

cofacToday

Spring 2013

College of Fine Arts and Communication

Kanji Takano



DANCE: Featuring TU's Ailey Connection & Beth Griffin

THEATRE: Featuring Dr. Maravene Loeschke, WordBRIDGE & Tanner T. Medding

ARTS: Cubbison Winners' Art

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Dear Friends, Families, and Colleagues,

Welcome to our second issue of *COFAC Today*. In the pages of this issue, you'll read stories of our students, and of significant events that have taken place in COFAC since the summer of 2012.

We're thrilled to highlight the many unique opportunities our students have had to "go pro" this past semester. When the Ailey II Dance Company visited in September, our dance students not only had the chance to see a world-caliber performance, they had the incredible opportunity to take a master class with Troy Powell, Ailey II's Artistic Director.

Tony Winner and Towson alum John Glover returned for his annual visit to the Theatre Department, during which he worked with students and offered master acting classes. And several theatre students spent part of the summer in residence at CENTERSTAGE, as company members of the WordBRIDGE Playwrights Lab, where they worked alongside professionals to help develop new plays.

Our students also had the opportunity to reflect on professionals in action. They saw engaging art from former TU students — now working artists — who submitted pieces to the Ron Cubbison Alumni Art Exhibition. And they witnessed University President Dr. Maravene Loeschke's return to the stage in an Inauguration Week performance of *Love Letters* — an event that demonstrated how an artist's career might blossom in many unexpected ways.

To read more about our students and the wonderful work that happens in our College, please visit the COFAC website, at www.towson.edu/cofac. You'll also find listings for countless dance, music and theatre performances, art exhibitions, film screenings, and community programs in the Arts & Culture Calendar, available at www.towson.edu/main/artsandculture/. We hope you'll join us for some of COFAC's spring events!

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Cover Photo: From
left to right: Danielle
Cook, Beth Griffin,
and Arielle Israel (all
dance majors at TU).

From a section of
*Legends, Volume
II* choreographed
by Linda-Denise
Fisher-Harrell.

DANCE



TU's Ailey Connection

Alvin Ailey's Legacy Continues at Towson University



The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has been a groundbreaking force in the world of dance since its inception in 1958.

Known for its exceptionally skilled dancers and prolific choreographers, the company has shared Alvin Ailey's legacy — his firm belief "that the dance came from the people and that it should always be delivered back to the people" — through worldwide performance, community outreach, dance classes at all levels, and promotion of the arts in education. Its offshoot company, Ailey II, is an incubator for some of the country's most promising young dancers and choreographers. Its influence runs so deep that to mark its 50th anniversary in 2008, the U.S. Congress adopted a resolution honoring the Ailey company as "a vital American cultural ambassador to the world," and for doing "so much to break cultural barriers through the arts."


For Towson's dance students in particular, it's a thrilling thing that a company of such exceptional caliber would perform on campus, as Ailey II did twice on Saturday, September 15th. In fact, countless dancers — including students Beth Griffin and Megan Atkinson, and Assistant Professor Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell — say that seeing an Ailey performance during their formative years inspired their devotion to dance. But what's more exciting is that the Towson-Ailey connection extends far beyond that of a visiting show.

Fisher-Harrell, who danced with Ailey as a com-

pany member and guest artist for nearly two decades, is committed to helping her students "experience that Ailey magic, through Ailey's work, through the company...that infectious performance that they do." To that end, she pursued a grant that enabled TU's dance company to perform excerpts from five Ailey ballets. Fisher-Harrell's longtime friend, "Troy Powell, Artistic Director of Ailey II, came in and set those works. "We did a whole residency and the company performed them, which was amazing."

That Towson's dance students are getting first-hand exposure to the Ailey legacy and technique is undeniably fortuitous. Towson secured the rights to perform *Battlefield*, choreographed by Robert Battle, who took over the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre's artistic directorship following the retirement of the legendary Judith Jamison. Jamison herself was on campus in January 2012, to receive an honorary doctorate at the university's 147th Commencement.

This year, in addition to two performances, Ailey II did mini performances for area students, and master classes for Towson's dance students and the public.

Looking forward, Fisher-Harrell hopes Towson's relationship with Ailey will thrive and expand. A primary goal is to bring AileyCamp — a program that teaches self-empowerment to at-risk kids through dance and the arts — to campus as a COFAC-wide initiative. 



