

The Scholarship of Fine Arts: Professor Writes 'Sentences' of Movement to Bring Dances to Life

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*This is the second story in a *Lo Que Pasa* series that explores the unique nature of scholarship in the fine arts through profiles of College of Fine Arts faculty. Click [here](#) ^[1] to read the first story.*

Tammy Dyke-Compton ^[2]'s senior year at The Juilliard School wasn't going as planned.

It was spring 2003, and Dyke-Compton was coming to the end of her time as a student at the elite dance school. The Phoenix native had worked practically her whole life for this – the chance to audition for dance companies and start a career performing on stages around the world.

As luck would have it, Twyla Tharp was looking to cast parts for her new musical, "Movin' Out." It was Dyke-Compton's "dream audition."

But she didn't get to audition for that musical, or for any dance companies. Rehabilitation following surgery for a torn ACL had kept her from dancing for most of the year, and forced her to pass on auditions that spring.

"I was heartbroken," Dyke-Compton said, recalling the memory recently. "I basically went through all the emotions you go through when someone passes away."

But by October 2003, Dyke-Compton was dancing again, and her luck had seemed to turn when auditions for Tharp's musical reopened. Dyke-Compton made it through two rounds of cuts and watched as the original group shrank from about 500 dancers to about six. On the third callback, Tharp matched the dancers for male-female partner auditions.

The audition proved to be life-changing in more than one way: Dyke-Compton got a part on the national Broadway tour, and the partner she auditioned with, **Christopher Compton**, is now her husband.

Dyke-Compton is now an assistant professor in the UA **School of Dance** ^[3], where the challenges she faced as a performer inform the way she teaches her students. One of her primary messages: Whether you're dancing for a Broadway show or a cruise line, the artistry is the same.

"I really preach that wherever you're dancing, you're a dancer," she said. "You don't need a job that tells you you're a great dancer. You just need to believe in yourself that much."

The road to Juilliard

Dyke-Compton believed in herself early.

By 3 years old, she knew she'd be a dancer, and so did most everyone else in her life. Her childhood dance teacher told her she had a future as a dancer after Dyke-Compton's first session. And by 16, she had spent a summer at Perry-Mansfield Performing Arts School and Camp, an intensive summertime school in the mountains of northern Colorado that draws dance students from Juilliard, the UA, Florida State University and elsewhere, keeping them on their toes until school is back in session.

Her summer there proved to be a turning point as she danced alongside older students who could see her passion and encouraged her to chase it – even to Juilliard, they said, if she wanted to.

"I remember thinking, 'Wow, I could go to school for this,'" she said. "I knew I could be better than what I was at 18 in Phoenix, and I knew I needed more training."

"I just had that craving to really dive into my craft and study my artistry."

A prolonged illness that had Dyke-Compton in and out of the hospital in the fall of her senior year of high school left little time for completing as many applications to dance schools as she'd hoped. Still, she applied to Juilliard, and by spring 1997 she was in New York City for the 12-hour audition process alongside about 150 other students. Other Juilliard auditions took place at cities around the U.S.

Call sheets posted between audition sessions listed the prospects who had made it to the next round. Dyke-Compton found her name on each one. Several weeks later, a letter arrived with the news of her acceptance.

"My dream came true that moment," she said.

One dream leads to another

Even though Juilliard was the dream, Dyke-Compton gave herself opportunities to explore other possibilities as a dancer.

Interested in experiencing the musical-theater side of dance, she auditioned for and was offered a role with "Fame – The Musical" after her freshman year in 1998. She traveled the U.S. and Canada on the Broadway show's first national tour for more than two years before her urge for deeper study pulled her back.

"I was craving the studying of my craft – the artistry, the techniques of modern and ballet," she said.

She re-auditioned for Juilliard and was again accepted in 2000.

Among the professors who guided Dyke-Compton's studies was Benjamin Harkavy, an internationally renowned ballet teacher and former director of Juilliard's dance division. He had a knack for finding the strengths in every one of his students, Dyke-Compton said.

"When he came up to you to tell you how much your performance meant to him, it was everything. He could really find people's callings," Dyke-Compton said, adding that it was Harkavy who helped her realize she could be both a performer and a choreographer.

