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Interview with Jan Erkert, 1998

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J a n E r k e r t

OK. It is June first, 1998 and this is the interview with Jan Erkert, professor at the Dance Department here at Columbia College and Artistic Director of the Jan Erkert and Dancers Company.

If you could tell us what, when you came to Columbia and what the circumstances surrounding your arrival here were.

I believe I first came to Columbia in 1974. I had graduated from the University of Utah with a degree in Dance and had danced professionally with a company in Detroit for a year. And it was a ballet company and I was really unsatisfied with dancing with a ballet company because I really wanted to dance contemporary work. So I came through Chicago, on a whim, because I knew some dancers here. And Shirley happened to have auditions. And I came in and auditioned and Shirley said she'd take me right there. So I was kind of surprised by that, and I still toured the rest the country because I had plans to go to New York and Boston. And when I got done with everything and weighed everything, I thought this was the best place for me. Both to dance with Shirley, and she had offered me to teach part-time at the College at that time. So I started as a dancer and a part-time teacher in the Dance Department. And I don't remember exactly when but I did become full-time somewhere in there, in that first five years. I stayed here five years dancing with Shirley, teaching. And I think maybe my second or third year I did become full-time at a certain point. I can't remember exactly when.

What was it about Shirley that made—you know, when you reassessed her, looked back on all your experiences and your going across the country—that made you want to come back here?

I think one, I've always been, I've always loved teaching. And so here was a combination where I could both teach and perform and be with a company. And I think that combination was right for me because I loved teaching and I didn't want to go to a place where I'd just dance. I felt like I wanted, I've always just felt strongly about teaching. And so that opportunity of doing both was really good. And I was really intrigued with the ideas that Shirley was working with and the concept she was working with. And I felt that I would learn; I had come from a very balletic background and I felt like Shirley was very opposite of a ballet background. She had a much different, just a different way into movement material that I felt like I needed and wanted at that time. So I felt like the work with her was really important as well.

What were, for the layperson, if you could put into words some of the differences of, you know, between your experience and what she was trying to do here that appealed to you?

She was working with dance in a way that was really appealing to me because I felt like she was—it was actually similar, in some ways, to my Utah experience, where I had had college. I felt like choreographically and in teaching, which is what I've always admired about her, she would work with a concept or

idea and the work, the movement would all come out of that concept or idea. And that traveled into class as well. So it was, if you were, you weren't just teaching a style, so to speak, like ballet, but you were teaching a concept; something that was about space or something about line or whatever. And so watching her kind of deal with things in the choreographic process as well as in the classroom was really interesting to me. And I think where I eventually wanted to go, as I was learning in that way, just as opposed to ballet, it's like you have your set repertoire of your classical forms in ballet and then you do dances, you know, based on those forms. But this was more like taking a thread and interweaving everything together in the modern work. So it was really fascinating to me to work with her at that time.

OK, and then, so that first five years, you left in '79? What were the circumstances around that, or what, maybe we could come



back to what you did in between, but then what brought you back to Columbia?

Yeah, the circumstances of leaving is I felt like I really needed, I had worked with Shirley for five years, and I really needed to strike off on my own. I felt like I needed to create an independence from Shirley and an independence from Columbia in a way. I needed to establish my own identity. Sometimes when you're with people that are really strong it's like you need the separation in order to form who you are and where you want to go. So that's kind of what drove me to leave and I formed my own company at that time and then started doing work and did a lot of freelance activity. And then I came back here in '90—is that what you wanted to ask next?

Yeah, right.

And it was actually really nice because I felt like I had spent, how long was that? I had spent ten to fifteen years on my own and that was really good. I felt like I had developed a core philosophy of my own and a way of speaking that was from my heart. And so coming back felt right at that time. At the time I had been doing a lot of freelance work. So I had been doing—and I taught at the University of Chicago in Hyde Park and taught there for ten years almost as a part-time teacher. And I had done a lot of guest artist work across the United States, just coming in as three, four weeks as a guest artist in major university programs. Which was really fascinating because it gave me a look at a lot of programs throughout the country and how different training was happening and all of that. So I had this kind of freelance lifestyle. And the other thing that was happening is my

home here was Moming, which was another art center, dance center, that was based here. And it was closing at about 1989 and '90 it closed down. So I was really like going like, "Oh God, you know, my home." Even though I was a freelancer it's like my home base was leaving. That's where I taught professionals here in the city and it was like where I gave concerts. And it was closing down because of lack of money and support and all kinds of things. So I was really like, "What am I gonna do?" And just at that moment, Richard called and offered me a job here. I was like, "OK." You know, like to go back. And I felt confident enough to come back at that point because I felt like I had to reestablish a sense of my own identity, and coming back felt good at that point, because it was a place to focus all this kind of freelance; I had been all over the place. It was a kind of focus again. So it felt really good to come back to Columbia at that point.