A Q & A with Beth Griffin

Majors: Dance Performance (BFA)
and Cultural Studies (BS)

Graduation Year: Class of 2014

Dance Performance
and Cultural
Studies major Beth
Griffin experiences
Revelations

What was the first Ailey performance you ever saw? How did it impact you as a dancer?

I first saw Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* on video when I was 12. I had strictly studied classical ballet, and seeing the piece opened up a whole new world of dance for me. I didn't see a live performance until Ailey II came to Stephens Hall Theatre. Watching amazing dancers who were close to my own age increased my hunger for dance tremendously. I was inspired to work harder than ever to achieve what I saw them do on stage.

Are you a member of the Towson Dance Company? If yes, how long have you danced with the company? Any highlights to share about that experience?

I am not in the Company now, but I was a member for six semesters. I've performed excerpts from classical ballets with TUDC such as *La Bayadère*, *Swan Lake*, and *Giselle*, which are always an excellent technical challenge and facilitate rapid artistic growth. I've been fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with multiple guest artists. It's wonderful to work with people from outside, but I loved being pushed to practice absolute professionalism.

When did you first have the chance to work with the Ailey Company?

Spring semester of my freshman year, Troy Powell came to set *Ailey Suite* on the Towson University Dance Company. I performed in *House of the Rising Sun* and *Escapades*, both choreographed by Alvin Ailey. In my sophomore year, Mr. Powell returned to set a piece of his own choreography on the dance company, in which I performed the lead role.

What was it like to work with Powell?

I worked with Troy Powell when he came to Towson University, and those experiences continue to be highlights of my entire life. Learning Mr. Ailey's choreography transformed how I felt about dance. I knew I loved to dance, but I never knew how emotionally, spiritually, and physically fulfilling performing could be.

Being cast in Mr. Powell's work the following year was equally incredible. This piece was tremendously difficult, but I loved being pushed to a new level.

What was your most memorable (or special, or challenging, or exciting) Ailey moment?

When Ailey II came to campus, one of their company members took technique class with us. This was very special to me, because I could watch how she worked in the studio, versus how she performed on stage. I studied her like a textbook, and she taught me to take risks in class.

If you could see a dance performance with any choreographer or dancer, who would it be? What would you take them to see?

I'd like to take Vaslav Nijinsky to see today's leading contemporary companies like Nederlands Dans Theatre, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, and Batsheva Dance Company. Nijinsky was groundbreaking in his time, and these companies are pushing dance to its limits today. I would say, "Do you see this? None of this would have happened without you."

Favorite style of dance:

I'll always be partial to ballet and pointe work, but the Lester Horton technique of modern dance is actually my favorite style at this point in time. It just feels right to my body, like coming home.

Dream role or piece you'd most like to dance:

Fix Me Jesus from Alvin Ailey's *Revelations*. I could watch it over and over for the rest of my life and never get bored. It really touches my soul. Aside from that I'd love to dance in anything Balanchine has choreographed.

Favorite class outside of the Dance Department:

Cultural Anthropology with Dr. Matthew Durlington. It changed the way I see the world and reinforced my decision to double major in cultural studies.

Secret or special talent:

I dance too much to discover any hidden talents, unless you consider procrastination a talent. I'm also good at cranking out 20-page papers in the blink of an eye.



Favorite song (or album or music artist):

Led Zeppelin's fourth (untitled) album.

Favorite way to relax after a performance:

Grabbing some greasy food with my best friend and roommate and calling it an early night.

Career goal(s):

I want to dance in a professional company that tours and see the world. I'm also thinking about dance writing, since performing careers don't last forever. 📖



An Act of Love

President Maravene Loeschke Performs Love Letters...Again

Three things you may not know about Towson University's president:

- She loves anything written by playwright A.R. Gurney.
- She thinks playing a little kid (or a very, very old person, or a woman who sports men's clothes) onstage is a hoot.
- She once chatted with Carol Burnett about one of her favorite plays.

The truth is, that's not the sort of stuff Dr. Maravene Loeschke has talked about since she took on the mantle of Towson University President. She's been too busy advocating for state funding, championing Towson as a model of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) education, and working to strengthen TU's programs while raising the profile of Towson University in the off-campus community, to name just a few priorities.

