

Vivien Fergusson
March 24, 2017

Bates Dance Festival

Miller Arts Scholars – 3rd Year Outcome Report

Thanks to the generous patrons of the Miller Arts Scholars, I was able to pursue my artistic interests this past summer by attending the Bates Dance Festival at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine. Since the festival's beginning in 1983, students, choreographers, educators, and performers alike have been drawn to BDF for its emphasis on learning, collaboration, and exploration. Bates is a modern dance festival, but it readily accepts, embraces, and encourages other styles, with the belief that expression is limitless and inspiration, to be found anywhere. Additionally, due to its intentionally limited accommodations, only a relatively small number of applicants are accepted, thereby nurturing a deep and deliberate sense of community. This yields an atmosphere of trust in which collaboration can thrive without the common concurrence of competition. BDF is three weeks of intense training (tiger balm, Band-Aids, muscle rollers, and tape for peeling feet become indispensable accoutrements for daily bodily maintenance), but it is a time that yields incredible, invaluable artistic growth.

The festival is structured by the dancer's selection of four hour-and-a-half long classes, to be taken every Monday through Friday for the duration of the program. For me, these included Ballet III, Spiraldynamik, Afro-modern IV, and a class devoted to a reparatory project. Aside from this initial framework, however, the opportunity to dance presents itself in almost every moment of spare time: formal and informal workshops, jams, discussions, question and answer sessions, showings, auditions, and performances. The weekends welcome time for rest and recovery, but may also be spent attending performances by professional companies on the Bates campus. The festival ends with a finale performed by the festival participants themselves in a large gymnasium. It is open to all, and is attended by dancers and Lewiston community members as well.

My Experience of Bates

When I applied for a Third-Year Grant as a Miller Arts Scholar of dance to attend the Bates Dance Festival last year, my intention had been to continue the work I had begun that year under Professor Kim Brooks Mata, the Head and Artistic Director of Dance in the University of Virginia's Department of Drama and my advisor in this endeavor. Kim had introduced me to and guided me through a lot of improvisational and compositional material, all of which was relatively new to me. I had wanted to delve deeper into these newfound methods of dance, because to me they were refreshingly and liberatingly expressive. Improvisation and composition are both remarkably individualistic practices, and I was interested in finding my own voice as a dancer. Moreover, I had wanted to surrender myself to modern dance for a time in a way that I had never had the opportunity to do before. Bates was recommended to me both by Kim and by Kathryn Schetlick, two of the most influential presences over my experience of dance at the University of Virginia. Whatever I had been seeking, Bates Dance Festival met many times over. I left Lewiston not only with a greater understanding of

improvisation and composition, but with a more comprehensive knowledge of my own art and a more focused approach to it as well.

Each class I took left me with a lesson. In Ballet III, I relearned the value of repetition and perseverance through a renewed appreciation of training. I enjoyed starting each day with a technique class, because I was able to warm my body with deep stretches and tune it with concentrated exercises. I witnessed changes in my body and my abilities between each day, whether it was in finding my equilibrium in a pirouette or the ease with which I could perform exercises at the barre.

Spiraldynamik lent me a completely different perspective on my body. I learned to study it- its functions, formation, and limitations- as a product of evolution, and then to relate this understanding to how it can and should be used in dance. To this day, I find myself diagnosing various use-related injuries that I incur with the eye of Spiraldynamik. It has changed the way I hold myself, the way I stand.

My favorite course was Afro-Modern IV, with Michel Kouakou. Michel emphasized the importance of truly *dancing* a combination. As dancers, we often cling to the steady reliability of explicit instruction; we're hooked on getting something exactly right. The most beautiful thing was to see the variety that sprung forth when people decided to let go. I could discern the individualistic differences in bodies and abilities, in their habits of moving, and in what they heard in the music. Michel also stressed natural movement, movement without inhibition: release, release, release. I felt the presence of the musicians the most in this class, due to the accompaniment's often abnormal timing. Some dances were done in fives, others in nines, and an ear always had to be inclined to the musician in order to pick up more obscure cues to begin or end.

And finally, I always ended the day with Marianela Boan, working on our reparatory project. We created a piece for the festival's finale about the seemingly pervasive sentiment of panic that has arisen as many people's response to the growing occurrences of terrorist attacks. We only had about two weeks to choreograph the entire piece. I was so humbled by the ability to perform for those in the festival that had unwittingly left me with so much.

Aside from the classes, I had the incredible opportunity of witnessing performances by Dorrance Dance, Kate Weare Company, and Doug Varone and Dancers, each of which left me with something new and unvisited. Following each performance, the Bates Dances Festival always provided a venue for questions from the audience to the dancers and choreographers. I felt so blessed to sit in the audience after watching a magnificent work, and then to have the opportunity to peer into the mind that had created it and the bodies that had brought it to life, to hear what emotions drove the action and how the intention behind each relationship was forged. Much of what I learned was scribbled messily into my notebook, and used later to create my own piece of choreography the following semester.



Pictures from Afro-Modern IV, hanging on the wall at BDF



Copyright 2016 Arthur Fink Photography

Rehearsing for the finale



Copyright 2016 Arthur Fink Photography



Performing in the Bates Dance Festival finale

How I Used What I Learned

Bates Dance Festival left me with a good deal of work material for what I would come to create in the fall semester. I entered the process with a fairly explicit story that I wished to tell, but much of my inspiration for the way in which I told it- costuming,

music, lighting, etc.- came from what I learned at BDF. I developed a taste for a style of dance that is easy but highly energetic, that is flung proximally but manifests distally. I discovered, perhaps through BDF and through the course I was taking at the time, that ballet had come to influence my movement, in observing what I generated on other bodies. I explored partner work and the significance of touch, both of which had been strong themes throughout my experience of Bates. It was my first-time choreographing in a serious, academic setting, and I found it incredibly challenging. The end product, however, was incredibly rewarding. I found solace in sharing my work with others, and that's all I could have asked for.



Snapshots from my piece, "moths," featuring dancers Bryce Cuthriell and Whatley Ozer, lighting designer Michael Giovinco, with credit to Photographer Jack Looney and the Dance Program at the University of Virginia's Department of Drama.

Thank you to all of the supporters of the Miller Arts Scholars program, with a special thanks to Sandy and Vinie Miller and Evie and Stephen Colbert. I feel the most profound gratitude for this and every experience being a Miller Arts Scholar of Dance has enabled me to have.