

*Note: "FSU in NYC" was initiated by Drs. Sally Sommer and Tricia Young of the MA in American Dance Studies at Florida State University, Department of Dance (MA/ADS); Sommer has lived and worked in the NYC dance field for over thirty years.*

## **GATEWAY TO THE CITY**

**By Sally R. Sommer**

"FSU in NYC" is an intensive semester in New York City that introduces Florida State University students to the city's dance community. "FSU in NYC" takes place each fall, and functions as a gateway to the professional dance world for graduate students in a mentored stimulating environment, while they continue with their regular academic studies and take studio classes of their choice. During this semester, students learn about the arts while learning to navigate the city and the dance world. The aim is to better prepare them for life after college—while they are still in college—by providing them with professional training and the crucial, intangible insights about self and careers that come from experiential immersion in the life of the city. As student Meredith Howard wrote: "The importance of having time in this city as a dance student can be compared to a student studying medicine needing experience in a hospital. A realistic perspective of the field is present so I am far more equipped for my life after college than I would have been otherwise."

The realities of university dance programs are that they function at a disadvantage. The better-funded, extensive programs in history or science (for example) with hundreds of faculty members enjoy the fractious tug-and-pull of multiple opinions and educational approaches that enrich the mix. Dance, by comparison, has few faculty lines, and new hires are often chosen for compatible philosophies about technical training, dance-making and dance education. This promotes harmony in dance departments, but also effectively perpetuates uniform practices that separate them from changes in the wider field. Under the best circumstances— with progressive governance and guest artists and teachers continually refreshing the pool— students cannot experience the wide range of dance genres, techniques or choreographic approaches available in the city. Students are insulated, with little chance to collide with different ideas about what dance is, what art is, and why they are doing it. These are core issues that must be confronted by any serious young artist.

I often hear in academic dance departments, "Oh, we are just as good as they are in New York!" In a technical and production sense that is often correct. New York is scruffy and often crude, but the richness is in the enormous variety and sheer number of the city's arts activities. My favorite art dictum is: "Quantity begets quality." Young dancers need first-hand exposure to quantity— the good and bad contemporary developments that influence where the larger dance world is moving and affect the individual's assessment of where they fit in that world. Student Amy Flanagan noted: "I've seen so much crap that it makes me feel good, like 'I can do that, and I've also seen so much great stuff I feel like I didn't know anything before about what was really going on."

Immediacy is one of the beauties and one of the disadvantages of the performing arts. Whether the effort is on training or on observation or on bringing history to life, the exchange must be experiential and living. As student Dajhia Ingram wrote: "New York City is packed with

opportunity, a rich history and culture that I will continue to study and learn from. Its history took me on a journey through the lives and struggles of the people who inhabit the island – from the 1700's through today...[and] intrigued me because of its endless connection to the New York City of today. I've felt those connections everywhere, from the riding subway to the roof of the MET; and I'm thankful for the opportunity to become a part of [it.]" Technically, dance requires replication and response in the body. In dance writing, as in writing about theater, art cannot be properly described, analyzed and critiqued unless seen live. Nor can history have vitality unless the past is directly linked in a meaningful way to the present.

The overarching challenge is how to make the diverse elements of the program relevant. One key to understanding how the city and its arts function is to look at the whole as a system of inter-connections. Thus, the job of the program and of each individual class is to reveal these intersections. The two-part course "New York City as Art and Resource" twines academics with performances. Professional internships place students inside the dance workplace. In American Dance History, students become contributor/participants in a larger research project "Library without Walls: George Washington Project" and thesis research can exploit all the city's archives, libraries and museums.

"New York City as Arts and Resource" (six credits) is based on the fundamental principle that the city itself interacts with dance, causes dance. Dance history is everywhere, interwoven with exhibitions and performances, films, libraries and especially with the people— the prominent, generous guests: choreographers, performers, film people and arts administrators. With this inclusiveness, practical paradigms for theoretical and/or historical analyses are created. "It helped to be amidst such a wealth of resources," wrote Dajhia Ingram... "Space and history provide telling information about dance and social movements; actually going to a variety of these places was of infinite importance. Meeting and chatting with so many artists also helped me to define the relationship of dance to personality, history, and space." Dance history and theory gets placed within the larger urban intellectual and arts context, showing how the city and the arts— traditionally and currently— operate in a gigantic interlocked system. Because the class is dependent on what performances are happening each fall, the syllabus changes each semester to suit the offerings.

For example in fall 2004, as a complement to seeing Baroque dance, we visited the spectacular "Dangerous Liaisons" exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum. Ballet technique is explained: Once students see the dresses they understand the pragmatic placement of the ballet/Baroque arms, positioned slightly in front of the torso and gently curved to accommodate the clothes. Corseting reveals why the ballet torso is upright and restrained, while neck and shoulders are fluid. These are the elusive social and human histories behind the ballet technique.

