

ACS Mellon Foundation Faculty Renewal Grants Final Report

Name of Person Submitting Report: Jenefer Davies

E-mail/Phone: daviesj@wlu.edu/ 540.397.1236

Institution: Washington and Lee University

Name of project/event: Aerial Ballet

Date(s) of Project: April 20th-May30th

Amount Awarded: \$7700

1. Original Goals and Objectives

A.) Growth of Student Interest in Dance/Outing Club: This type of dance is imbued with athleticism not as apparent in typical dance performances. Past experience has proven that its obvious athleticism inspires men to join the dance group and, after experiencing their own innate strength, encourages women to explore activities that they previously thought too masculine. Because of its' stylistic accessibility this performance has mass appeal, will encourage students to seek out ways to be involved and create a greater appreciation of dance as an art form.

B.) Growing/Educating Student Audiences: A performance experience such as this challenges audiences' preconceived notions of dance. It challenges them to think in new ways and broaden their definitions of dance and creative ways that dance can coordinate with other physical endeavors. These free performances will expose new audiences to dance, climbing and the state of collaboration at W&L and influence and inspire them.

C.) Providing Student Choreographers/Dancers with New Challenges: This style of movement, with its illusion of freedom from the forces of nature, presents the choreographer with seemingly endless possibilities for unique, creative movement. It provides the student choreographer/dancer with intriguing new challenges and educational opportunities experientially exploring kinesthetic manipulation and physics. It will challenge students to investigate concepts in time, effort, shape and locomotion and analyze specific alignment, spinal articulation and moving from 'the center'. It may encourage students who do not consider themselves choreographers to make work and those who do not consider themselves dancers, to perform.

D.) Exploration of New Concepts: Creating this work will continue the professional work of the Visiting Assistant Professor of Dance. It will allow her to use her past research and translate her theories into an experiential classroom. It will give her the resources to expound upon a new vocabulary of movement which can be used in future classes, workshops, demonstrations, lectures both for the students and within the dance and educational community. Given that this form of dance is so new, her written account of her experiences can be published and referred to within the growing genre. The funding necessary to carry out this exploration is not available through the University.

2. The goals/objectives did not change during the course of the project.

3. In what ways were the goals/objectives met? Please give examples.

A.) This performance/class opportunity was met with much enthusiasm on campus. As word spread about the nature of the class, athletes who had never danced before were drawn to it because of its extreme nature, dancers were drawn to the new style of movement, the ratio of men in the dance class (compared to regular dance classes) jumped from 3% to 25% and students who enjoy climbing sought it out. I did lose two students due to the dizzying, swinging sensations inherent in aerial that caused them motion sickness and another one who felt she didn't have the necessary stamina. There was a wonderful diversity in the class in age, race, sex and by major. There were Art History majors dancing alongside Bio-Chemistry majors and French majors with Poverty Studies majors. This was unexpected and contributed greatly to the creativity and collaborative opportunities within the class.

B.) The student audience was much larger than I thought possible. I had hoped for this performance to inspire 100 students to come out and see the show. However, we had upwards of 400 students and community members who came to W&L to see the performance on each day. Based on their response forms, it appears that they were delighted by the show, inspired by what dance has become and would love to see another show of this kind. Many, surprisingly, expressed a desire to take the class and many adults over 50 asked for special classes for them. Everyone stated that they would like to feel the sort of freedom that aerial allows and that they were awed by the beauty of the art form. Already students are asking for master classes and more performances of aerial on campus.

C.) Not only did the typical dance students embrace the aerial technique, I was surprised and delighted that the athletes and non-dancers took an active role. These students sought me out and requested to be allowed to make their own dances based on their experiential research. I was hesitant at first to allow any student who hasn't taken a dance composition class to create a dance, but knew that allowing this sort of freedom would encourage their experimentation and individual investigations. This proved to be very fruitful. They spent countless hours outside of class working and exploring. Not only were their dances imaginative and unique but they used their specific viewpoints and experiences to draw on material for the dances. For example, Isaiah Goodman, captain of W&L's basketball team, made a solo dance with a basketball and took all the vocabulary from a game (dribbling, shooting, figure 8's between his legs) and incorporated it into an exciting, gravity defying look at the sport on the side of a building. He incorporated thematic material so it wasn't just a recital of moves, but had a viewpoint and made a statement.

D.) Countless hours of video footage, interviews and technical evidence were compiled during this course that will be used to create a presentation at the annual National Dance Association conference. It has sparked a conversation/relationship between myself and Nancy Smith, author of the first book written about aerial dance, which will open the opportunity for our research to be part of the ongoing national dialogue/continuum that is currently being created as aerial dance takes shape and develops its own technique. It has

provided for me the opportunity to participate in the nation's only Aerial Dance festival and meet aerial artists from around the world. It is wonderful for W&L students to be part of and contribute to this conversation.

