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Interview with Richard Woodbury, 1998

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Richard Woodbury

It is June the 1st, 1998, and this is an interview with Richard Woodbury, faculty and Music Director of the Dance Center of Columbia College.

Could you tell us when you came to Columbia and the circumstances around which brought you here?

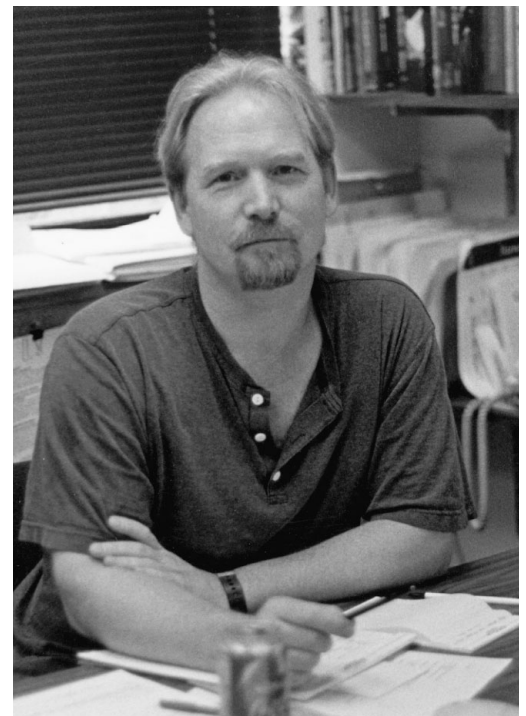
In the summer of 1976, I had just graduated from the University of Minnesota with majors in dance and music. I had no idea what I was gonna do with my life; I had a hard time getting out of bed most mornings, 'cause it was sorta like "Now I have these degrees that aren't gonna do me any good for making a living. And one day I rolled off to take a dance class at Nancy Hauser's Guild of Performing Arts, and I walk into class, and like every male dancer in town was there, and I had no idea why. And I just took class and there was strange woman sitting in the corner watching the class, and at some point in the class I became aware that she was this woman from Chicago named Shirley Mordine and that she was there auditioning male dancers. I hadn't been told about the audition—I found out later because the people there didn't want me to leave—but she invited me to come to Chicago and join her company. At the time, I knew nothing about Columbia College. I didn't know that she was in residence there, I didn't have any idea what that meant, and so my initial move here was to join her dance company and be a dancer with her. Once I got here, I found out "Oh, she's in residence at Columbia College," and not that Fall, but the following Spring, which would have been Spring of

'77, I taught a class as a part-time instructor, and that's how I began my relationship with Columbia, was as a part-time instructor.

How would you describe the relationship between the Dance Center and the College, and if you will, has that changed over the years since you came?

Oh, absolutely. Initially, my first identification was almost exclusively with the Dance Department; as far as I was concerned, what I did was train dancers, and the College was an umbrella under which that occurred. I was certainly concerned about students' broad education, but my sense was that our job was to worry about their dance training, pretty much exclusively. We're eight miles away, and out of sight was very much out of mind. I don't... other than going downtown to sign contracts and stuff, like the first couple of years, and meeting a few people, I don't know that I was even consciously aware of the downtown campus most any days. You know, flash forward 20 years, it's completely different now. I am fully engaged in, you know, committee work and other kinds of efforts for the College as a whole. I definitely see the Dance Center as part of an entire package, and that starting, I think—I don't know how many years ago this was—with the Writing Across the Curriculum initiative, we as a department became much more aware of and involved in the broader educational needs of our students. We also instituted, well over 10 years ago, an in-house counseling program, where we got more involved with academic advising of students and became more aware of what they were going

through in other classes as well. And so at this point, even though we're eight miles away, I feel that we're very integrated into the notion that the Columbia experience is a holistic thing that involves the department major and general education and those other features. The shift's been... gradual, but I think it was really spurred by Writing Across the Curriculum. I think that's really the thing that first... but it is hard for us, being eight miles away. I think the degree to which we feel we belong to the rest of the College is probably higher than the rest of the College feels we belong to them. I think, particularly among students, "What's the Dance Center?" They have no idea, because we're out of their sphere of travel. It's unfortunate; I'd like to see us down there where more people were aware of us and knew what we are and what we do. What was the question again? Did I answer the question?



Yeah, and I'll just return to part of what you said, that you increasingly saw the Dance Center as part of the entire package of what Columbia had to offer. Talk about that a little bit, what you see, you know, personally, and if you could maybe talk about the mission of the school and the Dance Center, where they overlap-

Sure. Well, when I first got here, the sense of mission was very much about exploration; whether or not a student was interested in a degree, I think, was... relatively unimportant. What you wanted to do was provide the experiences the students were after in terms of exploring their own creativity, their self-expression, their sense of self, their sense of self-worth. And certainly in dance that resonates, because dance is a career, or field, I should say, where career options are problematic at best. It's something that people do because they love it and they won't feel fulfilled without it. And as such, it's a field that many people come into and participate in, you know, for anywhere from a year to their entire lifetime. They sort of figure out when they've played out their dream. And so there was a high degree of comfort, initially, with the notion that I was here, we were here, to provide students with that sense of exploration and experience in this field, to see what they could do with it, and to provide them with the training and facilities to have those experiences. Sort of in parallel, both the College and the department got more involved in developing programs, majors, minors, coherent curricula that would produce a-I don't want to say a guaranteed result, but a designed result. This was as much in response to student demand as it

was to the notion that Columbia as an institution was growing up, and therefore, for the better and the worse, becoming more like other institutions. I think our first dance major curriculum was somewhere in the early '80s. We've changed it any number of times since then; last Fall, Fall of '97-'98, we've done our newest version of it, which included a bunch of new courses.

