Faculty in the Spotlight

MARY COLE

Faculty in the Spotlight presents the inside scoop on our beloved faculty member, Mary Cole. Here at the University of Michigan Department of Dance, Mary teaches Dance Production and is the lighting designer for all of the Department of Dance productions. She has lit the Power Center stage for thirty two years and has devoted so much support and dedication to her students. I don’t know what we would do without our “Mary Mom” or her bowls of Hershey’s kisses.

Did you grow up knowing you wanted to be a lighting designer?

No. I took ballet classes as a child because I wanted to be a ballerina. I don’t remember actually performing, I only remember the funny spaces in the theatre to get from the second balcony to the orchestra lift. I was destined to be a techy. I went to Eastern Michigan University and was a double major in art and theatre. Sophomore year of college they asked me to design the dance concert. I ended up coming to UofM to study theatrical lighting design but for me it was already decided I would do dance.

How and when did you become a faculty member in the Department of Dance?

So in ‘83 or ‘84 the Department went up for accreditation and didn’t get it. One of the reasons was because they didn’t have someone in charge of the productions. I graduated in ‘84 and was hired full time by the University to be a house tech. In the summer of ‘85 the Dance Department offered me a part-time job to teach dance production and to be the designer for all the student shows. The following year I was full time and part of staff. I wasn’t made faculty until 2006.

Do you have any favorite choreographers?

I remember in the mid ‘70s seeing the Martha Graham Dance Company and being truly inspired. I was aware of their set designer and lighting designer and it was one of my early memories of recognizing them as art forms. That was before I got into it. Having grown up in the ‘70s and ‘80s, I like a lot of the old farts just like the rest of the faculty. Although I must say, I like a lot of the new choreography.
Do you have any advice for how choreographers should work and interact with lighting designers? What do you prefer when working with a choreographer?

*It should be a collaboration in the true sense of the word. If you, as a choreographer, have particular ideas I think it’s great to discuss those ideas but I don’t think you want to overstep the bounds and dictate how everything should look. That being said, there aren’t many lighting designers for dance out there. Theater lighting and dance lighting are very different. I know a lot of people get out there and a lot of theater designers don’t understand dance, so if you were talking to them you would have to be more clear. One of my irks is when people say the lights should ‘black out’ as the movement fades away. They don’t really mean a black out because then the lights wouldn’t fade at all. It is just an incorrect use of terminology.*

What are some of your favorite things about lighting design and its role in a dance piece?

*Lighting isn’t still or concrete and it adds to the dance. What I like about dance is what I like about lighting design, the movement and emotion of it. In essence what I do when I light a dance is I am dancing it with you guys, without having to be on stage!*

What do you like to do in your free time?

*I am an avid reader, I love going to movies and plays, and I love gardening. My parents were beatniks so I grew up on an almost self sufficient organic farm back in the ‘60s when no body did that.*

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**Stefania Spadaro-Bliss is an undergraduate student at the University of Michigan. She transferred to the U-M in 2011 and will be graduating with the Class of 2013 with a major in Dance. As a newcomer into the world of newsletter publishing, Stefania is excited to give her readers the inside scoop on the faculty here in the Department of Dance. You may reach Stefania at ssbliss@umich.edu.**