And how had your own philosophy or identity evolved? I mean, what did you come back with that, you know, you brought to Columbia that would have been different? I know that's a very big question, but could you give us a sense of who the person was that left and who was the person that came back?

You know, part of it, I think, is just confidence. There was more confidence in me in terms of the person that left and the person that came back. I think life experience and teaching in a lot of different situations during that time, I felt like I had a much broader perspective. Because as a freelancer I taught

anything and everything. I was an Artist in Residence for Bensenville, not for Bensenville, for the Illinois Arts Council, and I was stationed in Bensenville. And part of that teaching was I had to, I was the community's teacher, you know, in dance. And so I went to preschools, I went to senior citizen homes, I went to, you name it, I was there. I'd go to the grocery store and people would be waving, "Hi Jan." You know, it's like, hi, I know this whole town. And that experience of just having to deal with, you know, that kind of situation and work in a community that was very different than just teaching in a dance department. And so I think it gave me life experience in terms of having a broader perspective of the field. And today when I teach the teaching classes, I know what it's like to go into an elementary school where it's totally out of control. You know, I know those things, I've done that. And I don't think I would have had I just stayed here, you know? So I think that time was really important in that way.

I think in terms of a choreographer too, I really began to establish my voice that was, it feels like unique and of my own. And in a way, it's [a lie], my voice, I feel like the way I began to speak, that felt most truly my own, began in probably about '88. It took me a good eight to ten years. So it wasn't till I came back here that I feel fruition has really come about of my work per se. And the work I'm doing, really, has to do with an individual voice, like how the voice speaks. In both not only in me but within the dancers I work with. I work out of their voice and use a lot of techniques to pull out who they are to get an authentic kind of voice on stage.

And I do a lot of work with social issues and just issues of life. And that comes from Shirley, that kind of thing. But I've taken it a very different way than she takes it. Most of my dances are based on like ecology and a lot of women's issues and those kinds of things, which also had to do with my life experience of working, you know. I've worked with the Culver Center for Survivors of Torture. I've been a volunteer for five years with them and working with people that have a story to tell, you know, want to voice something that's very important. And I have a way of bringing that out in movement and being able to take that to the stage. So I feel like that time really was important for me to establish a way of choreographing, a way of bringing things to stage that is my own.

And also, I think in teaching too, I think in teaching, I taught professionals, like at Moming, and so it wasn't where it's a captive audience, you know, of dance students in a college, it was professionals that needed training. And so that work there was really important too. It's like, what do professionals need? Because in college you're dealing with training people to become professionals. I was working with professionals on a really ongoing basis and kind of watching, what do they understand and don't understand. And so, you know, in a way, working a higher level than where I was here was really important. So that gave me, I think, a broader perspective as well of where should I be working in a college level now is different than what I taught, I think, many years ago. You know, I was young and out of college. At the same time, I remember, the funny thing is that, I'll say this a lot, it's like when I first got out of college and Shirley

had me teach in her Composition I for, you know, young dancers learning how to compose. It's like, "No problem, know how to teach it, you know, got my notes out, you know, this is how you teach Comp I." And now I go into Comp I it's like, "What the hell do I teach?" You know, it's like I feel like in some ways I know too much now, it becomes more confusing now. You know, then I didn't have as much life experience and it's like I just took my notes from college and, this is how you teach Comp I, but now it's more confusing in a way because there's so much, and it's hard to break down and there's all ways of different work.

And you miss that ignorance.

Yeah, yeah. Ignorance is bliss, you know? That kind of young, "I know what I'm doing." And also kind of like this kind of young confidence that's like, "I know what I'm doing." It's like now, "Do I really?" So, you know, it's like there's a—wisdom gives you also problems. You know, it's like that kind of, the vast knowledge gives you more problems to deal with in some ways; it's not as straightforward.