OK, about the mission... the mission says we're to educate students for creative occupation in the communications and the arts in the context of an enlightened liberal education. I don't know if that's an exact quote, but it's pretty close. And I feel like that's exactly what we do. Certainly, we're about the arts, and the emphasis of our program is very much on doing, against-there's not a whole lot of-you can get into graduate programs where it's about studying the history of dance and things like that, but most undergraduate programs are very much about dancing and making dances. We're very focused on the notion of individual artistry. Some programs train you to be a grand dancer in this style or that style; we train students to be open to any number of styles, so that they can make those choices as best fits them individually. Again, the notion of individualization of the education, I think, is part of what the mission implies, even if it doesn't say it explicitly.

Regarding "within the context of liberal education," as I said, the conscious support and reinforcement of lib ed goals is relatively recent, but the notion of a creative artist, for us, has always included the idea that a student needs to be aware and sensitive to the world around them in order to make interesting dances. If your dances

are going to reflect the culture of your times, you'd better be aware of the culture of your times. And so even within our curriculum, we have a number of courses that integrate understanding of dance into broader arts and humanities considerations. Our students take courses in dance history, which unavoidably brings them up against art history and political history; we take courses in music for dancers, which, again, is essentially a music history and cultural survey course, and so they deal with information about aesthetics in arts and other cultures. In those courses, they read and write critically and think critically, and so that notion that-one of the stereotypes of dancers is that they have really smart bodies and really empty brains. Well, that's certainly not our point of view on it, and we encourage them and, in fact, directly promote their broad understanding of the world they live in. And so in that sense, I think we're very much about what Columbia's mission is.

The one aspect of the mission that's most troubling for us is the notion that "for creative occupation." There's been-and again, this has increased over the years-a notion that an education leads to a career outcome. And certainly that's a concern of ours, and certainly we actively support the field in such a way that it provides an environment where the students who leave us have some hope of finding a career. But dance, as I said before, is-there aren't huge dance corporations out there waiting to hire all the dance graduates. It's a field where people make their own careers, where you create opportunities and works and relationships that allow you to support yourself. The good news is many of our

graduates have done that; the other good news is many of them haven't, but are just as happy anyway. I constantly tell parents of prospective students who are worried about "Well, what will Susie or Jim do when they graduate?", I go, "Well, how many English majors do you know who are novelists? How many psychology majors at the undergrad level end up as psychiatrists or psychologists?" For me, the notion of an undergraduate liberal education means that. It's a broad-based education, and a major is a focus within that, but I for one—although I understand with the huge investment that college is that people want a career outcome, to me, the important outcome is more about quality of life and sense of self as an individual. The student grows up and becomes a full adult, with all the thinking and analytical capacities that that implies. Should they decide to pursue a career in dance, we certainly give them the foundation that they can do that, but I can't, you know, tell a prospective student or their parent that "Yeah, when you graduate with a dance major from Columbia, you'll be making \$30,000 in your first year"—that kind of stuff doesn't apply. And so that's-but that's problematic in all the arts. But again, I would hope one of the things Columbia- and when I'm on committees and stuff, one of the things I argue that I hope we don't lose is the notion that we're not a trade school. I don't want to think that our primary goal is to become the DeVry of arts schools.

What else does our mission say? The diversity issue, I mean—certainly we're the only dance program I'm aware of anywhere in the country, probably the world, that admits dance majors without

audition. The norm everywhere else is that you have to prove yourself before you come through the door. Initially, and for quite some time, when I first entered here, this was a-I saw this as a huge disadvantage, because what it meant was that we had a huge attrition rate. Students would come in, sometimes with no background in dance at all, with some fantasy about what they might become, and they would discover very quickly that it's a serious discipline that requires serious physical conditioning, and they would figure out quite quickly "Gee, I can't hack this, so it's not for me," or "What was fun recreationally doesn't appeal to me when I take it seriously." But the flip side of that coin, and it really took me several years to see this, was that some of them discovered that this is exactly what they wanted to do, and that they never would have stood a chance anywhere else, they never would have gotten in to another dance school. And because they don't come with the background, they also don't come with some of the baggage. A lot of students who are trained, you know, through ballet since they were three year-olds or whatever, they come to us with a lot of habits and a somewhat narrow view of what the art form can be. And what's wonderful about this place is you put those kids together with somebody who has little or no background, who's totally open to anything new, and the kids with the history and the discipline are a model for the kids who haven't had that, and the kids with the open-mindedness and that sort of eagerness for the new are the models for the kids who have the old habits, and the synergy that can result from that can be really wonderful and quite unique, not something you see elsewhere.

