



Movements, Mentors & Meaning

A LOOK INSIDE BRENAU'S DANCE DEPARTMENT

by Cassidy Clevenger

Writer George Borodin said, "Ballet is not technique, but a way of expression that comes more closely to the inner language of man than any other." The way dance instructors and students from Brenau University seem to put enormous emphasis on the value of communicating is seen by the way students are taught to explore their craft. At Brenau, students go beyond simply creating pieces, and instead learn how to communicate through dance.

The Reason and the Purpose

Brenau University's Dance Department provides the groundwork for students to explore classical ballet, modern, and jazz dance, all while further refining their personal philosophies and values. This heavy emphasis on self-exploration allows the students the opportunity for pursuing a double major, in the hopes of generating the most tailored education possible for the students' aspirations and ideologies.

Madia Cooper, Chair and Assistant Professor of Dance at Brenau, says that performing in showcases allows students the venue to speak their minds. Cooper explains how many of the shows and choreography the students present at showcases have deeper meanings, such as personal narratives. Moreover, for some students, they use the opportunity of the showcase to reinvent themselves in accordance with their personal growth. While the students are learning structure and technique, the professors in Brenau's Dance Department aim to help students discover their inner voices. Cooper describes the department as one that "maintains tradition" while also "burning new pathways to the future."

Spaces for Preparation

Though introspection and creativity are vital, so is endurance and strength. Brenau's Dance Department offers a variety of studio spaces on campus where students may practice. The Brenau University fitness center has four dance studios that are used for classes and rehearsals by the Brenau University Department of Dance and the Gainesville Ballet Company. Additionally, the fitness center has an athletic training room and an athletic trainer available to dance majors.

Secondly, Brenau East houses two large studio spaces and a fully equipped Pilates studio for the Dance Department. The studios provide ample space for both classes and rehearsals. The Pilates studio is fully equipped with a Cadillac Convertible, a Total Workout System, Ladder Barrel, High/Low Combo Chair, Wunda Chair, an Instep Barrel System and Ped-o-Pul. According to the Journal of Dance Medicine and Science, Pilates training can help improve core strength, flexibility, and postural alignment, which can help prevent dance-related injuries.

Getting Outside Perspectives

For more than 35 years, the department has partnered with the Gainesville Ballet Company and the Gainesville School of Ballet, offering unparalleled performance opportunities. Similarly, the multitude of guest artists Brenau invites seasonally offers a variety of benefits to student dancers. These guests provide fresh perspectives, teaching methods, and choreography that expand students' abilities and help them achieve their goals. For example, the guest performances and workshops for 2019 include the following: tête-à-tête, an immersive arts platform; a lecture on Black Dance and Dancing the African Diaspora; Terminus Modern Ballet Theatre; Zoetic Dance Ensemble.

Upper-level students choreograph two performances each—one solo and one group number. In addition to students getting a Brenau instructor's feedback, guest artists also serve as outside judges. The professionals score all aspects of the production, including props, lighting, costumes, story, and tone. This process helps students prepare for their upcoming careers, by allowing them to hear critiques and have conversations with current professional dancers working in the field.

