

Listen For It: Dance, Dance, Evolution

THE LEGACY OF DANCE DEPARTMENT CHAIR KITTY DANIELS

By Rosie Gaynor



Cornish dance students. Photo: John Lambert

We take it for granted that Cornish dance students and alums are everywhere—dancing in companies, forming collectives, performing independently, teaching, studying, coaching, choreographing, and collaborating all around Seattle and beyond.

But that was not the case when Cornish hired Kitty Daniels 29 years ago to chair the Dance Department. Daniels hadn't seen Cornish students in the dance classes she taught around town. So, one of the first things she did as Chair was to open the doors. "There's a big world out there that they could be learning from," says Daniels. "We're always pushing students out the door." A happy byproduct of this outside exploration is that by the time they graduate, most Cornish students have created their own authentic connections in the professional dance community.

The department already had a tradition of asking the outside world in, and Daniels pushed that particular door open even wider. Nowadays, Cornish invites 15 to 25 guests to give master classes each year. Choreographers come to work with the students. And the Bossak/Heilbron Charitable Foundation supports an annual two-week residency that allows for intensive engagement with outside artists. In 2013, that meant Cornish students learned a technique not available in Seattle (Gaga) and danced Ohad Naharin's exciting *Echad Mi Yodea*, an experience that established for Cornish students a commonality with the likes of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, who have also performed it.

It seems a small thing, just opening the doors. But it evolved into something much bigger, with huge repercussions for Cornish students and for the Seattle dance landscape. Nowadays, as Daniels says, the fact that Seattle is a vibrant dance community both *feeds* Cornish and is *because* of Cornish.

One couldn't have planned it better. But Daniels didn't start with some grand vision. In fact, she rejects the label "visionary" entirely, explaining that this



Breathing Room, choreography by Molly Scott, from Cornish Dance Theater's Spring 2013 concert

Photo by Chris Bennion, Design by John Engeman

change and other changes in the department during her tenure have occurred through a more organic "evolution," a process of looking and listening for the next logical step.

In retrospect, the department's success seems inevitable, and Daniels was the obvious choice to lead the way. She is active in dance education/medicine associations, she publishes research, she teaches master classes internationally. The Daniels we know now is, in Gail Hellbron's words "so well-respected nationwide for all her talents and expertise...truly an inspiration!" But keep in mind: Daniels was only in her thirties when Cornish hired her as Chair. She was a freelance performer and a dance teacher, and although she had taught in higher education for 14 years, she had never held a full-time position in academia. What she did have, however, was first-hand experience of the professional dance world she would be preparing students for, the willingness to question that world's foundational thinking, and the ability to put aside ego as she looked for answers that could help her students.

DANIELS REFUSED TO IGNORE, FOR EXAMPLE, that most dancers do more than perform. They also teach, choreograph, write, produce shows, market shows, seek funding, and, in smaller companies, function like business owners. Like most schools at the time, Cornish emphasized performance. Daniels worked to expand the curriculum to cover what she calls the "patchwork quilt" of a dancer's life. You can feel the results when

you walk onto the third floor of Kerry Hall. There's realism, hope, and lack of desperation in the student-centered curriculum she and the faculty have created. Yes, dance entails financial risk and hard work. But here are thriving role models; here are ideas and skills to navigate those risks.


This shift, too, comes with happy repercussions: when you devote time and knowledgeable faculty to these "extra" activities, people see them not just as back-up survival plans, but as interesting, important ways of engaging with dance. Dance broadens. Students broaden. And, ironically, the entire experience can strengthen a dancer's performance, too.

Daniels had an uncommon qualification on her resume when Cornish hired her: an MA in dance kinesiology. Her interest in dance science flared up when, at 21, she switched from ballet to modern dance. "I had been a very strong professional ballet dancer and I could do a triple turn on pointe," she recalls, "but I could not stand on one leg, put my other leg out to the side, and curve my body without falling over... Shouldn't," she wondered, "the technique in one form be good technique in the other?"

Back then, dance culture encouraged blind obedience to a teacher's strictures rather than listening to your own body, but Daniels listened...thought...and experimented. Years later, getting her MA, she found that classes and clinical work bore out what her own body had already told her. In clinical work with

kinesiologist Karen Clippinger, Daniels saw clear correlations between injuries and (1) ways of dancing, and (2) areas that required strengthening. "To me that was a moment of immense empowerment," says Daniels, "because essentially what she was saying was that you can control whether you get injured or not." To exercise even some control over injuries is to release dancers from a host of physical, emotional, and financial hardships.

Daniels has worked to empower students artistically, too—to listen to their hearts as well as to their bodies. In the senior seminar she teaches, she sees the results of the faculty's continual push toward individuality and authenticity, and of the curriculum's gradual progression from structure to freedom. "There are 20 people in the room going in 20 different directions," she says. "And that is when I smile inside. Because that is what we wanted. We wanted them to figure out what speaks to them in the world of dance and to go out there and create their own pathway."

Daniels might not approve this article's subtitle—she would point out that it's not just *her* legacy. "This is a group effort," she says when asked about the department's achievements. "This is not mine." Which is a beautiful thought, because it means that although Daniels retires in May 2015, the department can continue to listen, to evolve logically and organically, even without her. What better legacy is there than that? 



Subway Stories: Dancing on the 'A', choreography by Iyun Ashani Harrison, from Cornish Dance Theater's Spring 2012 concert

Photo by Chris Bennion

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Associate Professor Michele Miller coaches students on form. Photo by Calleen Dishy



Kitty Daniels at Kerry Hall studio in 2006.

Photo by Rick Dahms