As part of the Inauguration celebration, Loeschke returned to her theatre roots for a command performance of A.R. Gurney's Pulitzer-nominated play *Love Letters*. The play chronicles a 50-year relationship through the protagonists' correspondence, and it has become something of a signature piece for Loeschke and her husband, Professor Emeritus C. Richard Gillespie.

The duo first performed *Love Letters* at Towson in 1993, as part of the Maryland Arts Festival, and four years later to mark Gillespie's retirement. Because it's simple to mount — it's read rather than mem-

orized, requires no set, and has only two characters — they had numerous requests to stage the show at Wilkes and Mansfield Universities, where Loeschke served as provost and president, respectively. Every time they performed it, they used "the same podiums that Theatre Professor and Assistant Department Chair Tom Cascella built" for the original production. "Those traveled with us. And he actually adjusted them to our eyes. One is higher than the other. They're like our lucky podiums."

Those who saw *Love Letters* got an unusual view of Loeschke. Her character, Melissa Gardner, is "a completely wild person, you know, just completely outrageous. I don't get to do that too much."

In other words, "she's not Emily Dickinson" (another one of Loeschke's signature roles). "She's just. She says bad words, and just things that people don't expect from you." But like the Dickinson role in *The Belle of Amherst*, the Gardner character gave Loeschke the chance to explore "a person's aging... I love the fact that the challenge for the actors is that you age from second grade until when one of them dies. Now there are little facial expressions, little tiny, tiny things, but Gurney didn't want you to do too much. He doesn't want a lot of 'stuff' going on, and so the challenge [is] doing it vocally. And if it's done well, my theory is that you forget after about three minutes that it's being read, because you feel so connected to these two people."

But it's not just the acting challenges inherent in the piece that excite Loeschke. "I also love doing it with someone you love. This play has a long, long history of being done with famous people. I actually had a conversation with Carol Burnett about this at one point. We went to see a show that Towson alum John Glover was in, and Carol Burnett was in the audience. She was kind enough to ask about what we do, and we had just done *Love Letters*. So she said 'Oh I just did *Love Letters* with Brian Dennehy, and I love working with him, but we didn't even rehearse! You know,' she said to us, 'It must be wonderful to do that play with someone you love, or really have a relationship with, or have a long friend-

ship with, because wouldn't that be special.' And I just thought that was a magnificent thing for her to say, because it's really true."

That Loeschke and Gillespie are a real couple

playing a pair in an enduring relationship has rarely escaped mention over the years. But this go round, it was hard not to think about the piece as a love letter to their history and steadfast devotion to Towson.

"When we left here we did it, and I never thought I'd do it here again. And so deeply in my heart, it's an absolute miracle to me that I'm even here doing such a thing again as a president." 🍷

Tony Winner John Glover Returns to His Alma Mater

In October, Tony Winner John Glover spent a few days at Towson to work with the Theatre undergrads. Glover was the first person to graduate from Towson with a theatre degree, and the first recipient of the department's honored alumnus award. In 1996, he was awarded an honorary doctorate as well.

The stage, film, and TV actor has maintained strong ties to his alma mater – several years ago, he endowed a scholarship for acting majors, and he returns to the theatre department each year to teach master classes, and share his knowledge with a new generation of theatre professionals. 🍷



Photos by Kanji Takeno

A View from the BRIDGE

WordBRIDGE playwriting laboratory revived by Towson University professor

Back in 2003, when he was still a doctoral student, Assistant Professor Dave White had a “transformative experience” at WordBRIDGE, a unique, interdisciplinary playwriting laboratory. The program — designed to shepherd nascent playwrights through the new play development process — was in its final year, but White couldn’t stop thinking about how to revive it.

After a three-year hiatus, WordBRIDGE was up and running again, first at Clemson, then at Towson University. This year, the lab enjoyed its first year in residence at CENTERSTAGE, Baltimore’s nationally esteemed regional theatre. Following the 2011 lab, CENTERSTAGE’s Artistic Director Kwame Kwei-Armah extended an invitation, saying “this is an internationally-recognized program. You should be at CENTERSTAGE.”

For the student artists at this year’s WordBRIDGE, the chance to work at CENTERSTAGE was a boon. But bigger benefits derived from the priority placed on “empowering students to be in leadership roles, to allow them to engage in their craft opposite professionals, be treated with the same dignity and respect as professionals.” One of the most striking characteristics of the lab was how seamlessly the student artists were integrated into the company. While other programs “marginalize students, use them as day labor,” says White, we’re “putting them in key positions, stage manager, acting — sometimes lead roles...and for us there’s work to be done, but you’re never going to be asked to do something that you wouldn’t see us doing.”

