasion of Dr. King's speech, she shrugs and says, “Oh, honey, I'd sung ‘The Star Spangled Banner’ so many times before I wasn't even thinking about it.” (Of the legendary civil rights leader, she says, “He was a brilliant man. How could someone who came with such love in his heart be assassinated? I still don't understand why people can be so cruel.”)

Sitting in the living room beside her is an older man whom Williams introduces as her longtime accompanist, and at first you think she's being playful—a soprano's clever word for husband—then you realize she means it literally. Ninety-nine years old with a memory sharp as a surgeon's scalpel, the gentleman with the kind eyes is Borislav Bazala, Ph.D., a Bulgarian immigrant who was Williams' pianist for most of her career. (Williams was married for 20 years to the late Charles T. Beavers, one of the principal civil rights attorneys for Malcolm X.) After Bazala's wife died, his sons were reluctant to put him in assisted living and asked Williams if he could perhaps move in with her. “I had the extra room and thought, ‘Why not?’” she says. The two live platonically as best friends who share a remarkable history; their friendship was featured in a 2006 PBS documentary, *The Mystery of Love*.

THE RULE IN HER FAMILY:

‘Everybody had to go to church, everybody had to sing in the choir... I had God and talent.’



Camilla Williams was born in Danville, Virginia, the last capital of the Confederate States of America, a strategic center of activity during the Civil War and the site of violent protests in the early 1960s. Young Camilla's world, however, was filled with music. “Everybody sang. My uncles, my auntie, my mamma. My grandfather was six foot five and when he sang in church the rafters shook.”

The rule in her family “was that everybody had to go to church, everybody had to sing in the choir, everybody had to take piano lessons, and everybody had to go to college. My parents believed in education.” Williams was poor, “but as one of my teachers put it, I had God and talent.”

‘Some Beautiful Negro Voices’

When she was 12, a Welshman named Raymond Aubrey came to town to teach voice at the two white colleges in the area. “He heard that there were some beautiful Negro voices in our town and he sought us out,” Williams remembers. “He gave me a piece of music to learn. It had a Japanese lady on the cover and that was Madama Butterfly. I had the good sense not to try it because it was beyond me and it was Italian and being twelve I knew I wasn't ready for that music yet.” Aubrey tried again, this time with Mozart, “and that was the beginning of a lifetime of loving Mozart.” It would be another 15 years before Madama Butterfly would launch Williams into the opera world's stratosphere. Williams continued to sing in the choir of Danville's Calvary Baptist Church and when it was time for college, local benefactors helped pay her tuition at Virginia State College (now

Virginia State University) where she studied voice and piano. After graduating with honors in 1941 she returned to her hometown to become a schoolteacher, but was still intent on a singing career. A scholarship from pioneering soprano Marian Anderson enabled Williams to move to Philadelphia for advanced vocal training. In 1944 she won a singing contest that led to a concert date with The Philadelphia Orchestra and acclaimed conductor and violinist Eugene Ormandy.

There was more training ahead. With the financial assistance of the Philadelphia Alumni Association of Virginia State College, Williams was able to study voice with Madame Marion Szekely-Freschl, a renowned Hungarian-trained voice teacher. She soon landed a valuable endorsement from retired Metropolitan Opera diva Geraldine Farrar and signed with Columbia Artists.

(opposite page): Williams in her most famous role as Madama Butterfly.

(above): Williams today and a portrait of her as a young woman.

(below): Williams at age 2.





When Borislav Met Camilla

The girl from Danville was suddenly in demand. One problem: Williams desperately needed a new accompanist. “The one I had then was so old and sick, and I had just made my debut and had all these concerts lined up,” she recalls. “I had to find the right person.” Meanwhile, Bazala, newly arrived from Bulgaria, presented himself at the New York headquarters of Columbia Artists in search of work. “They told me, ‘All the artists have their accompanists and all the programs are already printed but if someone cancels, we’ll call you,’” he says. Right around that time Williams cut her accompanist loose and Bazala got the phone call he was hoping for. “They said, ‘Mr. Bazala, can you go to Philadelphia? There is a young singer with fifty concerts lined up. If she approves of you, will you tour with her?’”

