

Published April 28th, 2010

A LEAP of Faith

By Lou Fancher



Vanessa Zahorian in Matinez' Delibes Suite Photo
Erik Tomasson

professional dancers are perfectionists. "We don't give up until we get it right," says Baird. Accustomed to performing exquisite maneuvers on a daily basis, the prospect of becoming a beginner, a frosh, fills professional dancers with fear. "We can take that fear off their plate," says Baird. "I found confidence in the present," Low explains, about her experience as a student. "Being enrolled in the program allowed me to be calm."

This isn't to say that LEAP is an adagio; a slow, controlled dance of serenity. Academic rigor is maintained by helping dancers to identify their special interests, recruiting the best instructors, and requesting input from department chairs at SMC for petitions for study. "Each student's course of study is individualized," Baird says. "It's not a cookie-cutter degree."

Vanessa Zahorian, a principal dancer with the San Francisco Ballet, learned about the program from Muriel Maffre a fellow dancer. "At first, I was interested, but I thought, 'Yeah, but I could never do that,'" she remembers. A few years later, she changed her mind, deciding to transfer some of her considerable energy to school. Zahorian praises the program's design, which allows students to convert years of dance experience into course credits. She points to the instructors when identifying what makes the program special. "Here, I never felt like I was a bad student-which I did when I was younger. LEAP makes you appreciate even subjects you didn't like in the beginning." Set to graduate in May, Zahorian is bursting with optimism. "If I didn't do this, I would have no idea about where to head next," she says.

Like a dancer, LEAP's greatest strength lies in its flexibility, a fact demonstrated by the emailed responses from Keelan Whitmore. A member of LINES Ballet and on tour in France, Whitmore is enjoying firsthand the program's accommodating design. "[SMC faculty and staff] have met every obstacle with compassion and a smile, which helps us focus on our studies," he writes. He goes on to add that "more than learning anything, I feel like my professors have helped me to remember a lot of the knowledge that is within me. So many institutions try to pour information into students' heads without any real understanding." The SMC approach to teaching parallels dancer training, where daily dance classes allow dancers to practice innate and developing skills. It's practical, rigorous, and refined in its focus.

Maybe LEAP's impact would not be so spectacular in another place and time. St. Mary's College, combined with Baird, teamed with Low, and finally, matched with the number of professional dancers working in the Bay area, creates a "place" like no other.

Supportive dance company directors, an evolving field that is miles away from the "keep your mouth closed and your toes pointed"

A leap is an ordinary thing. It's a jump from one foot to the other, sometimes over a puddle, or the rubbery toy a child has left on the stair, and hardly cause for celebration. But LEAP, the innovative, transformational program for professional dance artists at St. Mary's College (SMC) is something altogether different. This LEAP is a grande jet• a soaring journey, performed with great expectations and completed with enough grace and ballon-a dance term meaning effortless bounce-to spring again.

LEAP, a Liberal Education for Arts Professionals, allows current and former professional dancers to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree from SMC. The program runs in only three locations: San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York/New Jersey. Mark Baird directs the program with the impeccable assistance of Megan Low, program coordinator. Both have had impressive dance careers: Baird, with a number of national and international companies and Low, with the San Francisco Ballet. Both are graduates of LEAP. Baird has years of experience working in corporate human resource and executive search departments and Low, after receiving her masters degree and teaching credentials from Cal Berkeley, taught in the Bay area school district. "I was successful," Baird says, explaining his return to the dance field, "but I missed working with dancers." Low too, was drawn back, like a moth to light. "Both my veering off into something new and my coming back to working with dancers relates to that dancer discipline."

As LEAP alumni, Baird and Low have an insider's appreciation for the program. "Dancers come with amazing skill sets," says Low, "but what they need is that degree to get their foot in the door." Busy schedules, touring, and a get-it-now-or-forget-it career, can all prevent dancers from enrolling in college after high school. And contrary to their reputation as flighty, narcissistic animals,

mentality of the past makes this the perfect time for the program. "Dancers are more empowered, more motivated," Baird says.

To celebrate LEAP's 10th anniversary, the college is planning an "invitation only" reception and performance. Held in May at the LeFevre Theatre on the SMC campus, performers will include dancers from San Francisco Ballet, Smuin Ballet, Broadway musical productions, LINES Contemporary Ballet, Diablo Ballet, Los Angeles Ballet, Merce Cunningham Dance Company, New York City Ballet, and tap dancer Joe Orrach. LEAP alumni and current students, program faculty and staff, donors and the press will attend and applaud the program's success.

And then, they'll all get back to learning. Dancers have always been determined, disciplined, excellent at time management and vigorous in the exploration of their craft. LEAP sets that considerable energy free into the working world, not just the world of theater. Zahorian, with characteristic optimism speaks for all, saying, "It's amazing-the opportunity landed in my lap; it has landed in so many dancer's laps-it's a wonderful thing!"

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