



DANCE PARTNERS

NEWSLETTER

A YEAR OF

NEW BEGINNINGS

by Michael Bearden



It is with enthusiasm that many of us say goodbye to the year 2020 and embrace the new year with optimistically open arms. I too am on this bandwagon to better days but before climbing aboard, I take a last look over my shoulder in hindsight at 2020. The year started with promise as our students in the School of Dance, put together the most impressive *Young Choreographers' Showcase* that I have seen since becoming a part of the School. The transformative power of educational travel was alive and well in February when twelve of our dance majors took part in the International Dance Encounter in Cancun, Mexico. While at this festival they performed and participated in master classes with the likes of Cynthia Harvey of the American Ballet Theatre. They also had the opportunity to visit one of the seven wonders of the world in the Mayan ruins of on the Yucatan Peninsula.

Not long after they returned from this adventure, the world began to change as we know it. International travel restrictions were put in place and the University of Oklahoma informed the School that we would be going online for at least two weeks after spring break. On Friday, March 13th, we met for the last time (in-person) as a school. The mood in the room was that of apprehension as none of us had any idea what to expect moving forward into the semester. Throughout the remainder of the spring and into the summer our students, staff and faculty faced many challenges as they sought to keep the integrity of their work through less-than-ideal means. To say the least frustrations could sometimes be overwhelming as students danced in the living rooms, bedrooms and in some cases bathrooms.

As we entered the fall semester, there was some form of renewed optimism because we could once again be in the studio together but with that also came many concerns and questions as cases of Covid-19 were surging in some areas of the country. Can we dance together safely? Will anyone get sick and if so to what degree? Will it be the same as before or will we face new challenges in our student's progress and our ability to teach? These questions and more filled the hearts and minds of those in the school yet by the conclusion of the year we had learned to be successful in our endeavors together through persistence, creativity, and

communication. In 2020 we learned to be more innovative in the way we work, and how to show more empathy to one another. I could not be more proud of the students, staff, and faculty in the OU School of Dance for their herculean effort this past year to make the best of a truly difficult time and I am confident that we will emerge from this period even stronger as a program.

As we enter a year of new beginnings, we are pleased to launch this Dance Partners Newsletter to keep you, our loyal supporters informed and engaged in the work of our students and faculty. I want to thank Dance Partners co-presidents Dane McDowell and Millie Audas for their initiation of this project and for their passionate leadership of this vital organization. Please enjoy our first edition of the Dance Partners Newsletter and may this be a year full of rejuvenation for you and your loved ones.



The future ahead was uncertain, as much of the year had already been.

As the long summer drew to a close, students and faculty at the OU School of Dance didn't fully know what to expect. New protocols, procedures, and restrictions lent to a flutter of nerves and hesitancy upon the return to the classroom. Emails about "unprecedented times" and a "new normal" were passed between faculty and students as they tried to navigate through the confusion surrounding COVID-19 that had plagued the world for countless months.

Apprehension

Professor of modern dance Austin Hartel expressed a common sentiment among the faculty and students.

"We were all very apprehensive," Hartel said. "Everybody was a little nervous. We weren't sure how it was going to work. We weren't even sure how long we would be in the classroom."

Prior to the start of the semester, students received a comprehensive email containing the various precautions that would be taken to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 to their education and training. Among these guidelines were rules about how many students would be allowed in a space at a time, mask-wearing requirements, walking pathways, and regulations concerning physical contact.

Adjustment

Freshman modern dance major Carson McHugh discussed the struggles she faced in making these adjustments in the classroom.

"The biggest thing for me was not being able to physically interact with other students in class and with teachers," McHugh said. "I think that's a big part of dance and partnering and all those things that we didn't really get to do this semester. It was difficult to find that emotional connection with the other people in the class."

Sophomore ballet major Allison Cervantes discussed the internal challenges of returning to a unique classroom setting.

"I think you're so used to a very specific routine as a dancer," Cervantes said. "And that being thrown off, it forced you to adjust your mentality a little bit going into class. It definitely added a level of stress and uncertainty."

Resilience

However, despite these obstacles, the resilience of the artistic spirit prevailed. Through the students' hard work and the faculty's dedication to providing a safe and supportive environment for their dancers, the School of Dance was able to persevere through a time of turmoil.