Williams arranged to meet Bazala at the 30th Street train station in downtown Philadelphia. “I told him to have a red flower in his hand, and I’d have a red flower in my hat. I was wearing a Persian lamb hat that matched my coat. And then I see this man holding a red flower and I said, ‘Are you Dr. Bazala? I’m Camilla Williams.’”

Around that time, Williams auditioned for Laszlo Halasz, the first music director for the New York City Opera. Halasz thought the young woman possessed the ideal voice for *Madama Butterfly*, the tragic tale of a Japanese geisha married to an American navy lieutenant. “But the war was on and you couldn’t get *Butterfly* performed during the war,” she recalls. “Halasz said, ‘When this war is over I want to call that young girl in.’” True to his word, in 1946 Williams made a critically acclaimed debut as *Madama Butterfly* on the stage of the New York City Opera.



(top): Williams met Borislav Bazala in 1946 and he became her accompanist for the next half century. Bazala, now 99, lives in Williams’ home.

(above): Williams at home in her lavishly furnished apartment surrounded by mementos of her celebrated career.

(painting): This painting by Bloomington artist Wayne Manns hangs in the Uptown Café. Photo by Lynae Sowinski



BAZALA IN 1946 WAS LITERALLY AWESTRUCK

‘I could not believe that an American Negro had an angelic voice like the prima donna of the Berlin Opera...’

When Williams sang for Bazala that day—he remembers it precisely, January 9, 1948—the Bulgarian was literally awestruck. “I could not believe that an American Negro had an angelic voice like the prima donna of the Berlin Opera, Tiana Lemnitz, my vocal ideal,” he recalls. “We went over the program without any repetition. I play for her, she sings, she brings me back to the station—this is a Friday afternoon—and she tells me, ‘I will meet you at this station on Sunday at 1:30 pm and from there we will go to Bushnell Hall in Hartford,’ which was like the Carnegie Hall of Connecticut. The governor of Connecticut introduced her to an audience of a thousand people as ‘Camilla Williams, the Queen of Opera.’ The following Sunday I get the letter from Columbia Artists with the dates of the rest of the concerts, the hotels, the railroad schedules. I couldn’t believe it. I’d had several little appearances in America but nothing steady. I told my wife and she said, ‘Now you can support your family.’”

“I tell you,” Williams interjects, “God is good.”

That same year, she created the first *Aida* at the New York City Opera. She spent the next three decades traversing the globe and adding to her formidable list of accomplishments—the first Viennese performance of Menotti’s *The Saint of Bleecker Street* in 1955; singing for Martin Luther King, Jr. at the Nobel Peace Prize Ceremonies in 1964; the New York performance of Handel’s *Orlando* in 1971. She appeared with such internationally recognized orchestras as the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and the Vienna Symphony.



From Performer to Teacher

After a glittering performing career Williams retired from the stage in 1970 and began teaching at Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens colleges of the City University of New York. In 1977 she moved to Indiana to join IU’s faculty at the invitation of Charles Webb, dean of the IU School of Music. “He was my mentor,” she says.

Making the transition from performer to teacher came naturally. “Many people have the most beautiful voices but they are not teachers. But Boris always told me I’d be a good teacher. I have a gift. You see, I can hear a vocal problem and fix it.” This gift led one Kentucky mayor to bestow upon Williams the honorary title of Kentucky Colonel “because I did the impossible. I taught his daughter to sing.”

Reminders that discrimination was alive and well, even in the cultural oasis that was Bloomington, occasionally marred her early

days at IU. She remembers going out for lunch with fellow music professors and pointing out the east-side condominium complex where she wanted to live. “They said, ‘Oh, Camilla, you can’t live there.’ I asked why not and they told me it was because I’m black.” Williams did in fact move into one of the condos in spite of her colleagues’ skepticism.

Williams generally prefers not to dwell on the bleaker moments as a “colored” woman in America, but Bazala doesn’t mind sharing a tale or two. He tells of the time in the ‘40s when they traveled by train to tour the South. Camilla reminded her accompanist to sit in the front of the coach while she would take her seat in the back behind the curtain as segregation laws dictated. “I wouldn’t do it,” he says, shaking his head resolutely. “I sat behind the curtain with Camilla. I was a Bulgarian citizen. In Europe, the black person was part of society. There was no such thing as blacks can’t come into a restaurant or stay in a hotel but in America there was an iron curtain between blacks and whites.”

