2016

Interview with Shirley Mordine, 1998

Columbia College Chicago

Shirley Mordine

OK, it's April 29th, 1998. We're interviewing Shirley Mordine, chair of the Dance Department and director of the Dance Center at Columbia College in Chicago.

OK, could you tell us when you first came to Columbia, the year, and what the circumstances were that brought you here?
Well, I had moved to Chicago in 1968. I moved here because the husband took a job and I gave up my job at the University of Minnesota to do this. And so I didn't come with a job; I just followed him here. And I found many, many places in the Chicago area to teach part-time. And Columbia was one of those places that I taught a dance class part-time, at the theater program. I think Louise Strauss was her name at the time, and there was really no contemporary work going on here. The Sagans, Bruce and Judy Sagan, were running the Harper series in Hyde Park, but, and I knew of Sibyl Sheer on the North Side, and I knew of Maggy Kast somewhere in Hyde Park, but there was no real contemporary work going on. So I just scrambled to try to earn a living and find several part-time jobs. And one of them was as part-time faculty worker in the Theater Department in Columbia. And then I got to know Bob Evans. We taught in a state program for the gifted in Pennsylvania together, a high school program, and I taught a high school state program for the gifted at Evanston. And it was about the time Mike had made the decision to create a whole new thrust in theater. And it really was so, I think, that thrust was the embodiment of a lot of what he felt about education and the purpose of Columbia, what he saw happening to that. He brought Gordon Rudolph out, Mort Schlichter, folks like that from Yale, to begin this program. So then they decided, I suppose amongst themselves, and Don Sanders was in that group too, that they needed a movement component of this theater program.

Bob Evans recommended that I come in and be the person to do this. There wasn't an awful lot of competition. There wasn't much here in that kind of work unless you went back to ballet or something like that, because there's always been a strong ballet influence in Chicago. And so I started teaching one class but it was at a time—now we're 1969, and it's a time when people were experimenting greatly. And what I was doing, the kind of commitment to really thinking to be a dancer or a mover, doesn't fit with a really loose theater environment. You know, you really have to but your time in, taking class, it's very demanding, it can't have a laissez-faire attitude about it, you really have to get there, take your class, rigorous, no hanging out or just hanging around, which was so much the environment and the feel of the time. And so I gathered a group of people together and decided to make an advanced theater group because I didn't have any skilled dancers to work with, so I took folks that I thought were good movers and I just trained them as performers to do this work called "Journey," which got to be kind of a landmark piece. It was a kind of a seminal work, I think, here in Chicago, nobody had done that kind of work and it was very, very successful.

Could you expand that, the kind of work? Describe that further.
Because I think when you have disciplined, trained dancers, we did a lot of vocal voice work, we did extended acting kind of work with movement and dance per se but not in any kind of classical form, whether it was contemporary or ballet. And we worked through just images and scenes one after another, but wrote the pieces an hour long. We used three stories of the building, went in and out windows, had every mode of transportation flying around the place there was. And it was quite an event; people were very intrigued by it. In fact I remember one night, somebody who was really high on drugs came in and interrupted the performance. I mean this guy was out of it. And he started yelling obscenities, just walked right into the middle of the

performance and started yelling. There was a mixed couple sitting there; black man and a white woman. And he just started—this was a black man who was drugged out. And he just started taking them on, insulting them, and then he kind of forgot about them and joined the performance. So we just all kept whispering to ourselves, "Keep going! It's all right, it's all right, it's all right." So we kept performing and kept performing and my manager at the time got terrified, went out and tried to get the police. So during the whole course of this long performance, he instinctively took an incredible role. I mean, I couldn't have gone out and taken an actor and rehearsed it to do the kinds of things this guy in a drugged-up state was responding to and how he was participating. And toward the end when we were all lined, the chorus, us, the four main people, on the floor I think, it was kind of towards the end, he had kind of slipped out the back of the performance and the police walked right in and stood in front of the audience, "What's going on here? What's going on?" "Get him out of here! He's interrupted the..." "No, no, he's a part of the performance..." "No, leave him alone!" And we started fighting with the police. And it hit the newspapers as quite an event because there were so many reviewers in the audience that night. So it's one of these wild nights that, you couldn't have made better theater. But that's just a story of the time, too.

