TOUR NOTEBOOK: UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA WILMINGTON
BY SHANNON HOOKER
DIRECTOR OF ARTS & PROGRAMS

The University of North Carolina Wilmington had the wonderful opportunity to present Doug Varone and Dancers for an extended residency in our community this fall. The company presented seven days of master classes, creative workshops, and a studio performance for the campus and community. The residency culminated with a performance featuring Doug’s newest work, Chapters from a Broken Novel.

My partnership with Doug and the company began when we were first introduced to each other through my participation with the South Arts Dance Touring Initiative. UNCW Presents is one of 11 presenters to take part in this three year program that provides an opportunity to develop stronger dance presentation and audiences for modern dance in the southeastern region. In 2009, our presenter consortium traveled to Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival, and this is when I was first introduced to the company. The performances we saw were enthralling and I was immediately intrigued with the company.

While at the festival, Doug also facilitated his ‘mapping’ workshop for our group. The activity encourages participants to share their life experience by focusing on creating a series of small gestures in response to questions, which then are built into a physical story of the participant’s life. The discussion that took place among us was lively and enriching. I found myself developing camaraderie with individuals who were still relative strangers to me. I was delighted at how this creative exercise empowered us to build community so quickly, and from this experience I began to imagine the possibilities to engage my community in unique and different ways through modern dance.

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“We began by inviting Doug to campus for one day last spring to meet and work with various students, staff, and community members to shape and inform plans for the community residency. This advance visit was an opportunity to immerse participants in Doug’s work, to generate excitement and interest in modern dance, and to strengthen community partnerships and collaborations. During Doug’s visit he toured the performance space at the university and community venues where he would be performing residency activities, he attended a community partners meeting, and conducted a mapping exercise for the planning team.

The residency activities unfolded into two parts. Prior to the full company’s visit, Natalie Desch was on campus to teach a full schedule of classes for four days, to target participation from the dance community and student body. Her teaching schedule included classes for an elementary school and a high school with strong dance programs, a local dance studio, the YWCA, a creative arts center for underprivileged youth, as well as classes at the university. She worked with diverse groups and a wide age range, teaching both dance technique and creative workshops.

Later, the entire company arrived and conducted master classes, creative workshops, and a studio performance on campus and off-campus, concluding with a public performance at the university. We teamed up with our local art museum to present a free studio performance, Stripped, which showcases, without lights or costumes, excerpts from the company’s newest and established works. The performance gave a more intimate look into the creative process, creating dance based on imagery and live music. It allowed audiences the opportunity to be in close proximity to dance making and to see dance in a way they’ve never seen it before, and in an essence to demystify how dances come together. The response was amazing. By partnering with the museum, working with our small but robust dance community, and inviting a local band to provide music, we were able to bring in a cross-section of audiences to experience modern dance. Over the next two days, the company hosted a technique class for UNCW dance students, a creative process workshop for creative writing students, and a mapping workshop for freshman.

We had diverse audience in attendance, and those who participated in the educational activities were at the performances. We reached almost 900 people through this residency, which is tremendous for our community. It brought together students and community members from different perspectives for a meaningful and creative exploration and to experience dance as a significant force in our common cultural life, including returning patrons who have participated in past performances; deepening connections with the dance community and organizations we’ve worked with in the past; and through partnerships like the one with the art museum, we reached new audiences that have not participated in our programs before. The company’s visit to Wilmington made an indelible contribution to the cultural life of our community.

CALL FOR VOLUNTEERS!
If you would like to become a volunteer, please contact Sarah Bodley at 212.279.3344 or sbodley@dougvaroneanddancers.org

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