Williams, who went on to become the first African-American professor of voice at Indiana University and has lived to see the first African-American president of the United States, says she harbors no resentment. “Why should I focus on the nasty stuff,” she asks, “when God has been so good to me?”

(above): Williams broke the color barrier at the New York City Opera in *Madama Butterfly*, 1946.

(below): Young Camilla (left) with Marian Anderson, an American contralto and one of the most celebrated singers of the 20th century.



Violette Verdy



The first thing you notice about her is the light in her eyes and you can imagine that it must have been this same light that inspired the great choreographers George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins. As she sits here in her condo on the southeast side of Bloomington, dressed casually in a skirt and sneakers, you wouldn't necessarily know that Violette Verdy is one of the premier ballerinas of our time. As a principal dancer with the New York City Ballet, the ballerina known for her exuberant, joyful style danced in more than 25 starring roles. Verdy was the first female artistic director of the Paris Opera Ballet and among her countless honors and accomplishments, she holds the title of Chevalier (Knight) in France's National Order of the Legion of Honor, France's highest decoration, awarded to her this past June.

Verdy was born Nelly Guillerm in 1933 in the Breton working-class town of Pont-l'Abbé in northwest France, and raised by a single mother; her father died when she was an infant. It was Verdy's strict and stalwart mother who firmly steered her toward ballet when she was 6 years old. It never would have occurred to Verdy to challenge her mother's judgment. "In those days, parents and teachers were next to God," she says, in a lilting voice that still bears a strong French accent, even after 50 years in the U.S. "My mother was formidable and I was trained to be obedient."

Jeanne Guillerm recognized her daughter's musical ability—the child had perfect pitch—and started her on violin lessons, then piano. In 1942, with Pont-l'Abbé occupied by the Germans, Nelly and her mother—who had set her sights on a ballet career for her daughter—moved to Paris. Family members protested; they thought Jeanne was being impulsive and insisted that dancing would be too demanding for the slight, fragile Nelly. But Jeanne was determined, and with the encouragement of the family doctor who believed ballet would be a fine outlet for this hyperactive child, they made the journey to Paris.

Nelly began her lessons with the Milanese ballerina Carlotta Zambelli until her mother spotted an extraordinary young student in the same class and, with a little investigation, discovered that the girl was also training with a second teacher, Rousane Sarkissian, among the most prominent ballet teachers in Paris. Jeanne promptly enrolled her daughter with Sarkissian, known to her pupils as Madame Rousane. Recalls Verdy, "My mother could see that Madame Rousane was an amazing pedagogue and thought, 'This is it.'" As Verdy is quoted in her biography *Ballerina* by Victoria Huckenpahler, "I had the feeling of my life being taken in hand by something larger."

Living in Wartime Poverty

Paris was a mecca for ballet students but during the war the city was hardly glamorous. Nelly and her mother lived without heat or electricity, and food was scarce; the two subsisted almost entirely on the bread and potatoes sent by Nelly's grandmother in Brittany. Almost two years after it began, her training as a ballerina would be precipitously interrupted.

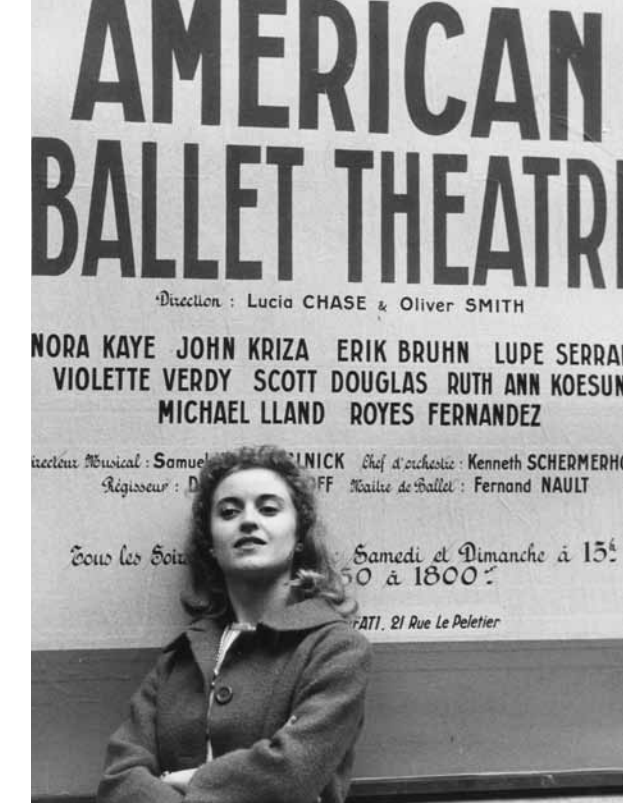
(left): Verdy in her prime as a dancer.

