

CSU Hayward Faculty Member Combines Dance and Theatre for Spiritual Fulfillment

By Koko Sato
Staff Writer

It has been a life-long journey for Kimiko Guthrie, a dance faculty member at Cal State Hayward, as she has tried to define dance and search for spiritual fulfillment.

Dance makes her happy, both physically and intellectually, she says. She has had to defy disappointments and emotional and physical impediments to keep on dancing. She now understands there is not just one-way to interpret modern dance. It can't be thought of in terms of right or wrong.

"Your body always changes, and you always have to figure it out," says Guthrie. "You cannot just rely on what you've already known. Dance is always evolving and changing."

As she accepts bodily changes and those in the dance movement, she constantly improves and updates her skills.

Having a former dancer for a mother, Guthrie started dancing ballet at age 4. After she saw the movie "Flash Dance" at age 12, she told herself, "I'm going to be Jennifer Beals."

It seemed she always wanted to be a dancer but started doubting the concept of the traditional ballet world.

Treating women as fragile and weak, the rigidity of ballet could be anti-female, she realized.

"When I was in high school, most ballet dancers were anorexic," she says. "People have to smoke and take cocaine to maintain their low weight."

All the dancers had to bear a humiliating weigh-in conducted by the ballet teachers as a control used to maintain their weight. Even then their career lasted a very short time because of all the injuries from the dancing and these unhealthy traditions.

Guthrie despised the image of ballet, and she quit dancing. "I thought that I could never get over it," she says.

While she attended the University of California at Santa Cruz, she was around people who were more relaxed. Little by little, it healed her pain from ballet.

Recovered from the disappointment, she took a modern dance class where she found that she could be more freely

expressive without many strains. She became interested in modern dance. A dance without gender-roles, but with a human, exploring spirit.

"I realized how much I love dancing," she says.

She is now a professional modern dancer, working for the Margaret Jenkins Dance Company, the Oberlin Dance Company (ODC) and the Joe Goode Performance Group. "I feel very lucky because it is very hard to make a career out of being an artist," Guthrie explains.

She is not only a dancer, but also a director of the Dandelion Dancetheater, based in the San Francisco Bay Area. After graduating with a creative writing degree in 1993, she was determined to form a dance company. Making a living out of teaching at the San Francisco Dance Center and the ODC School, she and her college friend Eric Kupers collaborated and established their organization in 1996.

Kupers was not only a co-director of their company, but they were also married for a while. After they decided to get divorced, she went through a depression because their company was so tied into their relationship.

"After we were separated, we started being independent from each other," she says. "He and I made our own relationship with dance." Guthrie and Kupers are still working together, but in a different way. Now they share dance pieces and

company resources.

"He is my artistic soul mate," she says.

Recognized for her ability, she has been asked to teach and choreograph nationally and worldwide. "I love teaching," Guthrie says. "I am able to focus on what I love and focus on dance in a different way."

When Laura Renaud-Wilson, the dance coordinator of Cal State Hayward, saw one of her performances, she asked Guthrie to teach on campus. Now she teaches modern dance, ballroom dance and ballet at the university. She now enjoys figuring out ways to teach ballet in a healthy way.

She encourages students to be healthy and not to worry about body image. "Our body has so much knowledge in it that, I think, a lot of people don't tap into." Therefore, she teaches students "a spiritual practice" to learn more about how to deal with their own bodies and the way the world works through dance.

A lack of experience in ballroom dance led her to attend a tango class. There she gained ideas about the concept of social dance.

"Everyone should be always in both roles [of a teacher and student]," she says. "You might learn a new approach to teaching." This positive attitude improves her teaching skills but also her own dance skills, she says.

"Teaching is creative," says

Guthrie, "because you can't just go buy a book and say this is how I'm going to teach. You constantly have to be aware what's going on a classroom and how to communicate an idea."

One and half years ago, she suffered a severe injury. During a rehearsal of her performance, her partner lifted her up and lost his control. Not only couldn't she land on her foot, but also the partner fell down on her leg. Her left ankle got bruised very badly, and she

was incapable of walking.

"I questioned myself, 'Oh my God, am I ever going to dance again?'" she says, "and then I realized, 'Of course I will.' Because dancing does not have to be jumping on your left foot."


While recovering from her injury, she wrote more, choreographed more and taught more than ever. She said it was very fulfilling. It made her stronger and more creative in her vision for the dance.

Her dream is to keep teaching

and producing works.

She has produced a show effectively combining dance and theater, like a play. It is not traditional, but it can be more expressive, she says. Shifting dance and texts, she avoids redundancy in her performance, and she explores and enjoys the differences between movements and words.

"Dance is within me," she says. "Nothing could happen to me where I could not dance. Dance is almost a state of mind for me."




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