It’s a formula that keeps students coming back to WordBRIDGE — even after graduation. 27 of the 61 company members this year hailed from Towson, including 10 current undergraduates. Senior Erin Boots has done WordBRIDGE for the past three years. In 2010, she was switched into a role in which an Equity actress was originally cast “and carried a show.” The next year, says White, “I didn’t have a role for her so I put her in a room as a drummer. They never needed her but she was totally engaged, totally active, and so we have people who are generous enough to realize that it’s important to be in the room. It’s not important to be the lead character.”

Because the lab is fundamentally focused on serving the playwright’s needs, that generosity of



Vincent Culotta Photography

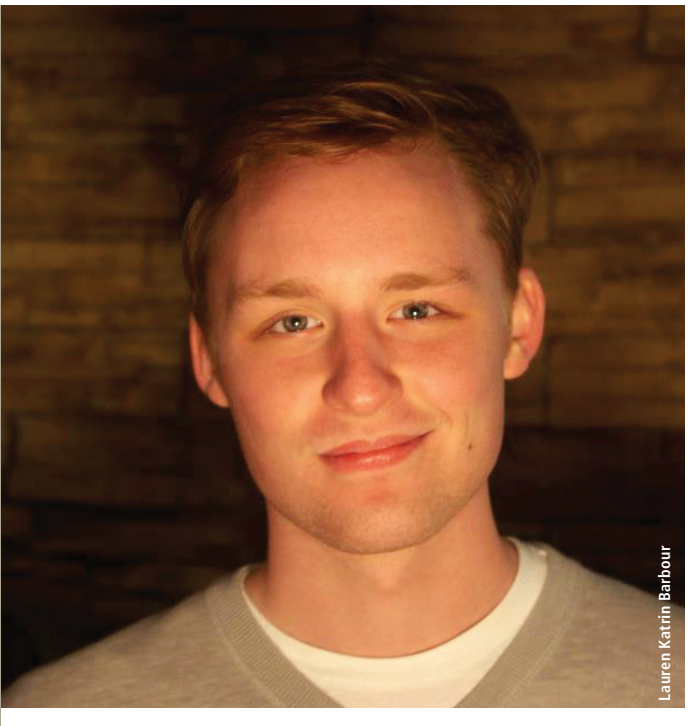
spirit, creative flexibility, and suppression of ego are highly valued. “In 2010, TU Alum Eric Poch was written out of a play, and after the second reading said ‘I’ve never been happier to *not* be in a show. The play is so much better without my character in it.’ And that’s a growth experience for a student to realize that *not* being a part of it might actually help it.”

WordBRIDGE embraces the idea that there can be tremendous fluidity in the creative process. And one of its lessons is that the artist — whether playwright, director, or actor — can have the freedom to get rid of something that doesn’t work, to try something else, or to take risks. There’s value, says White, when, for example, a student “watches a [professional artist] struggle with being switched out or switched through roles. It shows them that it doesn’t have to be easy, is doesn’t have to be painless...but it has to be fluid.”

“What is essential is teaching all of these young artists about process. And what I find is that all of these students are totally jazzed about being engaged on that level, of thinking “I offered that up and it’s in the play. I can change art. I can be involved in it. I can be a key participant in art.” 🎭



Vincent Culotta Photography



Student takes CENTERSTAGE A Q & A with Tanner T. Medding

Hometown: I was born in Tucson, AZ, but I lived up and down the west coast until I was 9 and moved to Columbia, MD. Most recently I'm from Westminster, MD. I live in Baltimore now.

Major/Graduation Year: I'm a Theatre Arts major, in the Acting Track, Class of 2015.

Off-campus Internship: I am a part-time intern at CENTERSTAGE in

the education/community programs/outreach office. I love it. It combines theatre with teaching with the community. Essentially, I am learning how to give back to those around me via my art. I also work with the Marketing Department as a College Ambassador for TU. I promote and market all the productions and events CENTERSTAGE has to offer to the Towson community. (Which includes free tickets!)

Why WordBRIDGE? What made you devote 3 weeks of summer to a lab workshop for nascent playwrights?