"I do feel that as we progressed into the semester, and after we worked through those first three to four weeks where there was a lot of in and out of the studio, it's kind of settled down," Hartel said. "I think we as a group started to feel better and adjust to the situation...I feel like when that transition happened, we started to really move forward in every way."

Performances

Against the odds, the School of Dance successfully created multiple performances and projects.

For example, the School recorded a work titled "Signature" by Price Suddarth which was set on the students via Zoom. Cervantes elaborated on the uniqueness of this experience.

"We were freezing cold and in leotards, but it was kind of fun," Cervantes said. "Just because it was a new experience, and we were all together and had that camaraderie between us."

In addition, the students were also able to present live performances, both in outdoor showcases and in the main stage presentation of Contemporary Dance Oklahoma.

McHugh said the performance experience was different from what she was used to.

"You're used to looking out and seeing all these faces, or at least feeling the energy of the people and kind of the buzz of the audience and that wasn't really there," McHugh said. "Usually when the grand drape is in and you're standing backstage, you can hear the chatter, and it just has a different sort of live energy."

However, McHugh said she was grateful for this opportunity.

"You're still getting to perform live in front of people, and you still get that same closeness with the people that you're dancing with on stage," McHugh said. "You're getting to share the stage with some of these people that you've been dancing with for a whole semester."

Because of the support, patience, and diligence of the faculty and students, the School of Dance was able to accomplish many seemingly impossible feats.

"The dance program especially has handled safety measures really well," Cervantes said. "And it's allowed us to have opportunities that a lot of my friends and other pre professional programs and traineeships and companies couldn't have at this time."

McHugh said she is grateful to be a part of the School of Dance because it has helped make her transition into college easier.

"[One of the most beneficial things] was having professors that really care about you, and make the effort to make you feel like they care and make the effort to check in on you and make sure that you're doing okay in the transition," McHugh said. "Those are things that people that are not in the OU dance department, don't have."

Eyes on the Future

The fall semester was filled with trial, error, persistence, and triumph. As the spring semester approaches, students and faculty alike are hopeful that the trend of success can continue.

"I'm hoping that when we get back into spring, because we'll still have all those protocols in place, but that we can hold on to that sensation," Hartel said. "That this is okay and we can work this way. It's good, you know it for what it is. It's still good."



THE FIVE MOONS

MYTH OR REALITY?
by Dane McDowell

This year, with an upcoming event, the University of Oklahoma School of Dance will pay homage to five unique ballerinas.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, five dancers belonging to four American Indian tribes put the state of Oklahoma on the world map. These incredibly talented Native Americans, through their art, perseverance, pride, and courage, performed on the greatest stages, not only in the United States but in most of the European and South American capitals.

But who are these Five Moons?

Maria and her sister Marjorie Tallchief, (Osage), Rosella Hightower (Choctaw), Yvonne Chouteau (Shawnee) and Moscelyne Larkin (Shawnee-Peoria) were named the Five Moons because, in the Native American mythology, the moon is a clan symbol: keeper of the night and protector of the earth.

As a tribute to the four tribes, the ballet *Four Moons* was created in 1967. Later all five dancers were portrayed in a mural, *The Flight of Spirit*, in the Rotunda of the Oklahoma State Capitol, and with a group of bronze sculptures in the garden of the Tulsa Historical Society.

For these five young women, passion more than ambition was a leading, irresistible force. From a young age, they danced and were soon singled out by their ballet teachers who encouraged them to move to higher levels. They endured rigorous training from famous masters: George Balanchine, the genius choreographer and Bronislava Nijinska (Nijinski's sister). At the time *The Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo* founded in 1932 after the death of its founder, Serge Diaghilev, captivated the ballet aficionados throughout the world. One after another, our five Oklahoma dancers, renowned for their technical virtuosity, fiery speed, and musicality, became associated with this prestigious company and eventually received the title of *prima ballerina*, a most coveted award.

If all Five Moons enjoyed an exceptional career and international acclaim, one of them, Yvonne Chouteau, is even more special and dear to us, for she and her husband Miguel Terekhov founded the OU School of Dance (then Department of Dance) in 1961, the first fully accredited dance department in the United States. Their legacy has paved the way to recognition and success for our students and continues, through invaluable Ballets Russes Archives, to stimulate studies of all the artists whose talent and dedication transformed the world of dance.



MEET GLENN EDGERTON

Please meet the newest member of the OU School of Dance faculty, Glenn Edgerton. Mr. Edgerton relocated to Norman from Chicago in August of 2020 after leading Hubbard Street Dance Chicago as their Artistic Director for the past 11 years. We recently caught up with Glenn via email to learn more about him and his impressive background in the dance world.