The other side of that that's really wonderful is that a lot of dance programs are, by nature, competitive. It's a competitive field; the people who make a living as performers are the top few percent of practitioners in the country, and a lot of dance programs feed on that and... under the guise of wanting to give the students what the real world will be like, they weigh their students in, they send fat letters to people who are overweight, they rank classes by skill, and if you're not the best in the class you're in the back row, and there's a real hierarchy and pecking order of student achievement. Around here, it's totally the reverse: the other night, we had our student performance night, and we had seniors out there doing pieces and we had freshmen doing the first work they'd ever done, and these were all works they'd created on their own, outside of classes, and every single piece was cheered to the rafters. Everybody supports everybody else's efforts to do what they can do, and so that kind of camaraderie and community spirit we have here is something I have not encountered in other dance programs.

And so for us, diversity is a real plus, not a, you know, a theoretical plus, not a rhetorical plus, but in the reality of how we practice the art form, we see it makes a significant difference.

And how did you come, over the years, to that realization? You know, it said it took several years. Were you getting rid of baggage that-

Yes. Yes, exactly. I came here with habits and expectations too. And I saw enough success stories, I saw enough cases where yes, OK, so

maybe 50 percent or more of the students who came in with no background disappeared, but of those who stayed, enough wonderful things happen that you begin to go, "You know, there is something to this." We've been trying, and we continue to try to find a way to help those students who are gonna figure out this isn't for them, to figure that out sooner rather than later. And that's a trick. It is a trick. Because you want to give them full run of their dream, but at the same time, you don't want them to invest so much time and money in a direction that they're eventually not gonna finish up on, that they feel burnt or abused or foolish after the fact. So that's still a very real concern, but yeah, you're absolutely right: I came in here from dance programs where I had to audition, I came in from training where, again, we train for people to excel, but where the notion was competitive and... one school I attended, you know, fear was the primary motivator (*Laughs*). Which can be very effective, but not exactly healthy. So yeah, I had to unlearn a lot of my baggage, and again, see that it could work.

How do you think that this is still-you've seen it work, and obviously the recognition of the Dance Center and the offshoots of it. Why do you think it is still the only place, or one of the few, who are still more the exception, instead of gaining credence?
Well, you mean why doesn't open enrollment in dance programs become more the norm?

Or less emphasis on competition, or pitting students against each other, or having-
Well, I think there is a trend away from competitiveness in dance

programs. A lot of it just has to do with the age of faculty. I'm sort of the middle generation of current faculty right now; I'm approaching the later generation. It's occurred to me in the last year or two that I'm now one of the old fogies as opposed to one of the young turks. But anyway... there's a generation of people in tenured positions in faculties all over the country that are of the old school, and as they are... some of them are old dogs who can learn new tricks. I shouldn't make it sound like it's all vicious; there's a lot of caring that goes on in dance training, wherever it happens. And some of the competitiveness comes out of the students themselves; I shouldn't over-characterize the rest of the field that way, so much as I should emphasize the fact that we have a real strong sense of community here, and a real strong sense of caring and nurturing each other, rather than differentiating each other based on skill. So I'm gonna backpedal a little bit, I guess, from characterizing the other schools. Other features of what we do that... the open enrollment issue is interesting. The primary reason most dance programs do it is it's very difficult to train a professional level performer in four years. Some would argue it's impossible. We're very aware of the fact that although... most dance programs look at their students in terms of success or failure primarily in terms of their physical skills: how good of a dancer are they? If we use that equation we would have to say we don't do as well as other schools; but if you look at our graduates as a broad palette, yes, certainly, there are those that are as good or better than those trained anywhere else, but there are others who... there are others who excel at creating dances, as opposed to dancing them themselves. And so one of the focuses of

our program has always been on the making of dances. And indeed, the students have an option, in terms of concentration, whether they're gonna do performance, choreography, or teaching, and even-you can be an excellent teacher, and you may not be able to turn around six times without falling over, but you might be able to coach somebody else to do so. So we try to give them different paths they can excel within. For a student who comes to us with no background-again, it's a hard row to hoe, and we tell them that up front. Our requirements are stated.

The other fallacy that a lot of people think about open admissions is it means open door right through the program. Progress through our program is based on demonstrated skill; the students have to achieve certain levels of proficiency as performers before they can move to the next level, and the requirements for completion of the major require certain numbers of credit hours at certain levels of proficiency. And so a student who, despite their best efforts, still doesn't make that level of proficiency, won't finish the dance major, and they're told that. And some of them end up here six years, because they want it, and that's to be applauded. I think for most schools, that's something they don't want to face or have to deal with, and it's much simpler, if they have enough students coming through the door, to say, "Well, we'll pick the 50 with the best background." It is a unique situation, and it does have its own stack of programs. We run every semester into the students who we feel are not making the progress we would hope they would make, who need to be told that "You're not gonna

do it in four years; you might do it in five, you might need up to six." Sometimes we have to tell them "We suspect you never will." And, you know, how do you have that conversation with a student in a way that's supportive and, at the same time, frank? And at those times, sometimes you wonder "Wouldn't it have been better to tell them that before they came through the door and spent two years trying?" But that's one of the tradeoffs, I think. Again, most of the time, you look at students the first couple weeks of classes, the freshmen, and you go—you can usually tell who you think's gonna make and who's not. And I used to think that I could do that probably, you know, 80, 90 percent correct, but sometimes some of the ones you think have the least chance light up somewhere along the way; sometimes some of the ones you think have the most chance have a whole lot of baggage and problems that cause other kinds—so I'm not, I'll let them make that call for themselves for the most part now. And even now, when we tell somebody we don't see the progress, we say, "This is your decision, but this is what those of us on the faculty see and think you need to consider as you make your decision." And then we tell them the bottom line: "You won't graduate with the dance major until you do this, this or this, and we're not gonna move you there just because you've been here four years," you know. Did I answer your question?

