

FSU in NYC

A Big Slice of Site-Specific Life

FSU in NYC, the Department of Dance's pioneering semester of study in New York City, is five years old and flourishing. To put it mildly. More like five years old and flying. Every year since 2002, seniors and graduate students have had the adventurous chance for academic courses, professional dance classes, concerts, internships, famous guest lecturers, major museums, dance archives, libraries, networking to the nth, street food, good food, subway confusion, and exhilarated exhaustion in the world's most dance-packed city.

The brainchild of Dr. Sally Sommer, professor of dance history and theory (and long-time New York resident), and Dr. Tricia Young, professor and academic advisor for the American Dance Studies Program (and New York University alumna), FSU in NYC is in Sommer's words "a gateway to the city" for aspiring dancers, choreographers, arts administrators, and historians of dance. Not only a full-body immersion into New York's

pulse and places, it is also a rigorous and imaginative study of what the urban-art nexus means: past, present, and on the horizon. The particular place is New York; the lessons learned and insights achieved do not stop there. And other universities have noticed.

VISCERAL

MEERKATS TO COOL CATS

New York is huge and hectic. Many college dance graduates jump straight into its forging fire and get burned, or at least singed. "It's a very well-working machine," says program director Sommer, a nationally known scholar and journalist who has written for the *Village Voice*, *New York Times*, *Vanity Fair*, *Dance Research Journal* and also produced video documentaries, "but you have to be focused in the midst of chaos. It takes a lot of energy."

"Get your hands dirty," one FSU in NYC veteran advised prospective participants at Florida State. Get outside the campus "bubble" was senior Ashley Sholtes's take: "FSU in NYC was crucial to my future because

"Environment shapes how an artist approaches work," says Sommer.

Photo of students taken on the balcony of the Statue of Liberty.

Top row (left to right): A'Keitha Carey, Sasha (friend of Tika, not FSU student), Latika Young, Katie Weir, Sally Sommer, Ashley Sholtes, Lauren Birnbaum

Bottom row (left to right): Rebecca Bliss, Ashley Melone, Kat Hall, Nicole Byrne, Jennia Plinke, Kristen Sholes



it brought me outside the castle doors of the dance department to the rough, real, cutting-edge dance scene.”

“It gives people courage,” says Sommer. With delight, she describes new arrivals peering about “like meerkats, fearing danger, trying to navigate. I watch them go from tense little creatures to casual subway riders. Back on campus, they’re more relaxed and focused, as if they’ve grown 10 years.”

MFA candidate Seiji Gammage articulates other visceral benefits: “It reinvigorated me. On campus, as

it should be, a big focus is fulfilling requirements. New York renewed how much I love dance and love to dance.”

INTELLECTUAL

CITY/DANCE, DANCE/CITY

Gammage’s academic life recharged too, despite “a ton” of required reading and writing: “The academic/arts line disappeared because we became a part

of the arts landscape as we interacted with artists through class, panel discussions, and as audiences.”

Exactly the point for Sommer and Young, who created a core course to reveal the city as “an evolving art event.” Students learn that dance in New York arises from, and affects, its physical-social landscape—multiethnic population, neighborhoods, architecture, bridges, politics, fashions, street life, institutions, other arts—and always has. The semester’s trajectory is historical, surprising some students

with George Washington's fame as a dancer and later with current white-knuckle 'extreme' dance.

"Environment shapes how an artist approaches work," says Sommer. One aspect is that "Artists are homesteaders. They go to undesirable, cheap areas. Location can determine what kind of theatres we have, what dance is done, who goes there." She relishes students' trip to the Lower East Side Tenement Museum while studying immigration's effects (past and present) on theatre and performance. In 2002 students saw choreographer Doug Varone's site-specific work *Neither* in a claustrophobic museum room. "This excavation piece," says Sommer, "asks and answers the question: how does an artist use the city's character, history, and architecture in a very contemporary piece?"

Students always visit certain must-see places, but the syllabus also flows with what's happening. In 2006, the International Site-Specific Dance Conference was an amazing exposure to artists, critics, and presenters—for students who had just been creating work in parks and subways.

Then there are research resources, which means people as well as archives, nonprofits, and institutions of dance, art, theatre, film, history. "My semester was personally important for research," says MA graduate Latika Young, who will head FSU in NYC during Sommer's sabbatical in 2007. "Having access to the exhaustive archives in the New York Library for the Performing Arts was invaluable."

Whether poring over archives or picking brains, Florida State students access amazing primary sources. Guest lecturers are national art leaders—performers, choreographers, scholars, journalists, filmmakers, administrators—often tied to live dance the students have just seen. To drop a very few names: Bill T. Jones, Susan Marshall, Rennie Harris, Paul Taylor (studio rehearsal and chat), Joan Acocella (the *New Yorker*), Wendy Perron (*Dance Magazine*), Dean Moss

(PS 122, The Kitchen).

"It was shocking," says Sholtes, "the people that Sally Sommer is buddy-buddy with and we got to meet!"

OCCUPATIONAL

NOT TOURISTS

Attending ever-changing NYC performances is curriculum too. The group sees four concerts weekly (informal, formal, mainstream companies, test-the-limits ones). But many students, says Sommer, become "culture vultures, eating up six to nine performances per week."