God, I remember gathering a group of people together and with Bill's rock band and we all got in buses and went from one store to the other and in there with the students that were dancing and singing, "That war is a mother that takes back..." We were so, it's an act of protest. So anyhow, what I was doing within that Theater Department was separating itself out, because it called for some discipline and I didn't have the patience, I thought at that time, to be a part of a collaborative effort. I could have learned a lot from these characters, but I think I wanted so much to build something myself and I didn't have the patience to deal with their way of looking at the time. It was just too laid back. And from that, Columbia offered more classes and more classes and I began performing more and more with this group. So it just kind of evolved out of that kind of a situation. I had a performing company going plus these classes going, the performing company, the teachers within these classes, so it evolved a center of its own quite naturally. We went from the location on Wells Street, the old Lloyd Wright studios, we were on the second floor and we shared it with the theater program. Then from there we went over to the Barry Street building, Barry and Kenmore, and then we went up to School Street somewhere, and then we were at a bank, at an abandoned bank building on the corner of Seminary and Belmont, and the Genman Episcopalian Church on Belmont. Then finally we purchased this space in about 1972.

'72, so that was only four years after you came here.
Three years.

Three years.
I started full-time in '69.

OK. But that, and you said at first, this idea of a movement component within the Theater Department.
That probably came out of Lloyd and Gordon's and Don's recommendation. We're looking at a theater that was breaking away from literary bound theater. This, going into a much more physical, emotion or movement kind of theater. You have to remember that the Living Theater was taking off at that time, Richard Schekner was taking off, it was that period, that's the kind of flavor that was experienced

So did they keep a movement component and you came out with all of it within only three years of your dance...
Well, I came out with it in about one year with the separate company.

And was there any conflict, or did you ever?
Yeah, I think they were, the conflict in that it was pretty clear right up front within a year that it was something I needed to just go off and do myself. And thank God Mike went along with it. Mike didn't turn around and say, "Well, we need this here. If you're not gonna provide it you're out." He really was incredible and generous and trusted me, evidently with what I was doing at the time to keep going in this direction that even at that point had an apparently different direction and energy and focus than the theater, the original theater group was about.

Did you have a company in Minnesota?
No, but when I first came to Chicago and I was teaching part-time that first year, I taught at Hull House. And I gathered a group at Hull House and we started performing even then. So that same group that was with me at Hull House came in to Columbia with me when I was hired full-time. So I did kind of get the influence of people that we were working together theatrically. So yeah, I had a little performing group that was already under-way.

And then you've maintained that.
Yeah, over the years, yeah.

Has that made it harder or do you feel drawn in different directions or...
For a long time it was extraordinarily helpful, it felt very fruitful to feel that sense of a performing entity being a laboratory for how you'd be making to teaching and work with students. It was extremely good to the members of the company that were teachers. So there was a very direct connection there. And, we've, certainly over a period of, it's almost been thirty years now, there have been evolutions of companies. My first company broke off and formed Moming Dance and Art Center, that's what started that. It was the group that moved away from the Dance Center that did that. And in about 1974 when that happened, Richard Woodbury, Jan Erkert, those people came in and began to work with me, so they've been here for that long. And then that was a group that worked until about 1980, and then I had another group that went all the way through about the next ten years, a pretty stable group. And, you know, companies evolve through membership changing over time. But it was, the larger of course Columbia's gotten, and the more successful we've become, the more the performing company needs to be redefined. It's not that very simple, immediate relationship; it has a much more complex relationship. Cause we're more like a standard college now, we weren't back then. We were a wonderful experiment just flying by the seat of our pants, truly, truly. I was happy to run something, I was happy to direct something, but to run something in the sense of "Chairman of the Department" and "Paula's my secretary" and all that kind of stuff, that never interested me. You know, because I always thought of myself as being an artist and a teacher, not an administrator. But that's also why from the very beginning I brought in the administrative component, what we called the Managing Director for some time.