Yeah.
OK.

Maybe you could talk to the roles—you have addressed some of the changes in your own attitudes as a faculty member, and

I'd like to return to how that has changed over the years, but also your role as Music Director.

Mm-hmm. Well, I came here as a dancer initially, but I also have background in music, and in fact, playing for dance classes, accompanying dance classes, was one of the primary sources of income I had throughout my college years. And so when I first moved here, in addition to dancing, I was also accompanying classes when I was part-time, it was between—

Was it mainly ballet?

No no. Modern, primarily. Percussion and piano, primarily. So I made my living by teaching part-time here, elsewhere, and accompanying all over town. When the previous music director left, Shirley needed somebody to step into that role. It was kind of short notice, and I said, "Sure." And so that meant suddenly I was teaching courses in music for dancers, as well as dance classes. I mean, for the first half of my career here, I was primarily a dance instructor. I don't dance anymore—you can probably tell.

(Laughs)

And it worked out real well for me, because I was ready, at that point, to sort of hang up my tights, as they say, and move on to music more full-time. Music director is an interesting role, and one I really like. Music and dance have a peculiarly close relationship amongst the arts, and it's really important to me that our students appreciate variety and diversity in music as a route to understanding options in dance. A lot that you can find out about formal structures in dance, about creative options in dance, is mirrored directly in similar processes in music. A lot of dancers find music to be one of the most, if

not the most, inspirational points of departure for dance, and unfortunately, have really narrow palates of what to be inspired by. And so one of my primary roles here is to open up their ears and their minds to a—literally, an extremely broad world of options out there. In addition, there are practical skills about how you count music, how you work with it structurally, how you... how you weave a dance together with a piece of music so that it's not ruled by the music, but at the same time, it's not ignoring it, it's not overriding it. I hire and fire the accompanist, I'm responsible for making sure there's music in all the classes, and so I work with the various men and women who play the classes. I work with the teachers; sometimes we do workshops on musical skills in the classroom and how we deal with music in other classes. I do guest shots in the composition classes where we work specifically with music; the students learn now, with a lot of the new technology, how to record and edit their own stuff. In fact, one thing that's heartening for me is a lot of seniors now, in their senior concerts, are actually composing their own sound scores, which is to say that—I wouldn't—calling it music in the traditional sense is a bit much, but dance has become very theatrical, and soundtracks, as opposed to just this piece of music, are quite common, where they'll take abstracted sounds and environmental sounds and pieces of music, text, and weave that all together into an accompaniment for their dance. And again, I give them the technical skills to do that, and we delve into the aesthetics of things like music [concrete], which is a movement that has to do with using natural sounds to create musical structures. And we do a lot

with 20th century musical aesthetics, their parallels in the visual arts and their parallels in the performing arts, and so not only do I deal with music, but it's through my courses and also our dance history courses that we examine the broader aesthetic movements and histories of arts and humanities. We're sort of the—between the music classes and the world dance forms and dance history classes, we're the part of the curriculum that gets that aesthetics and the place of dance within the broader world of the arts.

And we've already talked about the students and their work with the [composition class], but is there much overlap, or has the relationship grown between the Center for Black Music Research, or...

Um, the Music Department? No, and I think largely because of the distance factor. I mean, certainly there's a relationship between the faculty, and we talk and converse. There are other issues involved too... I have to be careful: no politics, no politics.

(Laughs) You can talk about politics, I'm just not gonna ask you about [them].

Bill's contemporary music program is very much centered on jazz and contemporary American music, which is fine; but it's a particular focus. Our program is very much focused on contemporary American modern dance, which certainly can intersect with jazz and with contemporary popular music, but also intersects with music from all over the world, with music from other time periods, other cultures. And so the palette our students are used to, or desirous to working of, is broader than the one that the

Music Department is currently involved in. You know, the other issue, we have with collaboration—and it's a huge one, and we can't figure out our way around it—is our students are busy, real busy. And between work and family and full-time loads here, the luxury of stepping outside the department for collaborative work is... real slim. And it's regrettable. We look at our curriculum, which, for the major with concentration, is somewhere around 70 credit hours, they don't even have room in their schedule to do a minor. There's no such thing as elective dance courses; I mean, there are places in the curriculum where you can take this instead of that, but when we look at our curriculum, there's a ton of classes we'd love to require, and we can't require any more. And our students have so many requirements from us and from other programs within the College that their ability to say, "I wanna do this" is limited. And if we go back to the original notion of Columbia College as a place to explore, I suppose one can argue that we've lost something in that. And there's truth in that; we have. However, I will point out, the student can still choose to do this, this, this or this, they just won't end up with a major in dance, or they'll have to negotiate a self-designed major. It's a tension between the mission's desire to allow students to explore, and the students' desire to be led, and let's not underestimate the power of that. I mean, I remember when this was happening, one of the impetuses for designing a major is students were saying "Tell me what to do. I want to be a dancer; what courses do I need?" And we're saying "Well, you know, what would you like to do?" And they're going "I wanna do what's gonna get me there, what's gonna make