Other class units study immigration patterns, or the effects of the Revolutionary War, and how these forces determine what styles of dancing were performed onstage and off. "Library Without Walls: The George Washington Project," a collaboration between FSU MA/ADS and New York Public Library/Dance, centers research in the politics and dance practices of George Washington's time. When the students study that time period, they become active contributors to a national research project, so studying 18th century dance/social practices (not at the top of most wish lists) gains relevancy in today's world. Older patterns of immigration also affect

contemporary dance-makers. Choreographer Doug Varone talked about his dance *Neither*, specifically created for, and performed in, the tight unlit rooms of the Tenement Museum on the Lower East Side. Watchers and dancers felt the claustrophobia of ghetto life and death—paralleled later in the creation of hip hop and its explosive dance battles. Research courses (three credits) are individualized to suit specific interests, work is focused in a particular library or archive, or on oral/video histories, or other viable approaches the students undertake.

Voluntary professional internships put the student in the network of presenting institutions, producers, arts management and administrators and alongside their creative peers. Dajhia Ingram described her experience as providing "a behind-the-scenes look into the dance world [that is] extremely helpful and important in dealing with the logistics of a company. i.e., grant writing, marketing, touring, etc. One of the most beneficial parts are the connections I have learned important tools from the people I worked with, and the projects I completed go beyond the classroom of dance." Professional arts organizations serve as conduits for the students to transition into the professional dance field.

While NYC can be exhilarating, it can also be distracting and depressing. Therefore, an emphasis is put upon the fact that work is expected in the classes and in the internships, that life is structured with expectations and results. It helps the student master focus, to feel self-confident, and to finish projects— but it does this while also providing them with as much support and direction as necessary.

The philosophy of "FSU in NYC" is to spread before the students the art-abundance that defines New York as a world arts capital. It affords the widest array of technique classes, the largest dedicated community of dance creators and presenters, producing the broadest variety of performances. Students recognize that, as said, "The very city in which the program dwells is extremely important in why this program must exist." The student, Nicole Durfee, added, "In such a specific field of study as dance, it can be extremely difficult to get a realistic grasp of what is happening ... unless you are literally in the thick of it. I have learned more, grown more rapidly, and matured more steadily in this single semester than I have in my years in school." In addition, New York City has the finest dance research archives and libraries and is the center of print, media and film industries. In having a pool of experiences, students can choose relevant areas of concentration that deepen them artistically and intellectually, and they are given a template for evaluating their career goals. FSU also enhances curriculum choices for New York University graduate dance students in their individualized study program, called the Gallatin Division. In fall 2004, three Gallatin students participated in our "American Dance History I" class, and in the "NYC as Arts and Resource" class. New York University student Kate Enright noted, "I heard many students describe how eye-opening it was to be in the city. They now understand what it is like to be in a non-sheltered environment, working in their art form of choice." Students need to understand— better yet, they need to feel— the difference between the accommodating womb of the university and the tough dynamic life-style of young NYC dancers. simply finding acceptable housing is horrendously difficult. and, since fsu does not subsidize student housing in any way, they scrounge for accommodations like all the rest of the young dancers. New York City is notoriously poor in physical performing and rehearsal facilities so focus is fixed on individual creativity and on the dancer dancing— very often in odd places.

The scope of today's "dance study" extends beyond the studio and stage to include research and theory, writing, and media explorations. Students exploit the city as classroom, and once they grasp the logistics of how NYC functions as an arts center, they can apply that knowledge to any city. The program maintains the student in a socially supportive yet individually interactive way. Beyond the basic training in academic courses, studio work, thesis research and internships, they see about four events/performances per week. Some of them have far outstripped that number and became culture vultures, eating up six to nine performances per week. They learn to work the system to scrounge up tickets, taking full advantage of ushering, student rush, ticket lotteries, half-price and reduced rates. One young woman made a point of trying to see something every night of the week, defeated only when she had to go to bed instead. Kate Enright remarked, "FSU in NYC" offers a wide variety of resources and personalities and the program did a great job of utilizing resources. As a Gallatin student, who has the city as her school, I found the FSU program easy to navigate; it opened many doors for me in the process. I now have a better understanding of how the dance community works in the city, and how to stay in contact with it. The 'NYC as Arts and Resource' class taught me to look at many various aspects of society in order to inform my dance research." The opportunity for students in regional universities to become active members in the NYC arts capital fulfills a deep pedagogical need. As a pilot project of Florida State University, "FSU in NYC" has been enriching and exciting— the best that arts education can promise. As Nicole Durfee said, "Everything I've learned at FSU has been in preparation for joining the larger dance world, which is primarily centered in New York City. Therefore, this gave me my introduction into the entire community in which I hope to work. I was able to see what kind of work is being done and who is doing it."