I started that in 1972 because I didn't want to be a chair of the department that sat on my coffee, push papers around primarily. So over the years I've tried very hard to keep that kind of partnership going. And then it's also important because as we've grown so much and the Center has grown to be such a large presenting organization, it's more and more difficult to keep that kind of balance but it's an important balance. In most colleges and universities, when you have such an increase in a presenting program, they usually break off and they become some kind of presenting organization or arm of the college. And I've worked very hard to keep it integrated into one center because I believe so firmly in a model that is artist and educator driven, not administratively driven. And so people who are presenters in the art forum aren't determining the art forum in this place. We as artists and teachers are determining what the art forum is and what influences us and how to contribute to the field as a whole. And most, around the country if you look now, most presenting organizations are run by executive directors who some might have had some dance background, but not necessarily. So you've got businessmen running these presenting organizations and determining the direction of the art. And I didn't want this place to be that, so I've really worked to keep it under that singular roof. It's gotten larger and we have enormously successful public programming.

In a sense of the earliest size, number of students, I don't know, number of classes, and where you're at now...
Well, we went back from one or two classes to, how many, almost about a hundred majors, going through this building in a week. We have easily eight hundred students walking through those doors because we have a community program. We've always had a community program; at the same time we've had a matriculating student program. So that primarily in our Advanced Technique class, where professionals in the field take class side-by-side with our students every morning. So we've always had an intention of being part of the community and affecting the community, and helping to nourish and take the art form in our community and not be an isolated event in a college.

Has keeping the artist/educator center or the driving force, has it been harder to hang onto, the pressures that...
The pressures are, first of all, it's an enormous pressure on me. It's too much under one person's directorship, that's really hard to do all the things I'm doing right now. And we're looking at ways of changing structure that I really become a director, you know, somebody coordinating the academic program so I'm not micromanaging the academic area. Probably a lot of tension comes from just somebody in the administrative management wanting it to be there, the prevalent program in their programming. So there's been tension between myself and that person, certainly in the last five years. And

making their own mark nationally in the field of presenters that have models that are totally different from this. And I have to keep saying, "No. That's not what we are." So if you don't have people who accept and buy into this moderation, you have problems, and it is a unique problem and I think it's an interesting one. It's gotten so much larger and you need to do that. That's to develop audiences. It's also to help our students learn how to be engaged with potential audiences, with community organizations, so that they learn how to create their own kind of professional growth and ultimate occupation in the community. There are a lot more alternatives to these traditional ones of choreographing, teaching, performing. Because if you're going to create a program and you've got this many students filling through here you also have to, if you're ethical about it, I think, provide more opportunities for occupation.

Maybe you could, you talked about what the department is and its unique model. If you could speak to the mission, perhaps, of your department and how it fits in with the larger mission of the institution as you see it.

Well, always, as I say from the beginning, we've always been engaged in the community. We've always had students come in who were necessarily Columbia students but they were community students, and they paid me a different fee, but they took part also. So, and we've been out here. We haven't been in the building downtown. So we've been very directly involved with the community at large, and on a national scale also. We are one of the ten or so nationally recognized presenters of dance in this country, so we play a distinctive and really a large voice in the health and direction of the theater. And, of course, now the increased activity in our community, our Outreach Education programs, I think that we're—I would say the model for what I think what will happen down the line to arts and colleges and universities in terms of community engagement, involvement. Teaching, especially youngsters, how to be engaged and carry on a dialogue with an audience, with people in the community is not an isolated entity in their art, the practice of their art. And it's certainly, what's so extraordinary, I think, is the number of students that have come into Columbia, looked at this program, which is pretty abstract and contemporary in its practice, who might have come out with such a limited perspective of what dance was or could be, and watch these students bloom into these incredibly interesting people and people who are making a real statement in their art. So we've certainly reached a real spectrum of young people purposefully designing our curriculum and our teaching methods so we didn't appeal to or limit our interest to just those youngsters who came in with a lot of pre-training, who were already on their way to a conservatory somewhere. This really has no atmosphere of a conservatory. It is an incredible place for opportunity and growth if you like to dance. And that happened with always engaging the community. The flexibility of looking at what we're doing, the way we're working, the kinds of courses we're offering, the ability to evaluate that, change that, modify it, make it different, to truly speak to the moment, has been an incredible opportunity. In a standard college or university, it's ritual or cumbersome; you can't do that kind of thing. So I feel like the students that come in here are seeing the art form at the moment and they're seeing teachers, experiencing all this with teachers who are at the forefront of that. There aren't a lot of places that can say that. People talk all the time about what a unique place this is.