This saturation—along with internships, ushering (free tickets), and a panoramic choice of technique classes—is a stark difference "from being a tourist for two weeks," Sommer says. "They're part of the dance world and work force, in the trenches."

Florida State students have built a reputation for hard, smart work. Some 30 internships have encompassed companies and artists such as José Limón, Paul Taylor, and Eiko and Koma; venues like the Joyce Theatre and the Kitchen; the *New York Times*, *Village Voice*; the Pilates Center, Movement Research Institute, Columbia Artists Management. The work is administration, videography, teaching, clerking . . .

These internships—which often produce job offers—and the professional technique classes empower students both as dancers and survivors. Sommer: "They must figure out alternatives for themselves, become realists without being cynics: 'How do I stay in the dance world, keep myself afloat, until I get into a company I want?' They quickly learn they won't be rich and famous. But being in the field they learn how the feeder system works. Start with smaller companies."

Thus the BFA and MFA graduates who return to New York are dancing and choreographing, but they're working too. In Gammage's

internship at Aaron Davis Hall, "I saw a production go from idea to performance, and that was incredible. It also showed me that even in New York, a job is mundane at times. That's important because we can romanticize the city." Gammage now has a permanent position at Aaron Davis.

Latika Young is another whose internship, at the Dance Films Association, led to a job. In 2008 she will coordinate the Dance on Camera Festival at Lincoln Center. Young notes that all internees develop close work relationships, making "the post-graduate transition to New York City much more navigable and less daunting."

Sholtes will choose Atlanta over New York but calls her internship at the Harkness Dance Center invaluable: "Being on the administrative side really taught me a lot about what it would be like to run my own company or studio."

Versatility in dancers is crucial in Sommer's experienced view. "If dance isn't full-time, how do you keep them playing in the ballpark? By playing different positions. This is true now and later, when performing ends. With a degree and extraordinary experience, they can be journalists, presenters, grant writers, dance technologists."

(INTER) PERSONAL

ENSEMBLE, SOLO

Networking and mentoring are built into FSU in NYC. As Latika Young observes, "There is no risk to fall flat on one's face or slip through the cracks because of the intimacy and support among the group's participants and teachers." Also, the Department of Dance has a large contingency of graduates in the city. FSU in NYC expands the group and helps it cohere: "An informal mentorship program is developing with an extensive web of people who can share information about good dance classes, job leads,

and upcoming auditions. This component of the program cannot be undervalued.”

New and exciting in 2006 was rental of a beautiful space (Gus Solomon’s loft) to bring studio into curriculum. Moving and creating together is a unification like no other. Also, dancers work out ideas—and frustrations. Sommer: “New York is so big they see work so bad it makes them mad . . . I can do better than that! Or they see something wonderful, a standard against which to play. There’s nothing that isn’t inspirational. Now we have a place to take that energy.”

In the end, FSU in NYC is both an ensemble piece and a very personal solo. Shared readings, discussions, concerts, journals, and papers co-exist with individual choices in internships, concerts, and dance classes.

A’Keitha Carey: “I took so much different dance—Brazilian, Haitian, capoeira—not available elsewhere. If you’re going to be a dancer out in the world, you need it. And you need it to develop your own style.”

Gammage: “FSU in NYC helped focus my goals, gave me that hunger a dancer needs . . . largely due to healthy competition. I came face to face with the men I will be auditioning against.”

Kathleen Wessel: “I loved hanging with so many dancers, seeing them in class, realizing that I was better than some. It gives you confidence to assert yourself and your point of view.”

TRANSLATABLE

SETTING THE WORK

New York City isn’t the only city for dancers, Tricia Young is quick to point out: “It’s the city Sally and I know best.” Still, as a dance cornucopia and a mecca for many aspiring dancers, it’s a coveted off-campus campus—which FSU is defining. Scholarships and graduate assistantships have helped support students since the beginning. “The program has potential for growth with other regional universities,” says Sommer. In fall 2007, FSU in NYC will collaborate with the University of Florida, welcoming Gainesville dancers to New York for a five-day intensive.

FSU in NYC already enrolls New York University students each semester (“NYU students know the city and people,” says Sommer, “but

they have no program remotely like ours, concretely linking city and arts. They love it.”)

Florida State University’s Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography (MANCC) is another campus-to-city (and vice versa) link as more and more New York artists come to Tallahassee. FSU in NYC student Shoko Letton interned with Eiko and Koma as a videographer, later filled that role when the dancers came to MANCC, and now works with them in New York.

Sommer herself leads a “dual life” between FSU and NYC, feeling fortunate for the rewards and resources of both: “a seamlessness has happened between campus teaching and New York connections.”

Or between any setting and New York, says Sholtes: “I want to bring my voice and what I now know about the cutting-edge dance scene of NYC to another part of the country. I carry new insights into life and dance wherever my future may lead.”

New insights are the ultimate goal for the creators of FSU in NYC: “If we enable dancers’ and choreographers’ self-reflection—Where am I, and what does that mean to making dance?—then we’ve done a good job as teachers,” Sommer sums up.

She should be fulfilled to hear Seiji Gammage’s most valued lesson: “Feeling a part of a community of artists, and also of something much bigger than us as individuals, was incredible. It is a very special thing to be a dancer.”

Sholtes: “I developed as an artist in becoming a much better critic. My choreographic mind matured. I saw a lot of dance. I loved some, hated some. And that is what New York is all about: something for everyone.”