1. Glenn, when did you decide to be a dancer?

Answer: The moment I walked into the studio for the first time in my hometown in Texas at six years old. My mother sent me in to get my sister who was taking classes and seeing the wide-open space and feeling the creative energy was like a jolt of electricity. I didn't know there was a profession for dance at that time, but I knew I had to dance.

2. What was it like to work with Robert Joffrey and Gerald Arpino?

Answer: Mr. Joffrey and Mr. Arpino were an incredible duo. They complemented each other beautifully. Mr. Joffrey was the intellectual curator of the company and a formidable teacher. Mr. Arpino was the emotional heart of the company with an exuberance that he instilled in us to bring to the stage. Following their examples as teachers and directors was synonymous to taking a course in innovation and thoughtful leadership.

3. What prompted you to leave the Joffrey Ballet and join the Netherlands Dans Theater (NDT)?

Answer: Mr. Joffrey died in 1988 which was the catalyst for me to make a change. I had been inspired by him since my first Joffrey workshop at 14 years old. I idolized him and when he died, I felt my time was complete having been at The Joffrey for eleven years. Mr. Joffrey introduced us to the Kylian repertoire with four works from his repertory which was always an incredible experience for me. In 1989 I followed my dream of dancing Kylian works and was accepted into NDT.

4. What was it like to dance under the directorship of Jiri Kylian and later direct NDT 1?

Answer: Being at NDT with Jiri as a director was yet another lesson in leadership, generosity of spirit, inspiration and support. He was fair and thoughtful for all things and had a zen-like approach to his directorship, very much as you would imagine from seeing his choreography. Given the opportunity to direct NDT 1 was and will always remain a phenomenon and privilege that I cherish. Sitting with him in performances, rehearsals and meetings is a relationship I revere every day. The word privilege doesn't fully express my gratitude for the vast opportunities given to me.

5. What are your most cherished memories of leading Hubbard Street Dance Chicago as the Artistic Director?

Answer: My favorite moments were seeing a dancer go beyond what they thought they were capable of. When a dancer was so immersed in a work that they surprised themselves in the moment with their emotional and physical depth was very fulfilling. Invariably in every performance at least one person would go beyond all expectations which is all you can ask for as an artistic director. Also, too, then after the performances sitting in the bar with the dancers, crew and staff, connecting with them and their lives, reliving the great moments and laughing at the mishaps that happened on stage, are the finest of memories.

6. *What has your experience been like joining the OU School of Dance family?*

Answer: Having been at OU now for a full semester I'm so impressed with the thoughtful care for the dancers along with mix of faculty from all different facets of dance. The diverse backgrounds of the faculty offer the dancers a range and an awareness of the art form that I'm proud to be a part of. Also, too arriving during a pandemic where everyone has said this has been the most difficult semester of all and for me to be new and not feel that level of difficulty is a testament to all the careful preparations and thought given at the onset.

7. *What are your objectives for the School of Dance? Are you working on a project right now?*

Answer: My objective for my participation is to get the dancer the job or help facilitate their dreams for whatever direction that might lead them. Being a catalyst to a dancer fulfilling their goals and potential is what we hope for. For the school in general, I would say to have students from around the world gravitate to OU School of Dance for being an inspired place to be creative, to experiment and grow in an emotionally safe environment and is inclusive for all dancers of ethnic backgrounds, sexual and gender identities. Apart from teaching, I have an idea that will need time to evolve. It is about creating an enhancement to the ballet technique to build a dancer's foundation of alignment, strength and awareness of the body that is supported by physical therapists. Other projects have been presenting Kylian workshops to every student in the School of Dance; also, I will be setting Arpino works for the spring performances. Bringing my past to our dancers to inform them of the creators who have come before them is exciting to me to continue the circle.

Thank you for your support and we hope you enjoyed our inaugural Dance Partners Newsletter. Our goal is to keep you informed about the inspiring work going on in the School of Dance. We would like to give a special thanks to Dane McDowell, Emmy Wildermuth, Glenn Edgerton and Michael Bearden for their contributions in bringing this newsletter to fruition. We invite you to send any questions or feedback you may have for our faculty, director, or contributors to this newsletter by contacting us via email at dance@ou.edu or call (405) 325-4051.