And I think too that even in Columbia that there's a lot of examples of people who really did stop doing their own work in order to administer a program and then there's others that have been able to continue, but it's not one or the other, you know, it's...

Yeah, it's hard and it's getting increasingly hard, but it's a different institution.

...we're no longer a mom and pa store.

You know, personally I've felt many times that I've sacrificed my own artistic ambitions and interests and time to work on my own ideas and grow as an artist to chair a department and be a director. So I'm at a time in my life when I don't know that I have an awful lot more years, I've been here thirty years. I've been seriously looking at and considering how I can give myself that opportunity of being the artist and concentrate the way I've always wanted to. Because I have no intention of giving that up and simply being an administrator.

So if something gave it would be Columbia.

Oh yeah. I do have some concern about the future of the College, that they are forcing chairs into that kind of choice and into that kind of role. I think it would not be a good direction for the College, and rather than giving us that choice, can't we look at an experiment with creating a new model? I

mean, the one I'm going after right now is that I'm creating a Director or Acting Coordinator of academic programming, so I can move out of the micromanagement thing and there can be an overlord director for the center, because I've developed a partnership with the Executive Director who takes care of the administration of all the public programming. And certainly I have my relationship with the faculty who are quite independent and quite self-sufficient, and if I walk out of there tomorrow they're fine. Because I ran for so long, 1974, and some have been here later but that's a long time. And on top of that I travel a lot and I curate seasons. And I make the selections for putting all the programming together, which is very multilayered, not only what we're going to present with the course of our season but how that interacts with guest artists and teaching, thematically where we're going in our pedagogue.

But I think it would be a great mistake for the administration to force chairs to make that choice of either being an administrator or an artist. It would become a totally different college. And, you know, go back to Mike's idea about Theater chairs who he felt would have a visionary role. And he was wonderful; he just left us alone, we couldn't have done this if he hadn't left, at least in my case, left me alone. To go about exploring and sometimes making mistakes that always tie back into that mission and purpose of the College, and to keep going forward in terms of what I knew and understood about my own art form and its potential. That's the great gift Mike gave me and gave many of us. But I think instead of saying, "Yeah, you've gotta do this or that!" can't we be a little bit more creative and come up with some other options? You know, I'm not going to be around that much longer, but whoever takes my place, are you going to go out and just hire an administrative chair? That seems to be the route we're going and I don't think that's a good route. Unless, you know, that person just totally facilitates the running of faculty and artists. You know, maybe it has to do with how you distinguish their role within their position. But to let go of that kind of functioning purpose, I think, would make us like any place else. You know, then people could say, "Well, it seems to me the faculty will just get together and we'll be the visionaries." And you know, I don't think that comes out of committees, I think that comes out as daring. And you've got to allow some people to be daring. Checks and balances, and certainly working with the sense that sometimes, people got to be daring and you have to let—sometimes they can see things that it will take five to convince anybody else of. And that's part of the quality I think of leadership, is to know how to identify that and to trust it. I hope we don't lose that.

Has that become more difficult or possibly impossible with the size of the institution or the growth of Columbia?
It's not difficult and possibly impossible, what I say here is that rather than saying, let's not just say, "Well, that's not possible, so we're going to resort to taking on the more generic approach to arts and education," why don't we invent another kind of model that takes in account our size and not just buckle under or accept that, "No, now that we're this size we have to operate this way." Because that's not our spirit, that's not what we came out of.

That's a reoccurring theme, I think, of the loss that some people feel or the losing of Columbia's uniqueness. And it's that? Because of growth?
Certainly it's because of growth.