me comparable with graduates of other institutions." And so there is this tension. Some students come to us—few students come to us really, truly mature enough to make their own educational decisions and to feel good about the choices they've made. Most of them come here wanting direction and strong direction. But there is that tension. And it is regrettable. But the distance is a huge factor, plus the culture of the College is departmentalized. Columbia is a collection of various fiefdoms that have had a history of seeing themselves as largely independent and autonomous, and we're only now beginning to truly build interdepartmental cooperation and a strong sense of institutional identity. You know, I think if you talk to most faculty, you'll say, "Well, who are you?" And they'll say, "Well, I'm a Photo faculty." They won't say, "I'm a Columbia College faculty." I think that the sense is still very much that people are tied into their individual areas. Again, that's a double-edged sword: on the one hand, people are passionate about their fields and committed to the training and the curriculum within their areas. On the other hand, it does make it difficult for us to move as an institution, and for our students to feel like the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Students who've come through here have had a couple different reactions to that—

When we talk about moving downtown the students will go, "No, no, no, don't do that." The fact that you're isolated is great. The fact that we have—this strong sense of community identity because we're up here all by ourselves and then other ones really regret it. We have had a few students who have actually sought out collaborations in

other [departments], with film or with music or whatever, and are very frustrated by the distance and also the departmentalization. We'll have students who want to do stuff in our spaces. And although we're theoretically open to the concept, we don't have the extra [room]. To give it to a film student who wants to use it to shoot a film means to take it away from a dance student who wants to rehearse there. So there are those difficulties, to be sure. It's a problem the College continues to need to address, is how do you form an institutional identity while also maintaining the strengths of the independent departments. And that's a fence we have to negotiate and in some times we'll fall on one side or the other, but it's a tough one. Because I know there's a sense within the College currently, and probably extending over the last, you know, five to eight years, that we're becoming increasingly centralized, that agendas are driven more and more outside of the field and outside of direct contact with the students. And I think there's some truth to that, but I'm not so sure that it's not necessary that we move in that direction, it's just a question of how we move in that direction. And how, as I said, without diluting the traditional strengths of the College, how do we add the new centralized strength, the new and unified strength. And we're not there yet.

When I was exploring being up here, the College doesn't even have some of what I would consider would be very basic services that are part of the campus, just say a shuttle bus and so, you know, you're riding around and...

Don't say that aloud, our students ask for that all the time, they go,

"DePaul has shuttle buses." And I go, "Yeah, look at the tuition of DePaul." You want the Marshall Fields of colleges, you'll pay those prices. Yeah, you're right, fortunately the El train runs more frequently and probably cheaper than a shuttle would be. Plus, you know, one of our issues always is we're not a large department. We've got like a hundred dance majors. How many of them need to go uptown or downtown at any given moment and how full would that bus be?

Yeah, their schedules are not full. Yeah. And our whole scheduling of our program is set up to accommodate the fact that students are going to spend half their day at least two or three days a week downtown. So there are certain classes that we cram into the mornings so that they can leave at one or two in the afternoon and still have time to do a class or two downtown. It's become a problem as we've grown because we need those afternoons, we need to offer those slots, and so now we're moving more towards like the curriculum's offered twice, in the morning and in the afternoon. And they are either downtown in the afternoon and switch back and forth. Our locale is not great either. We can't really do night classes here, the neighborhood just...

And you probably don't have the space to bring faculty up here to offer classes.

You are sitting in the only non-dance classroom in the Dance Center. This is my office, the sound lab, and a classroom. Later today I will have twenty-two kids in here. This is our one sit-down room.

Maybe you should speak to that, just briefly about space. And I

think that is that reoccurring issue with...

Well, when I started here there were around two thousand students, College-wide; fifty, sixty dance majors. Now we're double or more that size, the College is four or five times that size, resources are a real issue. Although to me, and I'll say this, and this can be political and you can take it that way, to me the more important issue is—this is a real tough nut—how big is too big? If Columbia's about a certain type of educational experience that allows for a concerned, caring faculty, at what point does sheer size overwhelm that possibility? You can say that we just add more faculty, more classrooms, but I don't know that I buy that argument. I think at a certain point you can become too big, and I know I see this is my own world and I know other faculty talk about it. You become a middleman between administration and the students rather than a direct contact with students. I don't know the percentages, I couldn't pretend to, but a large part of my time is spent now dealing with what we've dubbed here "administrivia". Some of it quite important; but somebody downtown wants this report, somebody wants this form filled out. Everybody's got their own institutional agenda that, frankly, intrudes on the educational process with the student. Last year, I had this student desperate to work with me on the subject matter in the class, and we were sitting there trying to figure out a space in my book when I could like manage to meet with this kid before the exam that was going; and it was like next to impossible. And I'm going, "This is wrong." And when I looked at the things that were in the way, which of these have to do with teaching, you know? Yet they're all

required activities of the College. Now is that sheerly a function of size? I think to a degree it is, because the larger you get the more effort you have to put forth in order to keep everybody on the same page.

