

DANCER AND CHOREOGRAPHER Heather Klopchin BRINGS REAL-WORLD EXPERIENCES TO ST. OLAF DANCE STUDENTS

By Kelly Wilson '07 PHOTOGRAPHED BY ERIK SAULITIS



"Sedentary" is a foreign concept to Heather Klopchin, an associate professor of dance at St. Olaf who spends most of her time on the go. The constant activity allows her to do what she loves most: explore physical movement and its connection to the intellect and the spirit.

As an instructor, Klopchin works with students on ballet, modern and jazz technique, and she has also taught dance history and the senior career seminar. As a choreographer, she cocreates works for the St. Olaf Dance Department and independent dance companies. As a performer, she has danced with several premier companies, including Joe Chvala Flying Foot Forum, Linda Lehovc & Dancers, and the Minneapolis-based modern dance company ARENA Dances.

Klopchin has been just as active in her sabbatical this past academic year, performing in Minneapolis, Oregon and New York, and choreographing and researching new innovations in dance technique.

What was your early dance career like?

I started dancing at four years old. I was pigeon-toed, so the doctor said ballet would help with my outward rotation. I was involved in sports, school musicals, gymnastics and jazz dance but focused mainly on ballet. As a teen, my ballet teacher wanted me doing ballet and nothing else. I had so many other interests, I stopped taking ballet.

Tell me about recent trends in dance today.

In what direction do you think dance is moving?

One major trend that I see happening in concert or theatrical dance is the fusion of dance forms in performance. There are dance companies and choreographers who take different forms of dance, such as hip hop and modern dance, and bring them together to become something new and different. Dance is becoming less definable and continues to lead the way in breaking boundaries and traditions, crossing into other fields and disciplines, and thinking outside of the box.

Why are you passionate about dance?

Dance is the only activity that truly satisfies me physically, emotionally and intellectually. I have participated in other activities that satisfy only one area, but dance challenges me to explore and integrate all three. In our world today, we have become more disconnected from our bodies, leading to all sorts of health and emotional issues. Dance is a way to reconnect the body with the mind and spirit and to serve as an outlet for creativity.

What makes dance at St. Olaf different from other colleges?

We have a very high-quality program at St. Olaf. Our attention to the individual major, the performing opportunities provided, and the inclusion of traditional western dance forms with an international dance component makes us unique. Almost all high-quality dance major programs are found at major universities. To have an exceptional dance major program like ours at a liberal arts college is very rare.

Do you have any favorite dances or types of dance you love to perform?

My main performance focus is modern dance. I am excited by its range of intellectual possibilities and opportunities, its athleticism and its connection to the emotional world. I also enjoy learning about more contemporary dance styles, such as hip hop, which focuses on rhythm and sequential movement.

How do you find a balance between teaching, performing and choreographing?

I place my primary emphasis on teaching, but my performing and choreography definitely inform the way I teach and what I teach. It's like a giant feedback loop with my performing and choreography influencing my teaching and my teaching influencing my performing and choreography. I wouldn't be the same teacher had I not continued to perform and choreograph.

Explain the dynamics of working with a pick-up dance company.

When performing with a dance company you get to know your fellow company members extremely well and they become your circle of friends. Being such good friends with the people you dance with really heightens the sense of trust while dancing, allowing us to take more risks. It also ensures that we are emotionally connected to the other people on stage.

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How will your sabbatical experiences affect your teaching at St. Olaf?

Sabbatical has allowed me to rediscover my love for dance and dig deeper into the field. With both ARENA Dances and Dancing People Company, I was able to really focus for six or seven hours a day on dance making and performing. I can bring these real-world experiences back to my students [showing them how to] make a dance that is new and exciting each time they perform it. 🐾

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