(right): With her medal from the French government.

(above right): Verdy, early in her career.

There were rumors of an allied invasion of Paris and Jeanne Guillerm sensed that the city would become a battleground, so on May 22, 1944, she made the decision to move back to Pont-l'Abbé. Their train, filled with French women and children, was attacked mistakenly twice by American bombers, killing six passengers and wounding thirty. Nelly and her mother arose from the wreckage unharmed and fled to nearby woods before the third attack. A train was sent to retrieve the survivors and, after an overnight stay in the riverside city of Quimper and a 15-mile bus ride, the two were back in Pont-l'Abbé.

By the end of the summer Paris had been liberated and they were determined to get back to the city to continue Nelly's training. The only transportation available at the time was a sardine truck. The driver had agreed to make a small space in the middle of the cargo in which 15 travelers would stand. "It was insane what we had to do in those days," says Verdy. "You would do anything and everything to survive." Back in Paris, Nelly continued her training with Madame Rousane. "Little by little I began to realize that I was pretty good," she says. Verdy could also see that her mother and teacher were pleased with her progress. Events unfolded smoothly as if her path had been



predetermined, she explains. A budding choreographer, Roland Petit chose the 11-year-old Nelly for their upcoming ballet, *Le Poète*. The child received her first contract and fee, the equivalent of about \$60.

"The road was straight," explains Verdy. "Everything we needed came one after the other. We recovered from the war at the same time I was developing as a dancer." A year later in 1945 she joined Petit's new troupe, Ballets des Champs-Élysées (among her peers was dancer and movie actress Leslie Caron), and she had a new teacher, Victor Gsovsky, the company's ballet master. If Madame Rousane taught her the fundamentals of ballet, it was Gsovsky who introduced Verdy to phrasing and composition.

Four years later at age 15, the dancer had signed with a film company and changed her name to Violette Verdy; she chose an alliterative combination of the delicate flower and famed composer with one minor adjustment: she changed the "i" in Verdi to a "y." Verdy starred in the movie *Ballerina*, the story of Nicole, a young dancer who is taken in by a scoundrel.

LIFE DURING WORLD WAR II:

'It was insane what we had to do, you would do anything and everything to survive.'



(left) Verdy with a portrait of her mentor, George Balanchine.

(below) Fifty years ago Verdy graced the cover of *LIFE* magazine.

I expanded and enlarged and augmented my knowledge. He made me do things that I might have been shy or fearful about technically. I did it to please him. I saw that he trusted that I could do it. I didn't have time to kvetch about it, to hesitate and make difficulties, or be shy about things. There was no time. All you could do was respond, be available, and let him lift you up."

To be precise, Balanchine saw an expressive quality in Verdy that other choreographers apparently had failed to recognize. "I knew I was a joyous person and dancer. I knew I had the capacity for lyricism but because my body didn't immediately suggest lyricism, I was getting a lot of choreography as an active, perky, good-jumping dancer. I didn't have these huge extensions with the leg going high. But Balanchine saw lyricism and depth. He used me [to convey] seeking and resignation and nobility. There were so many things he saw in me that I hadn't been used for. Delicacy and details. And at the same time he allowed me to continue some of my own stuff."