Now the rub here is: OK, so let's say it's really cool, you can say Columbia will be eight thousand students maximum and proceed gloriously in the future. How do you be open enrollment and at the same time have a cap on the enrollment? How do you maintain the identity of the College, in terms of the diversity of programming, if there are X number of students showing up at the door for Film and Y number of students showing up at the door for Dance? Does the College just grow depending on where enrollment trends are or do you cap? It's a very, very thorny issue. The other aspect of it is economic. The College runs largely on tuition dollars, and so growth in available dollars means growth in enrollment. And that's a spiral that I don't know how we can, you know, in short of huge gifts to the endowment, ever get out of. Or huge increases in tuition, which then disenfranchise a critically important part of our student body. So I don't know the answers to that one. In fact, I remember on a couple of occasions I've thought about the leaders of the College and I've had no envy for them at all to have to deal with those issues. And I don't know, usually when there's an issue, I can think of some, I have an opinion, I think it should go this way or that way. But these are issues where I go like, I have no idea what to do about this, I have not a notion of how you solve this problem. And another time I feel old is when you go like, "Well, I would've, back in the old days

when we only had two thousand students," you know, it was a different environment. So, yeah, give us or other departments new space, and you've solved significant, immediate problems, but you haven't solved them all. At a hundred dance majors we're already among the largest in the country. Now that's not quite fair. There are programs that might have a hundred modern majors and fifty ballet majors and so that the sheer numbers might be larger. But when we were doing the self-study, we were, you know, doing our comparisons with other programs. University of Utah has, I think, a hundred undergraduate dance majors and seventeen full-time faculty. We have four, you know. Also, I've been out there, you should see their facilities. Now it's a state school, you can't really compare the two in that regard, but at a certain point—you know, I don't want to sound like a complainer, at a certain point you need certain tools to get the job done. At the same time, I know lots of graduates from state schools where, you know, they had these huge studios with all ceiling to floor glass looking at the Rocky Mountains. And then they graduate and go to Chicago or New York, and it's nothing like what they've been trained in. So one advantage that our students do have is that the conditions that they are trained under very much reflect the conditions they are likely to find in the real world. And we get transfer students all the time from other schools that are much better equipped than us. And sometimes I'll sit and I'll listen to a student and they'll talk about why they're leaving and I sort of want to go, "And why are you leaving?" And the reasons they come up with are

really compelling reasons, you know, about the environment of the place, about not feeling nurtured, about feeling like they're a cog in a machine that's being rubber stamped on their way out. "Sure it was an idyllic world campus, but that's not who I am." And so some of those things we see as weaknesses can be seen more than one way, but doesn't mean that I'm not envious sometimes when I hear about the resources other people have to work with.

You have your own office.

Well, you know, I'm so used to this I kind of love it. This is my little world. The students know where to find me; I'm relatively isolated from the hubbub of the little hive of offices downstairs. But, you know, the chair of the department has got an office a quarter the size of this room with no windows and she shares it with somebody else. This doesn't make sense. So if they came tomorrow and said, "Sure, we'll give you seventeen full-time faculty," there'd be no place to put them. We're really kind of up against it here. We've been in this building since before I was here. I don't know the original date that they took possession of this building, and it's always been adequate, but we are approaching the time where it's no longer adequate if we're not there already. Certainly in terms of office space, we're well past that.

If you had your wish list, your priorities, would enlarged space here be the first thing or moving down? I mean, what...

Well, the fantasy would be to do both at once. Do both at once, to end up downtown with more space. Yeah, that would be the fantasy. The difficulty or the huge difficulty is, again, if I were one of the leaders of the College and I said, "OK, here's the Dance Department,

which is about two percent of the College's enrollment. Their space needs are absolute." But you take a room like a dance studio; you need forty feet by sixty feet sort of as a minimum. It's not a multi-use room. You can't move chairs in and then move them back out; it's dedicated to that purpose. Right now we have three studios. We can really use six or seven, quite easily; particularly if we were downtown. Right now we have some classes in the Theater buildings, one extremely inadequate classroom in the Wabash building. There's a studio in the building next door people use for faculty preparation but we can't use it for classes, because it's not in our building and for insurance reasons or something. We have two different suites of offices next door which is a pain to have part of our staff, you know, a building away. We're jerry-rigging, and, you know, the bailing wire and the twine is out holding us together. The fantasy is, you know, let's build a performing arts center for the College. Let's have a nice four to eight story building with a high-quality theater in it. The College is engaged in this capital campaign. I hope we're part of it, but again, if I'm the leader of the College I have to go, "Where's my income, where's my need?" And although our needs are absolute, there are other department's needs which are also absolute and which starving child do you feed first, given that the pile of food is insufficient to meet all needs? So, there are definitely issues that are gonna have to be addressed. The last self, not self-study, long-range planning document recognized this, and said that we may be at the point where, although we're an open-enrollment institution, we have to cap enrollment in certain programs. You know, the mechanisms have not

been worked out. Would it be a lottery?

So what if it comes, you know...

Yeah, what do you do? And nobody's eager to answer that question, but a department like Film, perhaps us, somebody's gonna have to go there first and find out what those parameters are. And that gets very tricky because, again, you don't know how to, if Columbia's about letting people find out who they are and what they want to be or some phrase like that, you can't do that if you don't let them in the door.

I want to make sure we get to this before the interview ends, but if you could speak to your relationship with Shirley Mordine. She brought you here and you've been here now...

Twenty-two years.

And speak to that if you will.