What else?
I'm going to be repeating myself a little bit here. But, you know, all this is certainly inevitable if you're so damn successful. And it grows. So the question isn't necessarily one choice or the other, it's how do we go about creating a way of working, a way of thinking that holds on to those crucial points we value that isn't necessarily like everyone else, but let's retain what we really want to retain. Create some fresh models here. Be daring about doing that. And I'm not willing to say that we can't do it because the size is so different, I mean, those are kind of foregone conclusions. Let's explore them a little bit! And it's like making a group: just because things get larger doesn't mean you limit your options, you just have to think differently.

Have you found kindred spirits, perhaps, in your hopes for Columbia's future, the direction?
You know I, I'm sure I do have kindred spirits. I'm sure Sheldon feels this way and people who've been here for some time. I am so isolated up here that I so seldom get a chance to talk with other chairs. I'm just, I'm sorry to say that, I should, except if I'm at the retreat or something. And it's like, I want to get past the point of being irritated at what I call the "administrivia" of life.

That's a good word.
...and get to the real challenges and how to... I don't get that much

time to talk to other chairs. Even the Chairs Council themselves, we sit there and it's like, "Finally." We don't even get to the business of what chairs, subjects like this, should be talking about because we're just responding to whatever the administration needs or wants from us in our meeting. So finally I made a motion and said, "You know, people have to stop coming in and taking time to make announcements in these meetings. The whole year's gone by and we have not even gotten to the agenda we set out for ourselves, as chairs, to discuss. You see how important this is?" And then being interrupted and taken over by very important and necessary issues, this whole year has been the self-study, the unionization of the part-time faculty; crucial issues to deal with. And everything's important, it's not arguable, but chairs have just, it's just overwhelming what's come down to the departments. And one of the reasons that is is that every department operates in such an autonomous nature. You know, it's not like we have a very round, evolved middle-management central administration that runs a lot of programs; if we really want these programs running up we tend to set them all up in our own departments. We track alumni; we have our own recruitment program. In most colleges a department is not...

You're saying your own department has this recruitment and tracking?

Oh, absolutely. And a lot of departments have this because we don't have the broken out, the more layered kind of middle-management administration where this could take place, so it falls to us in departments. And then of course I get really irritated when I hear people say something like, "Well, the fiefdoms." Well, for Christ's sake, what do you expect? When they just do all the work and you want it to come all from us and we look so autonomous? Give us some help and take it off and we won't be so damn autonomous! We'd love to just concentrate on the teaching and the what have you. But it's like throwing the wad of something at you and then saying, "You've got mud on your face."

Then maybe we can come back to that, but this idea of a new model, you know, if you were queen for a day would, do you have some ideas about? And keep with the theme of the future, what Columbia has on the horizon and what's going to keep it different or perhaps, you know, reinvent itself to keep its uniqueness.

I would like to play a totally different role. But I have a different situation here; I'm not just an academic partner in the arts or a department in the College. I'm in a setting that has three components to it: the academic component, the Columbia presence, and this enormous public programming we do. But I would love to see myself relieved of the "day-to-day," as they say in administrivia or administration, of the department, which is up and going in their practices, and their policies. That's something they get off on, I don't. But I think that's another kind of mind, that's another kind of intelligence I certainly respect. But I'd like to be free of all, I'd love to have the, I'd love to look at what we're doing with public programming, how we're affecting the art form, who we're selecting to do what, and how does that connect with our outreach programs, and how do the outreach programs and the public programming effect and connect with our educational component, and how are the students taking part in that. So it's more of a networking of all these amazing practices and components. I think we're beyond the time, at least here, where one can even afford to think of an academic program and what it's doing. We've built a whole other model. We're so networked into the field and into the community. It really—I need someone like myself and all as a director with a much larger overview to see these connections and help them along. So for me I think that—I can't speak for other people—but given that's the model we've created here, that, to me, seems a good model that I could play, that I could play up.

But, could you tell us a little bit about the origins of your personal philosophy of the world of art, of art and culture, perhaps specifically dance? And did they evolve, did you bring them with you when you came to Chicago, is it something that Columbia has influenced or shaped?

