



Dance Partnership Offers Apprenticeship

By: Steven Dawson

A new partnership between AU's Dance Program and Christopher K. Morgan & Artists will allow students to apprentice with the professional dance company. Senior political science major Ellie van Bever, who was selected for the first apprenticeship, will perform in three different works in October at the Kennedy Center, Sydney Harmon Hall at the VelocityDC Dance Festival, and at an evening of Christopher K. Morgan & Artists work at the Strathmore Music Center.

Christopher K. Morgan and Melanie George, director of the College of Arts and Sciences' Dance Program, discuss the partnership.

Why did you decide on this partnership and how does it work?

CKM: I've been the artist in residence at AU for almost two years, and many of the conversations that Melanie and I had last year focused on ways we can provide more opportunities for our students to partner with my professional dance company and round out their education through this kind of crossover. A model we've both seen in other universities and dance companies is to have students actually apprentice with a company. I find that a very successful model in that the student gets to integrate with professional dancers.



Christopher K. Morgan with Ellie van Bever '13 (Photo: Steven Dawson)

MG: At the end of the day, it all feeds back into the mission of the dance program, that it is very student centered. There are some students who have the focus that they want to perform, and Christopher's role as artist in residence is really modeling that for them, answering their questions about what it means to have your own company, what it means to be a working dancer, and how can we take that modeling one step further and give them that experience.

How does the selection process work?

MG: It's fairly informal, in that we are a small program and we know our students pretty well. The advanced modern dance students are in Christopher's class and likely have been in his class for four semesters, so it's really a matter of looking at who would be appropriate for the opportunity and extending that offer to them. There isn't an audition; there isn't an application. Perhaps those are things that may come up in the future as the program grows.

CKM: I think it is interesting because the selection process is something we spent a lot of time talking about last spring when we were starting to plan this. All of our other programming at AU is very formal, in terms of an application process and an audition, and very inclusive in terms of how we strategize things like the casting for performances. Given the fact that this partnership is affiliated with a professional dance company, we wanted to have a clear selection and a clear mission of quality that is lending itself to professionalism beyond the four years that a student might spend here in the university. It's not that it's exclusive, but it is very much about setting a certain standard that I expect out of my professional dancers at Christopher K. Morgan & Artists. It's an interesting next step to what our programmatic mission is here at AU, and this is a real reflection of what really happens when you go out into the job market.

MG: Yes, I think that's it. He's absolutely right with the formality and transparency of things. Because we are teaching them as they are having these experiences, it is important to teach how these systems really do work, because someday they might go out into the world, and they may have these jobs. But the reality of being a professional dancer is that it is rarely inclusive and transparent [she laughs]. So within this amazing opportunity that we are providing for the students, we also have to give them the experience that reflects what they will encounter when they leave the educational environment.

How many students will be invited per year?

CKM: We are not going to set a particular number. We have extended the invitation to one student this semester, Ellie van Bever, and given the structure of the AU program and the fact that the calendar intensifies in the spring, we are going to assess it semester by semester.

MG: That is a big thing: keeping the dancers healthy, not spreading them too thin, and knowing that they have a major that they need to complete if they want to graduate on time. The other thing, and this goes without saying, is we don't want the apprenticeship to pull them away from the AU program. It is an addendum to the college dance experience, a part of the educational experience.

You can find more information on Christopher K. Morgan & Artists and Ellie van Bever at www.christopherkmorgan.com