Well, I mean there's the professional relationship, there's the creative relationship, there's a personal relationship. All those things are in flux with Shirley. When I first met Shirley she was, I think, younger than I am now, and she was the choreographer and director of the company for whom I danced. So she was the mature artist, I was the young fledgling artist. And mentor is probably not the right word, but I learned a whole lot about the art form of dance from her through dancing with her. Her role as chair didn't have as much presence in my life for several years. Yes, I started as a part-time faculty. I was teaching this class or that course. And at that time there wasn't the same kind of sense of coordinated curriculum that we have now. But I also learned a lot about teaching from her; from having her as an example and also as a person who would critique my own work as a

teacher at that time. As I got more involved in the running of the department, I began to realize this other hat she had which was, you know, chair of the department. And there, I'm incredibly impressed with all that original generation of chairs who basically, you know, created something out of nothing. And that the vision she had for this place, which is largely unique among dance programs, this notion of a school for dance that's part of a professional Dance Center, which is to say, it has a resident company, and it brings in visiting guest artists that allows non-matriculating students to take classes right beside the matriculating students.

We have, in our advanced classes, professionals who are there to get their own training and maintain their own skills, but are also there is an example and models for our students. That model is just really bold and unusual and has proven to be quite successful. And the fact that she thought that up and built it—and believe me, built it is the right term. I remember, the first year Shirley's like, "The hallways need painting. Let's all come in on Saturday and paint the halls." I mean, that's the level of operation that we were at. Nothing got done unless you did it yourself. That sense of commitment to a vision is really spectacular. I think it's been difficult for her as it has been for all of us to operate integratively with the College largely because of distance. She, for many years, carried that burden much more than the rest of us, because as chair she's got to make all those contacts. Once I became Artist in Residence and eventually full-time faculty, I took on more of that role. And I think that helps her a bit be able to back off from having to carry that burden solely.

Shirley's imprint on the art of dancing in the city of Chicago is just immensely under-appreciated. If you look at the dance artists, modern dance artists, who are out there practicing, if you look at the people who are teaching in the various studios around town, if you look at the various companies who are out there, they almost all have some intersection with this place. They've danced with her, they've taught here, or both, and they were presented here for years, and that's how they got noticed enough to attract their own funding to go off on their own. For many years the only other presenter in town devoted to modern dance, Moming Dance and Arts Center, were essentially all ex-Dance Center people who had gone on to do their own thing. So not just for Columbia College but for the city as a whole you sort of have to say, "What place would dance have in Chicago had it not been for Shirley and that, you know, twenty, thirty year commitment to the art form here, and to Columbia too?" I think the College needs to be applauded for championing an art form that doesn't have a lot of friends, or at least not a lot of very powerful ones. And where the tendency in most places, with the exceptions of some places in Europe and certainly in New York, the tendency in most places is to go conservative: We have our ballet company, we have our jazz company, they do what they've always done and always will do and we call it culture and we're happy. But the notion that this art form is gonna progress and develop and move forward, people who champion that notion are relatively few and far between, and Shirley is certainly one of them. And Columbia, by supporting her, has supported that. And, you know, in New York do they think Chicago is the center for dance? I don't know.

Do they think Columbia College is the center for dance? Absolutely. We're an important stop on a lot of people's itineraries. So I have tremendous respect and affection for Shirley. I mean, certainly we've had our good times and our bad times and we don't always agree, but she's accomplished something quite wonderful here. And, you know, I met my wife dancing in her company. I mean, she certainly had an influence on my life. When I came down here to audition she was looking for a two-year commitment. She said, "You know, if I invest the time and stuff I want to make sure that you'll be here for at least a year." And that sounded just about right to me. And I came down here with every intention of two or three years, tops. So something good must have been happening because I never moved, never moved

What about your background, what brought you to dance?

It's a good question... [It started with music]. What brought me to music was the Beatles, I guess. I mean, at some point when I was quite young I noticed "Gee, you know, you get noticed a lot if you play music." And I played in rock bands through grade school. I started in rock bands and in college I moved into jazz and more serious music. I was really intrigued with experimentalism in music, and at the time, you know, it was the late '60s, early '70s, that was the environment. I had a very unusual educational experience. I attended the Experimental College of the University of Minnesota, which was a ten-year pilot program of a student-run college within the college, which also fits Columbia's background. I mean, as an undergrad, I was involved in designing the curriculum and setting up

courses and all this kind of stuff. And so I did not have the traditional education at all.

Were you from Minnesota or is that program...

It's very interesting. I lived in a suburb of Minneapolis where you could graduate early from high school. And I did everything you needed to do that and was set to graduate and then we moved to the city, where there was a four-year requirement. And in typical '60s rebellious fashion I said, "Well, screw that. If I'm two miles this way I'm a high school graduate but now I'm not? I'm not going." And so I announce to my parents that I wasn't going to go to my senior year of high school because as far as the old rules were I'd already graduated. And, you know, being a typical, what, seventeen year old or whatever, the notion that there would be future consequences of this decision didn't occur to me, so my parents, much to their credit, found something that I might actually want to do. There was a program in which you could take courses at various arts institutions around [time] for high school credit. So my senior year of high school I literally had one English class and lunch at my high school, and I spent my mornings at the Minnesota Dance Theater studying dance, and my afternoons in St. Paul making movies. And so that was my senior year of high school. All I needed was the fourth year of residence; see, I had all my credits.

