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Dancing on air

Washington and Lee University's dance program is breaking new ground with an aerial dance concert that blends the boundaries of dance and academia. [Read In here and here and here 4 decks.](#)

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LEXINGTON -- Jenefer Davies' spring term dance class at Washington and Lee University at first glance looks more like a rappelling academy, though a highly unusual one.

At one recent rehearsal, three dancers wore protective helmets while dangling from ropes attached to their waists by harnesses. They dipped their bare feet in trays filled with acrylic paint, and, as they began to spin and flip in midair, they painted patterns on a huge sheet of paper taped to the wall before them.

The painting dance was co-created by Kara Karcher, 23, one of Davies' students, who was soon hanging on a rope herself, running along the wall and back-flipping to practice a bit of Davies' choreography while a fellow student sat atop a scaffold playing violin.

Davies, 42, first dabbled in aerial ballet in 2002, when she was director of Roanoke Ballet Theatre. Now, as creator of the W&L dance program, she's breaking new ground by exploring its possibilities in an academic setting.

In June, she'll be attending a conference in Athens, Greece, where she'll present a paper on preparing students for aerial dance. She's brought the sort of boundary-blending approach to the art of dance that she was known for in Roanoke to W&L, and the world of academia is taking note.

"For a school our size and for a dance program as new as it is, there is some surprise around the country" at the program's quality and how well it's doing in national competitions, said Hank Dobin, dean of the college at W&L. "I can't say enough about what she's done. Dance is now a significant feature of the W&L cultural landscape."

Taking the lead

Head-turning triumphs for the program Davies started building from scratch in 2006 include prizes from the intensely competitive regional American College Dance Festivals. W&L's dancers have been chosen to perform in the festivals' galas, which showcase the top dance group performances, three times in the past five years.

W&L is also one of the first two universities to be allowed to perform cutting-edge modern dance originating from the Batsheva Dance Company from Israel, one of the world's top dance ensembles.

The Chronicle of Higher Education, the premier news source about U.S. academia, has published stories about Davies' innovative dance recitals that incorporate elements such as Wii controllers, Twitter feeds and demonstrations of economic theory.

The latter of those involved a collaboration with her brother Antony Davies, an economics professor at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. The "Tragedy of the Commons" dance was her brother's idea. He "was looking for a creative way to teach economic principles," she said.

Antony Davies was inspired by "NASCAR Ballet," a performance his sister coordinated with Roanoke Ballet Theatre in 2004 that made international news.

That performance brought modern dance to many people who wouldn't otherwise be interested, he said, so he wondered, "Can we do it in the other direction?" -- and bring economics to people whose prime interest was the arts.

Advanced steps

For "Tragedy of the Commons," five audience members were given clickers controlling spotlights illuminating the dancers on stage, with a goal of keeping each dancer illuminated for as long as possible.

For the first act, all the clickers drew from the same power source. In the second act, audience members had access to smaller power sources they controlled individually. According to economic theory, the communal resources would be squandered sooner, leaving the dancers in the dark quicker.

Much to Antony Davies' relief, all three performances followed the theory's predictions..

"I thought it was interesting that it actually worked," said Karcher, one of the dancers in "Tragedy," who had to dance in the pitch dark during parts of the performance.

The siblings are looking into future economics and dance collaborations, Jenefer Davies said.

Born into dance

Her brother isn't inexperienced in her field of expertise -- Antony has training in ballet and tap dancing.

They grew up in Montoursville, Pa., in a family where involvement with dance, music and theater was the norm.

"My whole family, my parents, my grandparents, were all sort of theater folk," Jenefer Davies said. She started taking dance lessons at 3 years old, and did her first choreography at 15.

Her brother and younger sister both became academics, but Jenefer was the only one of the three who continued to pursue the arts into adulthood. The advice her father gave her in choosing a career path runs counter to a lot of traditional parenting. He told her to ask herself, of all the things she could choose, "what's the one thing you would do for free?"

Choreography.

"The idea of taking an expressive work from nothing, I find that fascinating." She compared choreographing a dance piece to gradually perfecting an oil painting. "It's a long process of refinement."

Antony Davies, 45, said that as an economist who thinks all the time about topics such as job markets, "Frankly, I was petrified for her when she decided as an undergraduate to pursue theater and dance."

Yet it worked out. After attending Hollins College and earning her master's degree at George Mason University, Davies was hired at 22 as executive and artistic director for Roanoke Ballet Theatre. With little background in arts administration, all of her training was on the job, she said.

The support she received from her board and from the community at large made it possible for her to take risks that became triumphs, including "NASCAR Ballet," "Bluegrass Ballet," and her forays into aerial dance, the first performance of which took place on the Kirk Avenue wall of Center in the Square.

The point was to show people didn't need to know a secret language or be part of an exclusive culture to appreciate dance. "I think there are sort of unspoken rules, and I think that's part of what I'm trying to fight against."

Switching partners

In addition to running RBT, Davies also taught at Hollins University, which laid the groundwork for her hire at W&L. After he came to the Lexington university in 2005, Dobins began looking for a person who could create a dance program there -- the campus had a student-run dance organization, but nothing formal.

Davies assisted former Hollins director of dance Donna Faye Burchfield, herself a national trendsetter, who suggested to W&L officials that Davies might be just the person they were looking for. Burchfield left Hollins in 2010 to become director of the School for Dance at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia.

Dobins said that once Davies went to work, he noticed results almost immediately. "The students have taken to Jenny tremendously," he said.

'A kinetic tie'

For the past three weeks, Davies has been helping her students prepare for an aerial dance performance, "Defy Gravity," that takes place Monday and Tuesday at the Lenfest Center on the W&L campus.

Her classes during this short spring term are six hours long -- though students take hour breaks between practices -- and physically rigorous.

Because she's the only dance instructor, W&L offers dance only as a minor. Her dancers are majoring in engineering, chemistry, business, politics and other disciplines. She considers that a strength.

"They bring a whole new flavor to it," she said. "They bring a level of creativity in a way that's unique."

"I love it," said Rachel Alexander, a 20-year-old politics major from Baton Rouge, La., adding that the dance program gave her incentive to apply to W&L. She said she's grateful to have gotten the chance to take the aerial dance class.

Dana Fredericks, 21, a dual major in chemistry and engineering, and David Doobin, 22, a senior majoring in neuroscience, rehearsed a piece involving aerial silk that they choreographed themselves. Like most of the routines, it has a multimedia element, this one involving video. Doobin, a track runner, noted the silk rope work was good for upper body strength.

Fredericks, who's also on the swim team, said she relished the opportunity "to do something not many people get to do."

"I look at audiences the same way I look at my students," Davies said. In order to fuel an interest in dance as an art form, "you have to create excitement, and it has to be made accessible, too."

"Every human being moves from the moment of conception," Davies said. "There's a kinetic tie to all people, back to their childhood, however dormant that may be ... if we can just expose people to movement in a way they understand it, they'll love it."

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