What do you think, and please address, you know, your personal views on what your mission is as a teacher and maybe the Dance Department's and how that fits, and then, if you can, comment on the College's and what the relationship is; the department to the College, you know, and...

I think, I feel they're very synched and I feel very synched into that same message. And part of it is, I think the line that always strikes me is what we really are doing is, I think Shirley's kind of used it: the

phrase of finding authorship, finding a voice, you know, of each student. It's like, do we help them find their voice? And I think that's clear in the college and I think that's very clear in the department. And having been in a lot of departments I really see how that's clearly defined, it's very clearly done here. And it makes us different than other colleges because—than other departments, I should say—because of that. There's a lot of dance departments where techniques is the base and there's not much else going on. And so the technique is done so that the students all lift their leg high and turn really well and all of those things; they have all the skills down. But there's not much creative force underneath that. They don't understand who they are when they get out. And even, I've had a lot of dancers from other programs come into my company and I'm like, "You need to go back and, you know, figure out who you are," because it ultimately gets in the way when they don't have that. I've actually been a big proponent of trying to create more technique in the program so that people have a better base. Because when I came here it was like, there was, we didn't even require that they were in class every day. And it's been a big struggle through credits and talking downtown and all kinds of things to create this, they've gotta be in class every day. And this is the first year we've done that. So we're trying to increase the technical skills but still give that profound kind of creative underpinning to who they are. And I think that's really important to the growth of each student, you know. And I feel like that's very individual. When I look at the students, one of the things I'm proud of is that they do Senior Concerts and each Senior Concert

has a very, very, very, different feel to it, which is good. And there's a core to what they understand and they do, but their voices stand clear and strong. So I can really feel like that's the strength of our...

You don't do Swan Lake every year?

No *Swan Lakes*. But if somebody wanted to do it... But, no, I mean, we're very much based in the contemporary world and that's what we tell students, and we start there. And then, but they go from there, you know, to finding out who they are.

And that is seen as reflected too in the variety of what gets turned out.

Yes, right.

You're not turning out a standard.

A similar thing. But there's many, you know, I do feel like each finds their voice. And that's what we encourage them to do, is find who they are as a unique person and go from there rather than mold them into a model of what the field wants. I feel like we allow them to find out who they are within that field. And I think that's really important.

Have the students changed?

Would you be able to characterize them differently from the mid to late '70s and then in the '90s?

You know, I'm so different that it's really hard to tell.

You've changed?

Yeah, I feel like I've changed, so it's really a hard assessment. And I also feel like, you know, I often hear all of us as faculty going, "Oh, I'm not teaching nearly as much. The students are not nearly as well

prepared today." And somebody goes, "Yes, I see myself giving less in class sometimes, you know. It's like I'm not getting through as much material." But I also think that we're different too, you know? And I question that sometimes because I feel like we do change ourselves. And maybe what we thought was rigorous before really isn't as much. You know, I just have a hard time weighing it sometimes. I do feel that students are less prepared to come into college than I think they were.

And you're not speaking as dancers just as seventeen, eighteens or...

As persons, yes, yes. Their ability to read, write, and articulate thought is, I think, a lot less than—I do believe that's true. But the thing is, I have this little voice in my head, hearing my teachers when I went to school going, "Oh, students are so much less prepared than we think they are." You know, are we just getting less and less and less and less prepared or is that just something that an adult tends to think? When I look at the demands here in this department they're much more rigorous, and I went to a rigorous school in terms of the culminating event, so to speak, that we require students to do thirty minutes of original work and produce it on stage, produce some concert. When I graduated from college there was only, I had to do maybe one work and it didn't even need full production, it just was for Comp class, you know? In our teaching series they have to teach a dance class here. Which means they really have to have it together, you know, to get in front of thirty kids and teach a whole hour and a half class; and I never had to do anything like that. So, you know, in some ways I'm wondering...

By the end of the...