4. Describe the evaluation/assessment process used. Summarize the results of this process? Include any instruments used to evaluate/assess your project.

The students were each interviewed on video at length by another student (without my presence) and asked evaluative questions concerning the methodology of the class, the expected outcomes and their views on the results. They were asked to give personal opinions on time spent in the classroom talking about the required reading assignments, papers and ideology as well as time spent in rehearsal and completing daily workout preparation sessions. Audience members filled out surveys that asked their age, dance experience, opinions on the show, interest level and feelings on the future of aerial dance. Faculty members involved in the show met to discuss and review outcomes of the show and the media covered the show through newspaper, radio and television stories. Although we did not sell tickets, wanting the show to be available to everyone, we did do a head count and estimate approximately 400 people on May 29 and 400 people on May 30.

5. If you were to redesign your project, what would you do differently and why? (What are the "lessons learned?")

The design of the class would not be different. Its design was very successful. The technical end of the performance would require some overhaul. When I applied for this grant, I assumed that the head of the Outing Club, my partner James Dick, could rig the performance and teach students to run it. Although part of his job is taking students mountain climbing, I didn't realize that the University looks upon this rigging differently than that of the aerial show and for legal reasons would not permit it. There were a lot of liability issues and the W&L lawyers decided that the only way we could perform is to hire a professional rigging company. Once this was decided, there was further discussion concerning what company would set up and run the rigging and the legal implications for the University, the students and ACS. It took time to contact professional riggers, get estimates on cost, meet with them to see the space, design the rigging and deal with issues of power. The University spent a lot of time working on these issues and really enabled the performance to progress to the next step. We relied heavily upon them to negotiate the contract and work out smaller liability issues within it. When it was all finalized, the cost estimate was much higher than anticipated. W&L was extremely supportive yet again and helped us to cover the extra costs. If we were to do this performance again, I could better plan for the technical needs of the show and budget accordingly.

6. How did your project impact other faculty on your campus? If done jointly with one or more institutions, how did it impact faculty on the other campus(es)?

Following the performance, I received multiple emails from faculty on campus. Various responses include: “your class did exactly what spring term at a liberal arts institution should do”, “where do I sign up?”, “it’s not often that you get to be part of a new art form-to witness it being developed before your eyes.”, “your performance has helped me to know my daughter [who loves aerial dance] better.”, “it was incredible.”, “thank you for bringing aerial dance to W&L.” I personally spoke with many professors following the performance who expressed a desire to see more cutting edge explorations of this type on campus. Many suggested that I make this performance an annual thing since the show has so much broad appeal and brings recognition to the students and the University. I am unsure of how it might have impacted faculty on other campuses, although I think I can guess with some accuracy that they would be intrigued. According to my research, an aerial show with student performers has never been attempted at any University in this country. I think that the dance faculty at other Universities would be very interested to learn of our experiences. If they have not yet heard of our show, they will when I deliver my paper at the National Dance Association conference next year.

7. How did the project impact the institution (s) as a whole?

Washington and Lee University received a great amount of press due to this performance. News stories were carried in the Richmond Times, Roanoke Times, Rockbridge Weekly, Clear Channel Radio stations, television stations in Roanoke and Lynchburg did large stories and the Associated Press sent the story to newspapers as far as West Virginia, Virginia Beach, Covington, Danville, Norfolk and Eden, NC and to MSNBC and USA Today. Photos of the performance also went over the wire and went to multiple newspapers across the country. W&L also took much time to cover the event. Info on W&L coverage can be found at <http://www.wlu.edu/x32954.xml> and <http://www.wlu.edu/x32756.xml>. Beautiful photo coverage can be found at: <http://www.wlu.edu/prebuilt/in%5Ffocus/dance%5Fperform/> A photo spread with voiceover description can be found at: <http://www.wlu.edu/prebuilt/in%5Ffocus/aerial%5Fdance/> I recently discovered the ESPN is picking up one of the stories from the Roanoke Times and doing further reporting on one of the student aerialists, Isaiah Goodman.

8. If students were involved, what was the impact on them?

The students felt that they had a once-in-a-lifetime experience and valued everything they learned throughout the process. In their video responses they said that they felt honored to be part of something that has national implications and a place in history, that they felt a personal achievement in completing the requirements with strength and grace, they were proud to put the experience on their resume and excited to relate their experiences to potential employers. Many said they felt humbled to be part of the creation of a new dance form and hoped that their experiential work could benefit the overall growth of aerial as a form. They were excited to be part of dance history and respected their place in

the continuum. The students who had never dance before expressed amazement at how it felt to be performing before an audience and being applauded and thanked on the street by audience members. All of the students that weren't graduating said that they plan to continue dance by joining the W&L dance company next year. The students said that they felt a wonderful release at being able to tap into their creativity and create something new. As the majority of the students were majoring in strictly academic fields, they commented that dance was a wonderful outlet for stress, allowed them to focus better and gave them a sense of accomplishment.