I'm sure that Columbia has influenced and shaped me a great deal. I always had that inclination to balance the making of the art with the kind of presenting and the kind of organizing. Partly because I always wanted to project myself. I didn't want somebody else running my artistic life. I wanted to be in control of my artistic life. You know, I grew up in a field where, I'm a woman, and you know, just lots of factors here that make it important to me to make sure I project, to be able to work and do my work and not be controlled or moved around by administrators or people out there who aren't artists. And that was always important to me, I can see it from way back, way back. In fact I did that when I was in college. I was running the

college arts council at the same time I was going to class and going to school. But when I moved to Columbia and got to know Mike and see what he was doing, and also because I was tied to another generation. I come out of a generation of really social conscious artists. I'm talking about Helen Tiniliss, and we would, the second, I guess you'd call that the first generation, but there was some show of conscious which to me is—all those people and me—is to accept your role and create projects and had a sense of going on, had a spirit that this country was about and that is still built into me. It is built into me out of our generation that had to do with doing something in your art that's larger than yourself, not just focusing on your own self and your own self-interests. It always seemed like that was an important part of your ethics as a working artist. I mean, that was built into my teachers and my models before me. So the idea of, even when I think about making work, I don't ever like didactic group and I don't like to lecture and make conclusions. But I really think, if you're doing your job as an artist, that you do make a profound difference in how people experience that moment, experience that, hopefully leave the theater changed some way. That's education, that's probably the most profound and meaningful kind of education and learning you can come by.

So I think that theater and I think that art is the most meaningful kind of changing and growing, it can be. That's why, I remember once I was listening to my friend Tricia Brown who, we graduated from college together, we were old friends, and just one of the outstanding artists of our time and somebody popped this question, here, they said, "Tricia, what do you think about your work? It's so abstract and so pristine and so exquisite. But what do you think when you run across someone who's lying on the street and is homeless and he smells and his life is asunder?" And Tricia was just sitting there and didn't know what to say and I thought, you know, as strange as this might seem, I think someone like Mercer Cunningham and John Cage are some of the most political people of our time because they truly made us think differently. It's not that the message is something you're going to lecture and take home, but they changed how we thought about things; and until you do that, you don't really have the deep impact on teaching or through teaching. But you hear sound differently, you see how things are put together differently, you experience things differently, you connect things differently, and hearing these men speaking to most people would probably be so bizarre and esoteric, I think they are some of the most—people like to shun. I mean, surrealist movement, that's a very political movement for those reasons. They completely insisted and forced us to see an experience differently.

Do you worry about the arts in our country, in our education system, with the pulling back the funding and the politicization of...

Sure, sure. You can see the way it's going and to a great extent why it's necessary: that the funding's going to community organizations, access to the arts, insisting that artists take part in the communities, not necessarily to the artists and the work they're doing. That simply is the thrust of the times. And I think it's probably a necessary one right now, because if you don't bring the audiences, if you don't learn how to create and maintain a dialogue with the audiences, what's the point of making, you don't have an audience. But I hope it swings back to a better balance of really truly supporting artists as well. I think it's going overboard quite a bit right now. But you know, we're a country who is very unhomogenous right now, and there's going to have to be a period of real struggle and learning to balance values, balance our educational/economic levels between peoples and groups. And we've gotta go through this to arrive at a more homogenous kind of, or a sense of ourselves. And if we don't, we're just asking for radical trouble. So it's a necessary part, I think, of the evolution of things. And I think if you're a wise artist or a wise student artist learning how to come into the field you need that perspective, you need to know that's what you're building; that's on the way to something else, but that's where we are right now, what we need to do.

If you could tell us maybe some highlights of your, as you said, "almost thirty years here," whether it be student performances that were particularly successful, Community Outreach program, individuals... I mean, really leave that up to you but....