Yeah, and that's compared to my training at Utah to here and so, you know. And they're confronted with a lot more information, I think, in this age too. The information boom of technology has created, you know, just a lot more things to learn at this point. So I don't know; I weigh that. I do feel that the colleges, or the high schools, are not preparing students in a way that I think that they should be. I mean, I really think they should read and write. And even in open admissions, if they graduated from high school I feel that they should read and write. And so I do feel like that. And it's interesting because I think the Chicago schools, just now, are, you know, holding kids back and they didn't used to. So I think that's somewhat a wave that's been happening, as we've been getting this wave of kids that have had this kind of real, "Well, you should go forward because you feel bad," you know. So I think that with increased rigor in the high schools that might help, you know, education.

How would you compare to—another challenge to Columbia, you know, size-wise it was obviously a much smaller place. Smaller school then, yeah.

What challenges has that meant to you and your department?

Yeah, it's, we're really feeling that right now. It's creating great challenges as far as right now, we've increased a hundred percent in the last five years and so we have huge challenges of space, is the number one, of where we're putting everybody. Plus size is another issue that's a very hard one. And I think that, you know, knowing the Columbia of the '70s as opposed to

the Columbia of the '90s, it's, the philosophy was built on this one-on-one real intimate relationship with students. And I love that, that's part of the reason I'm here. And part of the fear of it growing larger is not having that kind of time, space, or abilities to work with students on that level. A lot of my classes, like my technique classes which I used to have maybe ten students in, which meant I could spend, you know, in an hour and a half, you know, I could spend quite a bit of time with each one, and now they're like twenty-five to thirty students. And so that kind of individual attention is really problematic to me of, of losing that. And yet I know, in order to be financially solvent, we have to, you know, have that kind of size class. We're also dealing with lots of issues like our Senior Concerts or our senior teaching things. You know, it required that each student go out and do something in the community. Well, one teacher could see three students and that was fine, because that was a whole day with each student, you know; by the time you go out there, watch the class, evaluate, talk to the teachers. But how do we, as full-time faculty, handle ten or fifteen or twenty now? You know, it's a challenge, and should we change the curriculum because of that? You know, do we lessen the curriculum because we don't have the time? So those are all huge issues that we're dealing with right now just because of the size and the growth. And I don't know, you know, I don't know where we'll come on the other side. And it scares me because I do feel like what I love here and that idea of individual authorship and that kind of sense of voice is really, you have to have individual care of each student then, you know. So how do we hold that mission up to the

amount of stuff that's growing in size that we're dealing with? I don't know.

But at the same time you feel that, right now, that's been maintained, but you're worried about just...

Future, yeah, yeah. I feel like we're, you know, it's like, it's interesting because I feel like even the students that are new coming here don't know anything any better. You know, some of them are ones that are graduating, and the other day we went, "Oh yeah, remember when there was just eight in a technique class?" And I was like, "Yeah." And they said, "Yeah, it's not nearly as nice." There's a trade-off in dance because there's more energy when you have people but there's less attention, there really is. So the new ones don't know any different, you know, and they're kind of accepting of it. So I feel like right now we're trying to hold that same standard while we're dealing with the new numbers. But I think future-wise we're all looking at whether, you know, curriculum in our classes is going to be OK. We just talked about Improv II. We had a limit of twenty but we have this small room upstairs, which we should have put a less limit. And now there are, I think, eighteen or something enrolled in that. And that's like, I've never dealt with more than ten in that class. It's like, "How am I gonna deal with eighteen people in that class?" And then in the small—you know, I don't know. Am I gonna have to change what they do? Those are issues.

The faculty has to, and what about faculty numbers to students?

Right. At the Dance Department right now we're really feeling like

because of the growth that we've had that we've got to increase faculty. And so we're hoping that that will happen, we don't know, but, you know? That's really a need for us right now, is that we're, we're getting burdened with more and more administrative work and all kinds of things and something's gonna give here. And so I think increase faculty is a really important thing too.

Another topic that comes up is the issue of location. And I just thought you might want to you know, address that, your feelings of—do you feel isolated or would you like to be downtown?

