Faculty in the Spotlight

AMY WEST

Faculty in the Spotlight presents the inside scoop on the life of our very own faculty member, Amy West. Here at the University of Michigan, Amy teaches upper level Ballet as well as the Friday Ballet lab. Her professional dance background and dedication to her students are what make Amy such a respected faculty member at the Department of Dance.

WHEN AND HOW DID YOU START YOUR DANCE CAREER?
My junior year in college I became an extra for Ballet West. I took credit for rehearsals, and I would go on tour and work it out with my professors. I was very fortunate and danced with Ballet West for three years.

DID YOU TRAIN IN ANY DANCE TECHNIQUES OTHER THAN BALLET?
University of Utah was one of the first dance programs in the country and we had separate dance departments for modern and ballet. The program was very technique-based and extremely strict. You were required to wear a black leotard and pink tights and some students were put on probation for weight or bent legs. I was at the University of Utah from 1984 to 1989 and there was still a lot of division where modern didn’t want anything to do with ballet and vice versa. Thankfully, that has changed a lot. I wish I had been more open-minded to seek modern out. But honestly, I was not comfortable with it.

WHAT DID YOU DO AFTER DANCING WITH BALLET WEST?
From there I went to Nevada Dance Theatre and I went in as a soloist, which gave me more opportunities. It was a ballet company with contemporary works. Robert North came and set works and he is from the modern world. He was an amazing person to work with. I love the guy. I was with the Nevada Dance Theatre for two years.

In the summer of 1990, the director of Nevada Dance Theatre went to Seattle to choreograph the opera “War and Peace.” That is when I met my husband because he played a part in the opera where he had to dance with one of the dancers...me. We stayed in touch and a year later we got married. So I got a job with Colorado Ballet and the David Taylor Dance Theatre because that is where my husband and I were living at the time. We stayed for a year and then moved to New York City in 1992. We were there for 12 years and I got in with New Jersey Ballet and Pennsylvania Ballet and commuted. Then, at that point, became a freelancer because my husband and I decided never to be away from each other for more than three weeks.
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Did you experience any specific hardships when trying to make your professional career as a dancer?

A big shift happened to me once I moved to NYC. The technique and speed in the east was different and they were mostly trained in Balanchine. I had to learn how to adapt and I worked incredibly hard to get the style. So my style now is a mesh of both. I had to change to be in the Pennsylvania Ballet, but I accepted the challenge and, because of that, it made me versatile. You could throw anything at me and I would give it a shot.

How did the opportunity to dance abroad come about? What did you gain from the experience?

My husband started to gain recognition in Europe and so we spent months at a time there. In order to keep my technique, I took company classes in Germany, Austria and France. I realize now how valuable it was to take class with the company because it influenced how I teach.

What finally brought you to Ann Arbor, Mi?

My husband accepted a job at the University of Michigan, which anchored us in Ann Arbor rather than NYC. We moved to Ann Arbor to have our family be together more and plus, a wonderful offer from the University of Michigan was hard to pass up.

What is it like to teach ballet in a modern-based program?

It is my job to make ballet be structurally healthy for a modern dancer. A student once said that you have to know the rules in order to break them, which is so true. As a teacher, I like to think outside of the box. My training was very formal, and I think the amount of paths there are to modern dance is very fresh and fascinating. I love how open and diverse it is.

What are some of your hobbies outside of dance?

If I hadn’t been a dancer then I would have been an interior designer/landscape architect. I love fabrics and colors. I am also an excellent sewer and thought about doing my own leotard company but couldn’t commit to it time-wise. I am also passionate about flowers and gardening. My family and I also love to do things likes kayaking and hiking; the outdoors is where I get answers to life’s questions.

Stay tuned for our Nov/Dec newsletter to learn more about the faculty here at the Department of Dance!

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.