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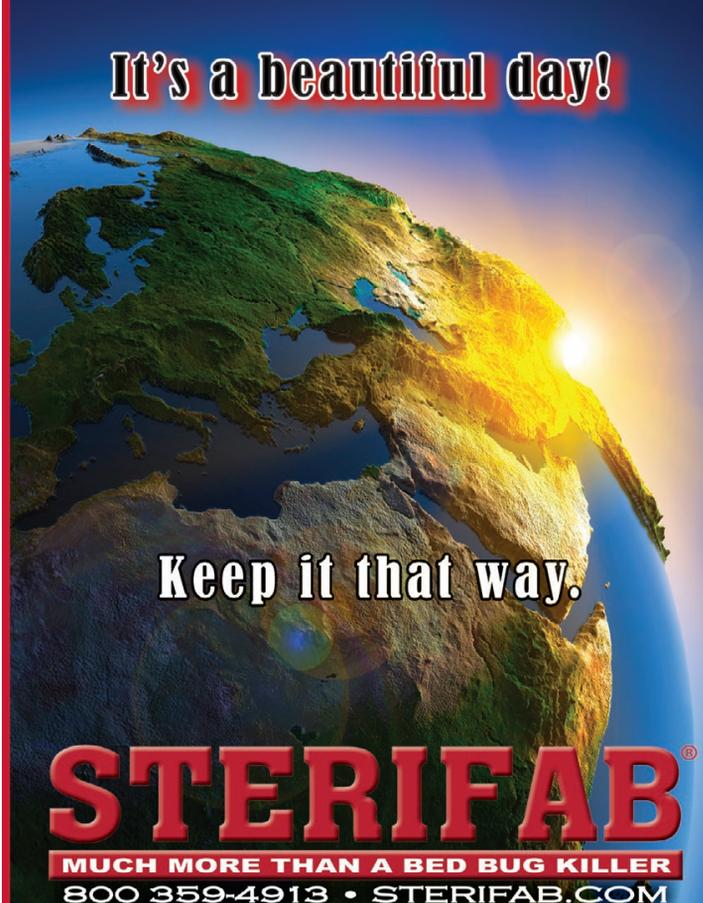
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The Power of a Mentor

For college students, self-exploration is both a necessity and a trepidation. When Cooper reflects on her time as an undergraduate dance student at Brenau, she is filled with fond memories about her mentors. Looking back, she feels as though Brenau provided her an artistic outlet and professional experience, while allowing her to still have fun and be free to explore her own vision. Cooper adds that the emotional connections and academic experiences she had as a student have been deeply influential in how she instructs today; the opportunities and support her professors gave her have come full circle, and are impacting the type of Chair and professor she wants to be for her students.

Cooper explains, for students, having a committed mentor has the power to “fuel the fires of inspiration” for young students. As an undergraduate, Cooper developed a special connection with Brenau’s former Chair of Dance, Jolie Long Carlton. Carlton, by all accounts, has left long-lasting impressions on



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her former students and colleagues. Cooper says, "I appreciate our friendship as co-workers and as sisters in faith. She was everything one could look for in a great mentor."

The Gratitude

Cooper produces all the dance productions at Brenau, and she feels all are equally strong, albeit, wildly varied. One show that carries a heavy emotional bearing for Cooper was the memorial service for Jolie Long Carlton last spring. Carlton passed away on May 1, 2018, after a long battle with cancer, which has left a palpable effect on the dance department.

Prior to her passing, Carlton continued to work, even while undergoing chemotherapy; this gives a quick highlight to the kind of dedication she had to her students and university.

Briefly before her passing, the dance department performed a living memorial service at one of the showcases, titled LUCENT. Sadly, due to her health and hospice needs, Carlton was not able to attend the performance, but that did not stop Brenau from bringing the show to her. The university arranged to have the performance



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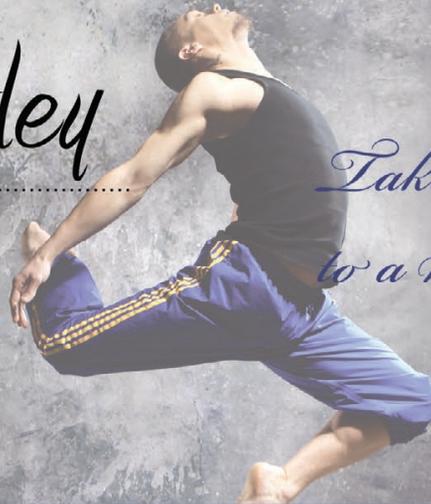
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livestreamed to Carlton and her family in the comfort of her own home. Carlton watched students and colleagues perform in her honor, read poems, and hold a candlelight vigil. During the service, the department displayed pictures of her twenty-year career at Brenau, as well as created a book of memories and quotes about her positive impact on the world.

Performing arts are an extension of trying to understand the world; some use dance to express joy, while others have darker or heavier emotions they are trying to work through. Dance is much more than a celebration; it's communication. Universities like Brenau are providing students with the resources needed to discover what kinds of value they want to portray, and then teaching them the techniques to preach their messages.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Cassidy Clevenger is a Samford University alum. She is currently in graduate school at Samford in the MSW program, while working as a staff writer.



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