Is that when you first started dancing?

Yes, absolutely. And what drew me to dance—I really shouldn't say this, should I?—I walked into this place and there were thirty girls in leotards and tights. And they looked at me and said, "A guy," you know, "Come on in!" And I

said, "This does not look all bad." I've always been involved in athletics through junior high, and there was this conflict between being a hippie and being an athlete that I never quite resolved, and dance was sort of the resolution of that; you could be creative and athletic at the same time. So I went into dance very naive about it with no sort of background or history in it at all. But it was a rigorous program; it was four hours a day, five days a week, for an entire academic year. And both modern and ballet and repertoire and because I was a male, males are relatively rare in dance, I was...

Busy.

Busy and, you know, pushed in performances way before I was ready. But just basically they glom onto you and they want you and they're going to develop you. And when I graduated from high school one of the teachers that I really gravitated towards, Andrea Marvey, was also teaching at the Experimental College. And at the time, the University of Minnesota did not have a dance major yet; through Experimental College I could design my own dance major, and so that's what I did. So I continued to take classes at the two professional studios in town and credited them through the University. And likewise, my music program, I took a lot of classes at the University but there was the West Bank School of Music, which was primarily about jazz and experimental music, which is where I did a lot of my musical work. And so I would sort of go out, not unlike Columbia, and put together classes and design my own thing and then when it was done it was...

It was encouraged or...

It was, well, within Experimental College it was assumed. In fact, it

was an interesting process. Every semester you made a contract with your seminar group, which was other students and faculty with the college, that you'd say, "This is what I'm gonna do." and you'd figure out the credit hour load and everything. And then at the end of the semester you'd have a meeting with them when they'd evaluate what you've done and plan your next one. And at the end of four years, or the end of the certain number of credit hours, you met with a graduation committee, which was comprised of experts in your fields and all this other stuff and that was a little scary.

The dark side of all this is if you look at my transcript now it says: Experimental College, eighteen credit hours. There's no course designations on much of it because there weren't [any]. In fact, one of the last initiatives I was involved in there was negotiating with the college, on behalf of the Experimental College, about transcript procedures because we were all worried about this: what does this mean? You know, when we go out into the real world? I remember when I first applied here and they needed copies of my transcript for my files. It was years later, I was looking at my own faculty file and I think it was Lya, who was the Dean, who had written on my transcript: "What, no courses?" Which is exactly what it looked like. And so we invented some; somewhere I have a copy of this. We kept our own transcripts where we kept a record of what we'd done, but there's no official seal, there's no nothing on it like that so... problematic. But, now it's interesting, Experimental College was open to any student from the University of Minnesota, but the selection was by

lottery. It was very small, a hundred students, and that was its maximum size ever. So I felt very fortunate to have gotten in on that system. You know, I don't know if I'd do it the same way if I had to do it over again, though, I really don't.

Because...

It was funny. I was studying...

It seems it worked out for you.

It worked out very well for me but I do have regrets. In my sophomore year I was taking East Indian Classical Music with these gentlemen who would travel from India and were teaching in the music department. And that mode of learning, which was "I know what I'm doing; you don't. Listen to what I tell you, do exactly what I say"—it was so refreshing. After this whole thing of I'm gonna build up myself, I'm gonna, you know, rebelling against the whole notion that anyone had anything to tell me. That kind of clarity was so [compelling], and it's actually at that point where I started taking the regular sequence of courses required for a music major as well as the other stuff I was doing. Because it occurred to me that, you know, there are people out there who have been through all this, and at that point I was willing to submit my self to their greater wisdom. But it took that rather significant, cross-cultural experience to make the point. With other more Westernized, and in my mind, establishment ways of operating, I wasn't willing to be as attentive and to listen. So that was an important lesson. Yeah, I'd like to do my first two years of my undergraduate over again. And, that's how far I got; I never went to graduate school. I came here, danced professionally, did a lot of music. And I am, I am glad about

that. At the time, graduate school and music composition, which is what I'd consider...

Very unexperimental...

Well, most of it was, you know, twelve-tone music and that whole notion of that German, you know, Schoenberg-esque serialism and sort of rigorous intellectually composed music. And I'm a romanticist, I guess, [and dance is] about how it makes you feel and how you respond to it on that level. And there wasn't a lot of support for that, at least at the University of Minnesota and a couple of other undergraduate schools that I looked at. And you know, if I hadn't woken up that morning and gone to that class where Shirley auditioned, I might have ended up in graduate school—who knows? I was really at a loss once I graduated. I had no idea what was gonna come next, none whatsoever.

Well, the stories of how people got here, you know, one after the other it seems so serendipitous.
Yeah, yeah.

The path that was woven either by Mike or someone that was working well with him or he picked or they picked

I'm not surprised. You know, I've always regretted I had almost no relationship with Mike Alexandroff. I think I met him formally once. I don't know if he saw me in an elevator he would even recognize who I was, and we overlapped a good number of years, but those were my isolated in the Dance Center years.

Yet, he walked the halls currently until the day he retired, and you're up here.

Yeah, it's always been a regret of mine. I certainly am aware of his legacy, but I never had a personal

relationship with him. I think I met him when I became Artist in Residence. I think I was ushered to his office and shook his hand or something to that effect.

Well great, I think that's a good place to stop it.