9. How have you shared the results with ACS colleagues and beyond ACS? What are your plans for dissemination?

I have extensive video and written records of the project. These are a record of the daily class meetings as well as techniques used in preparation and performance/rehearsal footage. All of the students responded to the process differently, both physically and intellectually. I plan to analyze and draw conclusions within our particular situation. I will be attending the National Aerial Dance Festival this summer and will interview Nancy Smith, author of the first book on aerial dance. I will compare/contrast her experiences in the professional world of aerial dance and her specific training/performing aesthetic with my experiential explorations and discoveries from this performance. I will discover how our experiences differ and if there were similar challenges faced or rehearsal experiences. I will collate all of this information into the paper to be presented at the National Dance Association Conference. Dance programs at ACS Colleges will be present at this conference as it is one of the few research based dance symposiums in the country.

10. What are the next steps (follow-up) in your project? Evaluations, surveys etc are to be included as a part of this report.

I will attend the National Aerial Dance Festival this summer in Boulder, CO. I will meet and interview the author of the first book on aerial dance as well as meet professional aerial artists from around the world. I will take aerial dance classes, attend lectures and performances and take part in post performance discussions. This professional exposure to aerial dance as well as the personal physical experience of the festival will inform my writing and contribute to the paper that I will present. After I return from this experience, I will begin writing my research paper, putting video together and preparing to discuss the first-ever student aerial dance concert in the country.

11. Financial statement,

12. Please include a summary of your work that may be included on the ACS Faculty Renewal website.

The Dance Program and the Outing Club of Washington and Lee University in Lexington, VA jointly collaborated on 'Aerial Dance', a cutting edge branch of modern dance that is currently being defined. Due to the newness of this art form, there is as yet no established technique for preparation or performance. This project details the experiential research of one class of students as they explored new shifts in gravity, three dimensional space and changes in torque and force as well as creative options in composition. The culminating student performance combined the skill, balance and coordination of climbing and rappelling and the grace and fluidity of dance. The experiential educational goals and resulting performance stimulated students, faculty and the community, highlighted the brand new Dance Program on campus and the innovative nature of W&L. This project is a successful example of inter-campus collaboration, creative ways of combining diverse disciplines, the power of experiential learning and exciting, new ways to stimulate the interest of students.

*A DVD of the performance will be mailed to your Atlanta address.

AERIAL DANCE

#1-Choreographer: Jenny Davies

Brand New Key by Rasputina

Dancers: Ellie Hanson, Dana Fredericks, Mary Beth Edwards

#2-Choreographer: Sophie Xiong

Blue by Joni Mitchell.

Dancers: A'rese Emokpae, Galina Yudovich, Tori Dickerson

#3-Choreographer: Isaiah Goodman

Second Coming by Juelz Santanta, *Freestyle* by Africa Bambataa

Dancer: Isaiah Goodman

#4-Choreographer: Kenny Hopkins

So High by John Legend

Dancers: Emily Wallace, Kenny Hopkins, Ellie Hanson

#5-Choreographer: Dana Fredericks/David Doobin

Battlefield by Cirque Du Soleil

Dancers: David Doobin and Dana Fredericks

#6-Choreographer: Emily Wallace

Spotlight (Into Twilight) by Mute Math

Dancers: Margaret Ward, Mary Beth Edwards, Sophie Xiong

#7-Choreographers: Dancers

Brandinburg by Black Violin, *Kung Fu Fighting* by Cark Douglas

Dancers: Dana Fredericks, Ellie Hanson, Sophie Xiong, David Doobin, Emily Wallace, Tori Dickerson, Mary Beth Edwards

Special Thanks: The Associated Colleges of the South Mellon Foundation, Hank Dobin, James Dick, Owen Collins, Phil Brulotte, Outing Club, Stu Cox, LeAnne Shank, Justin Smith, Kevin Remington, Cathy McElhannon, Shawn Paul Evans, Sarah Tschiggfrie, Marc Connor, The Poison Bottom Boys; Tim McElhannon, Bo Hughes and Russ Watkins, Ashna Sharan, Zaq Lawal, John Lindburg, Joseph Martinez, Cathy McElhannon, Jessica Miller, Kevin Remington, Sarah Tschiggfrie, Susan Wager and ZFX.

Please turn page over, fill out survey and return.

Aerial Survey for the Mellon Foundation

What is your age range and sex?

(0-18) (19-30) (31-50) (51-70) (over 70)

male female

How often do you attend dance performances?

frequently seldom never

Why did you attend today?

What did you like most about this performance?

What surprised you about this performance?

Have you ever taken a dance class?

Have you ever danced in a performance?

If given the chance, would you participate in an aerial performance? Why?

If given the chance, would you attend an aerial performance again? Why?

If given the chance, would you like to participate in an aerial class? Why?