Well, I can always go back and I always think of certain students that were special highlights, that were just exceptional students. And, you know, it's so thrilling to see them. I kind of had a highlight today in my Comp II class, Composition class, those kids did the most wonderful works and they gave me the reasons why they were wonderful and they were just thrilled at the end of class. It was such a high to see that kind of thing. To create a season, like right now we're bringing in all these European contemporary companies

and the students are having dialogue with these artists and they're seeing this work and this is going on in Belgium or Switzerland or Holland, France. And why is that going on, what does it have to do in relation to the kind of work we're doing here in this country and how did our work influence you? That's amazing. And I'm looking forward—next year, in fact in August I'm pretty sure, we're going to a festival in Indonesia to look at work from the Pacific Rim. Because one of the exciting things that is going on in the field is the opening up of the media and perspectives to include in dance, that it's become a large amount an inclusive kind of art form, and it needs a more extended kind of vocabulary. And if you look at most of the other art forms of the world they are more extended in vocabulary than what we've had in the last twenty years or so—you know, like it's so self-referential in this country and so performing for other dancers and choreographers kind of sense. And so I'm excited about doing that. For instance, one gentlemen I'm looking at bringing in is going to create a shadow play with students and also perform a [waiang], which is a traditional shadow play from Java, with a master. You know, to explore that is incredible. And to explore dance as a theater, all the aspects of theater having potential for the field and for the art form and not limiting it to just such a small perspective, that's exciting to me. To help support and take on different values and skills to pick up on and grow. But, you know, seeing student performances and seeing their growth, I think, if I were to say one thing, I think we're a little bit overboard on this experiential learning stuff. You know, it's like I get kids who are like, "Been there, done that." "OK." But if that's all you do, all you do is really experiencing and you're not insisting on a cognitive reinforcement and a clarification on real solid learning balanced with that it's "Been there, done that." So then you talk about that but I don't see any change in them, I don't see any change in their bodies, I don't really see them transformed by the experience. I think that can get real superficial real fast. We're at a college level, you know, they're getting enough out of teaching to balance those two; it's one thing or the other. That would be like pedagogical, here you go.

Have the, I don't want to end the interview, but—financial challenges. Have those gotten more difficult? Have you had to wear that hat to find funding or fight for the budget? What kind of challenges has the department faced with that?

Actually we've been very fortunate because we have a small department. But we've become so large because of the kinds of moneys we bring in, almost over a million dollars a year in funding a year to run all our programs. And, you see, you don't get money for presenting artists these days, you get money for your outreach or extended education and then you support your artists with that. And yeah, the pressure is there to keep doing that and to keep extending that. So a lot of your time and energy goes into sustaining that level of growth that you have. But I think we have been on the forefront of this kind of thinking a better—as I say, it's on its way to something else always. So that those efforts are a part of supporting what we are in this model and we didn't stay stuck in that place of simply being a department fighting for support. I really came into being the Executive Director here in about 1990. We both set out with a goal to enlarge scope of prestige of the whole place so it would give value to, mutual value to the respective components. That was important so that we didn't look isolated as an academic program but to connect, support all the components of the programming here by enlarging it through funding and larger community-based support for all our programs.

Has, I'm just curious, has Columbia College the institution said ever, "Well, you've got all this money coming in, we're going to cut back on..."

No, it because it really does support our public programming...

It does.

...and we're to the point now that we can offer scholarships. If we have enough surplus we can offer students scholarships. And we do support minority students coming into Columbia through our dance scholarships. No, not at all. If anything, I think the College has been enormously supportive in understanding the value of what we're doing in a sense of setting a model, setting, I think, a direction for the field. And I think, really, a certain kind of recognition to the College that is valuable.

You talked about how the community outreach and programming has been a part of your mission or the department's mission and that also that's something that funding institutions like to see, if that, you know, and it could—if funding dried up and went to whatever other kind of programming that other arts have experienced, as you've said sometimes

support for individual artists has declined, how would the department face that?
Well, you've got to keep your nose to the ground. That's where the direction of the theater is right now. And we stay so connected to the theater, to the funding community. If anything, I think we help the funding community understand where the support needs to be. I think we'd anticipate. We're so connected to it. I don't think you'd catch us by surprise. What's important is that people, myself, the Administrative Director of the Dance Center, keep that dialogue going with funders. Because they want to know that they're learning from us, that they're not interested necessarily in dictating, but they are interested in supporting what they determine ultimately to be valuable. Now that comes out of a dialogue from the people in the theater as well. So it's not like a guessing game.