Balanchine's Favorite

Over the next decade Verdy performed with the London Festival Ballet, La Scala in Milan, and the American Ballet Theatre. In 1958 she was invited by New York City Ballet cofounders Lincoln Kirstein and George Balanchine to join their company as a principal dancer, a defining axis in her career. She danced in more than 25 roles, many of which were created expressly for her, including *Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux*, *Sonatine*, *La Source*, and *Emeralds* (choreographed by Balanchine) and *Dances at a Gathering* and *In the Night* (by Robbins). Of Balanchine, Verdy says, "He was so encyclopedic in his knowledge and there was

so much to learn from him. He was a true craftsman. He could do anything. If he had to create a ballet in three days he knew exactly what he had to do and he'd come up with a charming piece." She adds, "You know, he never admitted to being a genius, though he did admit to being the best in his field. He was a craftsman, like Mozart, Faberge, Shakespeare. It is not bad to be a craftsman."

Balanchine was also perceptive. He saw something in Verdy that other choreographers—and the dancer herself—had missed. "I thought I knew myself," she continues, "but he saw me in a different way completely. With Balanchine



In Search of Enlightenment

In 1968 Verdy, an eager student of philosophy with a thirst for enlightenment, was introduced to Hindu belief by the Indian intellectual and novelist Raja Rao. Three years later Rao brought Verdy to meet Sri Padmanabha Menon, who would become her guru, a word she points out is translated as "remover of ignorance." During this period, Verdy struggled with severe orthopedic problems that made it nearly impossible for her to dance. Depressed and anxious, she traveled to Malakhra, India, to study with the guru for two months. During intense private and group discussions with her teacher, Verdy found both serenity and sharp mental focus. Her experience in India also seemed to bring relief from the chronic dance-related injuries, and by the end of the year she was able to return to the stage.

Verdy retired from performing with the New York City Ballet in 1977 to become the first female artistic director of the Paris Opera Ballet, until 1980, then joined the Boston Ballet for a four-year stint as artistic director. In 1984 she returned to the New York City Ballet as a teaching associate and went on to teaching residencies and choreographic commissions in numerous institutions, including Harvard University, Boston University, New York University, and University of North Carolina School of the Arts. She has choreographed for dozens of national and international companies, including the Paris Opera Ballet, the Royal Ballet, and the Chautauqua Institute. In 1996 she was

appointed Distinguished Professor of Ballet at IU's Jacobs School of Music. She continues to teach to this day.

Verdy says she was always a teacher, even as a dancer. "There was always a teaching quality to my dancing, a kind of clarity, an explicit quality. When I was doing a certain part I was told that I seemed to be teaching it to my audience—my dancing was sometimes too acute." In fact, Balanchine used her to teach other dancers, especially the American ones. "Many of the American dancers had great impulsive movement, covering space with a freedom like wild mustangs, but less of a sense of form. Balanchine loved [American style] but with me it was back to sculpture and form because I was French and in my dancing everything had to be clear and explained. This appealed to him and he saw it as a contribution." As all good teachers know, working with young people can be a bittersweet experience. "You can have promising students and then discover to your own great disappointment that they don't want it, or they're not prepared to do what it takes," she explains. "Or you have a student with an incredible body—thin, supple, pliant, lovely feet—but then she's not much there. No charisma. No

ON TEACHING THE BEST:
'Oh my God, you see a gift and you want to protect it, strengthen it.'

(left): Verdy today is still in good form and still teaching at IU.

(below): Verdy with Mikhail Baryshnikov, one of the great ballet dancers of our time.

atmosphere." And then there is the miracle every teacher prays for, "the old soul in a young body. You think, oh, the gods are playing with us and you salute the miracle of an inheritance that goes unexplained," she says. "It's so fulfilling for you, for the dancer, for the public. Oh my God, you see a gift and you want to protect it, strengthen it. Those are the most rewarding and exhilarating moments as a teacher. It is wonderful and captivating."

Teaching at IU offers a particular benefit: living in Bloomington. "I used to need big cities but now I don't need them so much," Verdy says. "I love my little yard, my cats. I like it here because there is a gentleness you don't find in big cities. People are less harsh, less pushy, less on edge."

Reflecting on her career, Verdy, ever philosophical, believes that there has always been an overarching logic—almost a master plan—guiding her success. "At the time you think, 'Why is this happening to me, what is the purpose?' Looking back you realize it was all a logical progression. I've had to deny nothing, reject nothing, change nothing because nothing I had done was wrong. My whole life has been like this. I look back and see the straight road, the ladder upward." ✨

