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Regional

Jarrell keeps dance traditions alive at SIUE

Dancing is one of the oldest artistic expressions. We have learned this fact by looking at some of the paintings in caves made by our prehistoric ancestors.

Although in many cultures, dancing is taught to children at an early age, more and more people begin their dance lessons at colleges and universities, where classes can help them learn how to express their feelings with their bodies.

Someone who teaches just that is Calvin Jarrell, professor and head of the dance area of the department of theater and dance at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Interestingly, it was during a beginner's dance class at SIUE when Jarrell was an undergraduate that he decided that his future was in dancing.

Born in Salina, Kan., Jarrell received his bachelor's degree in dance from SIUE, his master's degree in dance from the University of Illinois and a master's in fine arts from the University of Oklahoma.

Jarrell has choreographed and directed many pieces, including classics such as "Oklahoma," "The King and I," "Annie" and "West Side Story." But he does it his own way.

"I don't try to replicate the original choreography. I always try to produce something that is totally original but within the same style," he said. "In fact, I don't watch movies like 'West Side Story' because I don't want to be influenced but rather have fresh ideas."

The late Jerome Robbins, who was known for rehearsing dancers nearly to death in order to achieve perfection, designed the original choreography for "West Side Story." Jarrell's approach is quite different.

"There was a period of time when rehearsing was really hard-core in terms of demands. A lot of dance classes tend to be imitations of what others do, but I try to move away from that," Jarrell said. "When I direct and choreograph a musical, I spend the first week to do just musical rehearsals for learning the songs and the music, and I watch the students' moves and I use that for the sake of creativity."

Aldemaro Romero
College Talk

When talking to Jarrell's students after a class, you can hear how motivated they are despite the physical demands placed on them. Phrases such as, "I like dance because of how it makes me feel," and "It is harder than I expected, but it is worth it," are commonplace.

And his students are not necessarily going into dancing as a profession. Their majors range from genetic engineering to performing arts. Many become double majors after getting involved with Jarrell's classes. Some go into dance education.

Jarrell is a great admirer of those dancers — such as Isadora Duncan — who broke with the rigidity of ballet to explore movements and systems for recording movements. "That's important because if you watch a video of a dance, you may be repeating the same mistake all over," Jarrell explained. "When the movements are recorded on paper, you know how they were supposed to be interpreted."

Ballet has been losing audiences in recent times. The reason? Jarrell cites the economy as a major factor.

"The number of majors in ballet is related to the economy," he said. "The better the economy, the more dancing majors. Yet, most people do not understand the craft. But that is not the case in Cuba, Russia or South Africa." He added that the American tradition of dancing is different than in many parts of the world.

"America is being more eclectic, with modern and ballet learning from each other," Jarrell said. "There are still people who go to ballet because it is easy to understand. There is always a story line that people can follow. Modern dance is more difficult to follow."

Culture also plays a major role in how dance is perceived. "In Cuba, everybody dances from an early age," Jarrell said. "In America, there is a stigma by some parents



Shan Lu

Dr. Calvin Jarrell works with some of his students in the SIUE dance studio.

to pay for dancing lessons."

Yet he sees that most of his students are interested in modern dance, although some come from ballet schools. "I think that interest is because modern dance allows more freedom of expression," he explained.

Although he acknowledges that TV shows such as "Dancing with the Stars" may have helped to popularize dancing among younger generations, he believes what ultimately attracts people to dance is the pure enjoyment of it.

"Freedom of expression is the key," he said. "You don't thoroughly understand and enjoy it until you do it in a free space

expressing yourself. There is a song in the heart and a heart in a song."

Much of Jarrell's recent experience has been in Cuba.

"They have total freedom of expression," he said of the dancers. "It's incredible. The great Russian dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov said that he saw the best ballet training in the world in Cuba. I can attest to that. They have some of the best technical dancing and the passion and the commitment. If you take dance out of Cuba there would be a revolution. Cubans say that Fidel may be the only Cuban that does not dance."

When asked what SIUE students can learn

though the cultural and arts programs that the university is planning to develop in Cuba, he is categorical.

"Our students can learn passion and 110 percent commitment," Jarrell said. "I have never seen so much of it as in Cuba. It is hot and humid in Cuba. You sweat, but it is worthwhile. I believe in dance diplomacy."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.