I guess what I was saying was it seems to be something that you were committed to and valued whether the funding was there or not, that this was going to be part of your program.
Oh no, I mean if the funding went away for some reason we'd have to rethink everything, sure. Because we don't dip into tuition payments for our public programming, that is self-sustaining. You know, you always have to have an eye to what's going on, be very flexible, and there's a balance between what you feel is important and what you're trying to, what you think needs to happen and what the reality of what things are. And you ride that tightrope all the time.

What's in the future for the Dance Department, for Shirley Mordine?
We have to do something about space. I mean, aside from building more, I'm talking this building. There isn't one person that has an office to themselves. You've seen my office, I mean it's outrageous. Our faculty dress in the hallway with their butts hanging out. There just is no more space. And we've had such an incredible increase in our enrollment here at the Dance Center. And we've got to find some more space to operate in for offices, for class space, that's the main thing. And I wish the College would really commit itself to bringing us down close to them and build a performing arts center in the downtown area. Sure, it would be right next to that little cluster of buildings downtown, that would be the best thing in the world. But I don't know if that's possible. So many other things have come up now that if I think we're going to demand the College's resources and preoccupy them for some time that that might not be certainly in the near future. I was really hoping that before I retired I'd see that. That was a real goal of mine to see that performing center and location.

So as far as Shirley is considered? I would really like, in the last part of my career, I would like to focus on all the things I have protected myself to be able to do. I would like to focus and fulfill the kinds of artistic goals and learning and research to become a better teacher and a better artist for the last part of my working life. I don't want to push around paper. And I'm trying to create a model where that's possible because that's really where my value is, it's not being an administrator as such. But I've been in this position now where I've coped with growth, which has been incredible, but I need to go back and do research, think, and enrich myself as a teacher again. That's what I want to do, to be a teacher and an artist, that's what I am and I don't want to be compromised about that.

I think, you know, '68 to '98, that you have a not perhaps unique but almost unique perspective on the growth of the College at a key time and maybe we just could, towards the end of the interview, maybe we could talk about you relationship or the early days of the College when, I don't know, its character was forming.
When you look back and—it wasn't without its problems and its moments and its pretentious relationships, but we all felt we were in it for a larger cause than ourselves. It was all very important to us and it meant so much to us. And we might just stand up as the President of the College and speak and clarify what that was or redirect it or criticize something, we listened. Not because, he certainly had his autocratic moments, but not because of that but because we believed, we really believed in what was going on here and how important it was, how really important it was. And we believed what life was about. We might not always agree with him but it would be done. And I miss that.

His obvious significance and importance and vision, and again that's another reoccurring theme for people that have been here, where do you think that came

from, what do you think influenced his or made him who he was?
Mike has such a largesse of concern and care for people, for any walk of life. And he's such an essential fair man and he operates from that point of view. Not the "educated President," so to speak, but fundamentally and first of all, almost how a poet would speak to that concern. That's where his heart is and that's where his passion and ultimately his definition of what he wanted to do came from. So he operated like a poet or an artist in the realm of great social concern and great concern for education, addressing the problems of class and economics and Mike's just, as I say, I think he's a poet. And that's highly influential, that that's where he came from.

Interesting, I, you're the first that put it in those words but...
Is that the sense that you get?

Yeah, absolutely.
Because that's why, I think those of us that are practicing respect Mike so much because he did know a lot about art and I know that, he didn't. But he had the sense and the feel about what it means to speak as an artist. And he would do anything to fight and give us that right.

Finally, are you done? I was going to ask you personally as an artist to look back and maybe some of your highlights of your own career as a faculty member that continued, you know, to produce and perform.
You know, if I think about it I'm sure that there are lots of highlights. I tend to be one of those folks who just wakes up the next day and goes to work.

Looks forward.
Well, I don't know "looks forward," it's just no big deed, just go to work. And there's certain moments, I guarantee, there are those moments, have been those moments. I think I would have to say that it's not a specific highlight, but it's the sense and the knowledge that I really played a role in what I think is a very interesting and important experiment, and I think a successful one with the arts and education.