I have mixed feelings personally, you know, I think there's a better place for the department. But personally, I kind of like being up here, it feels like, I like the independence of it and we kind of have our own way of doing things and there's something that's really nice about being here. And the space we have is, you know, that main space; you just... What we're fearful of is if we move downtown we can't get that kind of space. And it really creates a difference in our program when we have that large space that people move in instead of the tiny little studio. So, you know, we love that space and it's, that one's hard to give up. Personally, I don't know if I'd want to go downtown everyday. But other than that, I do feel like it's, it is isolating in terms of other faculty. I've never met you, you know, I've never met a lot of people at Columbia. And I think people are probably isolated downtown as well in their own departments, but at least you go on the elevator together and things like that. So I feel like the isolation of faculty and the students is really not good. And the transportation time, both for me and our students, is horrendous. You know, it's like if

I have, yeah, if I have a meeting downtown it can take me all day. By the time I drive downtown, you know, do the meeting then drive back here it's a half an hour to forty-five minutes, you know, kind of thing. So that's an hour and a half, you know, like commitment to the transportation. And it's really hard for our kids because they're trying to, dance takes tremendous amount of hours, more than any other department I think, just hours in class. So by the time they're doing that and then have to deal with transportation time to get to their general studies, it's really hard on them. Plus the area's questionable and getting rougher all the time. We've had incidences and so it's, you know, that's another issue that we're dealing with right now is security and all of that. And that's one of the hardships here too is that we don't use this space at all at night, which, as we're growing we're tempted to use more night space, but the security issues are worth saying like, "I don't think we ought to have kids coming in and out of here at night." So that also puts us in a bind right now.

Is the College supportive in working with? It almost seems like they're two different entities. But at that campus if security was a problem in a building it would be the College's issue.

Yes.

It sounds like here, you know, it's something that you have to go and say...

Well, it is the College's issue, and they have security guards here and we're in touch with them. But, you know, because again we're out of sight, we're kind of out of mind. So if there are issues here in the neighborhood we've gotta go, "Yeah! We have this problem; we need to be addressing this." And things like

that. So, you know, it's again that isolation, that we're kind of out of sight and out of mind here. But I think we, you know, in something important like security issues we're, we're calling. We've got to deal with that. So, you know, there's lots of issues of us moving down. I mean, ideally we would be down with the rest of the campus. But I think for us the issue is having as good if not better spaces somewhere, and facilities. We need more space right now because we are growing out of this building at this point. But that kind of space downtown is hard to come by.

Maybe you could just talk a moment to that. That we're sitting in an office that is eight by ten at parts, there's two desks.

That's pushing it, yeah. And right now, just because we don't have an academic administrator, we're missing people, there's nobody sitting there, but there will be. Our office space is horrendous. We're just on top of each other and it's like, like Deb and I, who's the other full-time, used to share this office. And we would have, literally, two parents; four parents, two students in here both trying to counsel and having conversations. And I think this is not good for recruitment, you know? So we're, office space-wise, we're just in a mess right here. And not, it probably doesn't even look that bad right now because we have a bunch of administration positions that aren't filled. So, unless we fill them. So our space needs are tremendous right now.

I just want to return a little bit to that mission and the relationship to Columbia's mission or maybe your personal, you know,

what do you want to accomplish in the classroom? And I know you talked about people finding their voice but I guess with, you know, someone that enters and then leaves the program and how you think that, expand on that, how it fits into Columbia's mission as a College. Because, obviously, you know, I mean with dance I don't know, but with [literacy extra] is an issue although, you don't, you know, teach reading and writing...

Yeah, but I expect them to be articulate about their field. I expect them to be able to write about their field, I expect them to be able to, I mean, I feel real strongly about that, they need to, in dance or any art form they need to be articulate, intelligent people when they come out of here. And I don't care if they can do fourteen turns and jump high. It's a liberal arts college and I'm very strong about them being able to read, write, and to be articulate about their field because our field is—in this field they're not going to get a job dancing like that. And if they start teaching or working in the community at all, they're going to have to be articulate about what they do to convince a school administrator that they want dance, or to talk to an audience after a show and tell them what the concepts in their work are about. So to apply for a grant they need to write really well. It's very competitive in a lot of ways, not just, you know, what you can do on the dance floor. And if they're going to choreograph it's the same intelligence. I often say like writing a paper is the same thing as choreographing a dance. It has to have an idea, it has to be developed, it has to have intelligent choices, you know, it's like the same thing as going out here and writing as in dancing and choreo-

graphing. So to me those are all one in the same. We're known as being much more rigorous here than the rest of the College in a way with their writing skills, their ability to really perceive material.