Harkavy died of heart failure in 2002, during Dyke-Compton's junior year. Her choreography was among the work chosen for a performance at his memorial service at Juilliard.

Dyke-Compton's graduation marked the natural end of her dream of attending Juilliard, but landing the spot on Tharp's "Movin' Out" marked the beginning of another, which lasted nearly four years. Her professional career also includes work with renowned choreographers like Aszure Barton, Robert Battle, Peter Chu, Michael Rooney and Marguerite Derricks.

The scholarship of dance

Though she's a dancer first, Dyke-Compton said her role as a scholar becomes more evident while she's teaching, and especially as she prepares to choreograph a new piece.

She likens the choreography process to writing: Individual movements are like words, and, when strung together, they become "sentences" of a dance. Several sentences linked together become a paragraph, which make up a section of a performance.

The "vocabulary" of a dance can have tonal changes based on the "words" chosen for the piece. One section of a performance may involve large, sweeping movements that send dancers across the floor, while another section may have sharp movements that keep dancers confined to a smaller area.

Research, Dyke-Compton said, informs that vocabulary, and brings a deep sense of scholarship to the craft.

"I do tons of research before I actually start to work in the studio on movement," she said. "I do research maybe if it's on a concept, or I find photos or images of people in this piece, and ask, 'What kind of dialogue or vocabulary are they speaking with their bodies?'"

Jory Hancock ^[4], the School of Dance's longtime director who had a career as an esteemed ballet dancer, said he often finds similarities between the scholarship of fine arts and the kind found in scientific research. Both require critical thinking and analysis, mental acuity and a good memory, he said.

"There are still some people who would put them in different baskets," Hancock said, referring to the broad disciplines of science and art and what it takes to study them. "But I really don't."

Hancock said he relishes opportunities to highlight the union of art and science, and Dyke-Compton has been involved in those efforts. In 2016, she and fellow dance professor **Elizabeth George** [5] choreographed a **performance in the south lung of Biosphere 2** [6].

The result was a dance performance in a one-of-a-kind venue – and perhaps the last place anyone would expect to see dancers, Hancock said. Attendees came away from the performance, he recalled, with few words to describe what they'd seen.

It was one of those moments where people would say, "You had to see it for yourself," he said.

Finding students' strengths

Dyke-Compton began teaching dance early, assisting her childhood dance teacher while still a teenager. During her time at Juilliard, she taught and choreographed on a freelance basis over the summers.

But she really dove into teaching in 2007, when she and her husband moved to Toronto. Compton had just taken a job and was touring on a production of "Dirty Dancing"; Dyke-Compton, pregnant with the couple's first of three sons, stayed in Toronto to teach at schools, studios and conventions in the area, like the Oakville Academy for the Arts.

After two years in Toronto, Dyke-Compton and Compton moved to Phoenix to be closer to family, and the pair found work teaching at dance schools in the area. Dyke-Compton also taught during the summers at Perry-Mansfield, the Colorado school she had attended as a teen. She's spent every summer since 2009 teaching at Perry-Mansfield, and is now co-director of dance at the school with Compton, who is also a UA dance instructor.

Dyke-Compton came to the UA to study dance as a graduate student in 2011. She earned her master's degree in 2013 and became an assistant professor in 2014. Her most recent work includes choreographing "Bernstein Mass," under the direction of visiting professor **James Clouser** [7]. The performance, which featured School of Dance students, was held in late January in Centennial Hall.

Being a good dancer, Dyke-Compton said, requires different skills than being a good dance teacher. Following in the footsteps of Harkarvy, the professor who guided Dyke-Compton at Juilliard, she seeks the strengths in all her students – even those who don't plan to become dancers.

In an improvisation course for non-dance majors that Dyke-Compton taught as a graduate student in 2011, one student stood out during the first class. She urged him to take the rest of the dance school's non-major courses, and he later was accepted into the degree program. He graduated and went on to become a professional dancer, working for companies like Disney and doing commercial performances on cruise lines.

Moments like those – ones that help students realize their raw potential can become more than just a hobby – are rare, Dyke-Compton said, adding that she wishes they'd happen more often.

"That's the whole point of why I do what I do," she said. "I hope I can help them see the good inside of themselves."

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