I was instantly taken with the process of approaching, discussing, and exploring new works of theatre from my involvement with the Towson Theatre Lab, which meets bi-weekly on campus. It is a lab run by Theatre Studies Coordinator and Assistant Professor David White and several students. From Theatre Lab, I learned about WordBRIDGE, a more professional and extended similar process. What better way to spend the first month of my summer than by exploring my craft and the works of others?

Was this your first WordBRIDGE?

Yes, and it was love at first sight.

What was your favorite WordBRIDGE moment?

My favorite moment was something separate from the "work" of WordBRIDGE, but something that is essential to the process. David White, Mike Vandercook [WordBRIDGE Managing Director], a professional Chicago actor, a successful director/actor from Cleveland, two dramaturgs, and I were winding down from the day and entered into a conversation about American theatre. We discussed Eugene O'Neill, discussed my favorite play (which I'd never had the pleasure of doing before), and I learned more in those two hours about theatre as it stands in this country than I ever had — and what a group to be in conversation with. I mean, most students dream of moments like this, and I

was lucky enough to have the pleasure.

What was it like to be at CENTERSTAGE for the lab?

CENTERSTAGE is another home to me. Because of my part-time internship, I was very familiar with the space and many of the faces lingering over the summer. Kwame [Kwei-Armah], the Artistic Director, could not have been more welcoming, allowing us to explore and play in his home. The space was perfect.

What else did you do on your summer vacation?

Work. Summer to me isn't so much a vacation as it is another open chunk in my schedule that I do my best to fill. It began with WordBRIDGE and ended with monotonous work waiting tables for the rest of my summer.

Any upcoming projects you're juiced about?

Yes. I recently got cast in Iron Crow Theatre

ARTS

Cubbison Winner's Art

Company's spring show, *Slipping*, written by Daniel Talbott. It's exhilarating and a wonderful opportunity. I couldn't be more thankful. I urge anyone interested to check out their site: <http://ironcrowtheatre.com>. The show is going to be a challenge, and it has some very heavy themes (not meant for children), but my heart is invested in this play.

Any secret or special talents?

I don't think so, but recently I've realized not everyone can whistle, and I would say I am a pretty decent whistler.

Favorite playwright?

Eugene O'Neill. But that is not meant to say he is the best playwright, or the most influential. He's simply the one whose plays I get lost in and can't seem to put down. He turns the mundane into poetry and poetry into truth.

If you could go see a play with anyone – dead or alive – who would it be, and why? What would you take them to see?

I would take Trotsky to see *Animal Farm*. I think everyone should be so lucky as to see themselves in animal form. 🐾

"Ron told us that 'art is 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration.' He demanded much from us as students. It was such a relief to understand that artistic talent was not immaculately conceived, but something you could work towards and practice."

-- Sue Stockman

Assistant Professor Ron Cubbison (1939 – 2008) spent 30 years teaching in TU's Department of Art. A passionate and exacting teacher and mentor, he left funds to award his former students with travel scholarships, as his own artwork was deeply influenced by his world travels. The winners – former graduate students Diana Marta and Valerie Anderson, and former undergraduates Jane Hill, Tina Lake, and Susan Stockman – were announced during the Ron Cubbison Alumni Exhibition, held September 14 to October 6, 2012. All will return to campus for a second exhibition to display new works influenced by their travels.



Sue Stockman — Mosaic



Valerie Anderson Sophie, "On the Other Side"



Diana Marta "Mainstream"



Valerie Anderson
"Elizabeth in Ellicott City"

"Winning this travel stipend has been both motivating and inspiring. I wish I had words to describe how fortunate I feel to receive this gift from Ron."

"He poked, agitated and nurtured. He was a mentor offering insights, constructive criticism, friendship and motivation throughout my undergraduate and graduate years. Ron Cubbison provided me with a skill level that I would not have attained without his direction. As I now challenge myself to continue to grow as an artist, I can hear his voice in my head, encouraging me to push my work into new directions. He was one of my toughest teachers and finest friends."

-- Valerie Anderson

"I see within Ron's artwork the multiple and compounded points of view with which Cezanne led art into the twentieth century. Ron pursued essences of form with shifting complexity. These forms owe nothing to those already existing within schematic structures. And so his art and life were one."

"Even with planning this Memorial Exhibit of his former students' work, Ron Cubbison continues to teach and mentor." -- Diana Marta



Diana Marta "Regatta"

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