Yeah, that's interesting. I mean, I think that's a good point because that hasn't come up as specifically before but when they leave...

A lot of the students say that this department is harder on them than any of their general studies. That they have much more rigorous, you know, expectations here.

And do you find resistance to it or does that, that's laid out and...

I think it's pretty clear and I think the students appreciate it and like it, that it's there, you know? It's like, like we, I oversee the part-time faculty in terms of technique requirement. So I can really push it on them that, no, you don't let somebody come in late; they sit out for the class, they get a half an absence. And the ones that are really strict about it—kids come in the door and they know exactly what to do, you know—and the ones that don't, you know, can see the classes like, when they come in they're not there and that half of the class does come in late. So, you know, I'm really big on building that kind...

All right. So you see a much bigger picture for what they leave with.

Yes, definitely. I feel like I'm not just teaching dance skills. Part of my role is to teach craft of dance, which is very important. But part of the craft of dance cannot be done if they cannot perceive information, if they can't write, if they can't speak articulately. So that's all a

part of learning the craft of dance. I see them as very much one in the same and not separate at all.

And also, what else, if you could just expand more on what your students might be doing afterwards as opposed to, you know, join a...

A dance company.

...national tour or dance company.

Right. I think that either they dance professionally, a lot of them do that; a lot of them go into teaching. We have several students in the local area that teach at high schools or junior colleges or community programs or even studios in the suburbs. So a lot of them go into teaching in some shape or form. Others go into arts administration. They have one woman that's at Urban Gateways that is a, deals with putting artists in the schools and so she does administrative work; so are, you know, arts related things. I just did a workshop today with my anatomy class of careers that can be supportive of dance or that you eventually transition. Because dancers, you know, at thirty usually, or forty, make transitions into other careers. So I want them to be aware of that. So some of our dancers have gone into things like massage therapy or are becoming physical therapists or those kinds of things, you know, that deal with the anatomy/physiology aspect of that. So, you know, there's lots of different types of paths for our students and not just, you know, professional dancing. Some of them go onto Masters degrees in dance programs; you know, feeling like they need more training, which a lot of them do. And if they want to teach in a

university situation, as I'm doing, they usually do need a Masters degree. So those are different possible alternatives for them.

Two topics I'd like to get to before we end the interview: You know, what brought you to dance and then maybe events, productions, or other faculty that—in your experience at Columbia—have maybe influenced you or that you remember, you know, significant circumstances that were, or occurrences, that stick out in your mind.

But what brought—the first one was: What brought me to dance per se as a career for myself? I grew up with dance. I was one of those little babies who took dance and just never stopped. And I studied ballet at home, you know, from the time I was four till I was in college. And then in college I went to the University of Utah. And all along the way there were always like points in which, "Do I really want to do this?" And my parents were really good at like sitting me down, going like, "This is becoming expensive, this is a commitment we're making, you're making. Do you really want to continue?" And it would force me to always reevaluate whether this is what I wanted. And it seems like every time I did reevaluate, I came back to it with even a stronger passion. Then when I went to—I began studying modern dance which I really felt, for me that was my voice, it wasn't in ballet; it didn't feel right to me, it didn't feel like who I was. But when I got into contemporary dance I felt, "This is right and this is right." So that kind of held me. And then I danced for a while, was as a, you know, did the kind of traditional dancer. I was a professional dancer for a while. But then what really, I think I never, I think

choreography was always the most important to me. So, and that's why leaving Shirley's company was a very important change for me. Because I love to dance but performing has never been what is passionate to me. It's like teaching and choreography are what I'm passionate about because I really love the student/teacher interaction, and choreography is about putting ideas together, about, you know, taking all of these different elements of the lighting and the stage and the dancers and all of that. You know, putting it together, that kind of sense of weaving is what I really love. And teaching feels the same way to me. It's weaving with students in a different way but it's the same thing of really, really generating material and figuring out how that material integrates with who they are and where they are and how they're growing. So those two, teaching and, I think, choreography became my passions; hopefully more so than the dancing itself. Although I love to dance, I mean professionally performing. Some people, that's what they do, that's what they love. But I think I really understood I'm on another place.

And do you feel that Columbia provides, is the environment for you to bring this to the fore better than other places or...
Yeah, I feel that...

Do you like doing it with students that are open admissions and could be right able to come here with no dance experience before?
You know, I do feel like the open admissions policy, I have different issues with the College in the terms of I feel that they need to, if they're going to do open admissions, they need to do substantial remedial

work. Because I still believe that students have to read and write. You know, it's like they're not gonna pass through college without that. So that kind of work is really important, so that's my issue with open enrollment. But I love that, I mean, I've seen some real success stories here of kids coming here with very little background and succeeding. I've seen some, also lots of failure too with that. So, you know, there's issues there. But I do love the teaching here and that I feel like it's a volatile, lively place to teach. You get a lot of different cultural influences and a lot of different types. Like different colleges, when I've been a guest artist at U of I or some of your more traditional programs, it's the same prototype. It's, you know, the same like, they call them bunheads, kids that have, and it's actually me, you know...

Pink tights...

Pink tights and they've had, you know, fifteen years of ballet and that's what they know. And we get kids that have had street dancing and this that and the other thing. And they all come in and get mixed into this pot. And I think a lot of creativity comes out of that mix because they're rubbing against all kind of different influences that aren't the same as theirs, you know. So I think that's really important. And I love, to me, that's teaching in a really volatile, wonderful, exciting place. And I feel like I'm much more at home in this. Like I used to teach at University of Chicago and I was just like... their brains are so heavy there, you know? And I felt like I was the person there who was trying to get their brains into their bodies, you know, and like, "Your brain has a body." And they were exciting to me too, I have to say

they were exciting to me because they were so bright and they were so articulate about all kinds of things. So the challenge for me there was different, very different from here. But I really think I love the situation here. I would like to see us improve in terms of how we get to some real basics of reading/writing and those kinds of things right at the beginning. But I love that those kids are there, you know, they create challenge and an excitement, I think, to what we do.

I find that interesting, the juxtaposition of your background, and probably at Utah you had a lot of similar backgrounds. And then finding modern dance, for you, and, I don't know. Was that hard to welcome these students from all, you know, that was so different from your own experience, or at that stage had you found that refreshing then?

I think, coming right from Utah, the first time I was here, it was probably a little shocking and overwhelming, you know, in terms of dealing with it. I think the second time I came here I was much more prepared because, as I said, I've been out in Bensenville in a working class community and done all that, I've been in every school in Chicago with Urban Gateways, you know, so I worked in all kinds of communities. So I think I was better prepared the second time I came back, to have a much more broader sense of what the world was about, you know. So I think it, I'm just more prepared now to work with it.

If we could get to the second question, just a couple more minutes.

Yeah, a couple of minutes. I'm not sure I understood: The different

arts events that have happened here at Columbia?

Right. Or individuals that have influenced, you know, you talked about Shirley, but other people. Richard brought you back. Or were there like a special class or something that really sticks out in your mind that kind of symbolizes? I know Shirley talked about this one performance where someone off the street came in and interrupted it but they kept going and half the audience thought he was part of it or... Right, right.

...I mean, she used that as kind of, "Only here, only in this neighborhood," or wherever they were at at the time. You couldn't plan it.

No, there's a lot of that kind of stuff happening. You know, sometimes our Student Performance Nights are just, where we have the open stage. I really, we go back and forth of whether we should do that or not do that and most of the time we do it. But we have these things we call Open Stage Night which is, is that. I mean, you can do anything. Some of those have just been, I mean they're my favorite arts experiences in some ways. When they're really right on it's just, you get the most outrageous, bizarre, wonderful stuff going on, you know? And it's wonderful to do it because it comes, you know, they're doing class work but it's not an assignment from class work; it's just whatever they do. I remember one where this woman put scarves on the floor and just started skating and singing the whole time and had these scarves going. It was so ludicrous; we were all sitting and just going, "Oh my God." And it was from, you know, it was like this whole performing thing and

she was incredible. And she was like this meek little nothing in technique classes, you know, but it's like, she got on stage and it's like, "That's so and so?" So I feel like I've seen Performance Nights a lot of times that are really wonderful because it's like you don't see a certain aspect of them in the classroom. And when you see that, as a teacher, you go, "Oh, we need to push that now." So I think it's really been, you know, quite wonderful to have those kinds of situations and... yeah. I've got to get to another student.

OK.