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Welcome to the Family by Daniel Salas '12

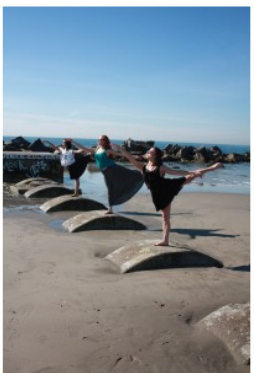


Five ballet majors journey across the country to dance alongside L.A. Contemporary Dance Company for alumni and patrons of Walnut Hill School for the Arts.



In the fall of 2011 Director of Ballet Michael Owen approached five ballet majors, all from the class of 2012, and offered a unique opportunity not one will soon forget. He proposed to fly each across the United States to spend time working with Kate Hutter, class of 2000, and members of her professional dance institution, L.A. Contemporary Dance Company (LACDC). The dancers included Melanie Benker, Nami Miwa, Cacia Lacount, Emily Orillac, and myself. While in Los Angeles we would present a master class (given by Kate) and perform solos that we have each been rehearsing for nearly four months as part of our college audition process. Additionally, we would get a "sneak peek" of a commissioned repertory from LACDC that will premiere at the University of Southern California later this year, all in the presence of alumni, parents, school administrators, and other patrons of Walnut Hill.

On January 9, the dancers and our chaperone, college counselor Sarah Lovely, departed from Boston's Logan International Airport. As a California native that takes pride in his home state, it came as no surprise that after settling in to our hotel I was eager to show the dancers around Los Angeles. We explored the Santa Monica State Beach and pier, rode the famous ferris wheel above the ocean, and shopped around the Third Street Promenade before ending the evening with a family-style Italian dinner. The following day we headed out to Venice Beach and while Melanie and I were the only ones who submerged ourselves in the January water, we all enjoyed getting some much-needed sun.



However, the time soon came to exit our vacation mode and prepare ourselves for dance. We headed to the Brockus Project Space where

the event was being held. We were all a bit nervous, but as soon as we entered the space any nerves we had were diminished by Kate Hutter's welcoming smile. We settled into one of the studios and began stretching or marking through our solos. In no more than fifteen minutes, Head of School Antonio Viva, Michael Owen, and Chief Development Officer Bruce Smith and Director of Alumni Relations Jillian Kohl (the brains behind the entire event) had arrived. At six thirty all attendees congregated in the largest studio of Brockus Project Space to witness one of the most invigorating contemporary dance classes I have ever taken. We began by forming a circle, dispersing ourselves between Kate and the LACDC dancers and from there began an enlivening full body warm-up of ballet, improvisation, and yogic content. Of the warm-up, Cacia notes, "the environment that Kate created was extremely professional. It felt like we were a part of the company. It really helped us in our performance because we did not feel the need to be intimidated. Kate put so much emphasis on personal exploration. We were not just warming up...we were exploring our bodies."

When the time came to learn some of Kate's choreography, it is agreed that we all felt free to just dance as ourselves. From floor work to arabesques, handstands to sautéés, we moved throughout the space with a continual exploration. Through the entire master class, it felt as though there was no audience at the front of the room, proving the validity of the remarkably healthy learning environment that Kate and her dancers provide.

Following a brief reception the formal presentation began with Walnut Hill soloists and every other piece would be performed by LACDC. Melanie started off the presentation with her self-choreographed solo to the sounds of Peruvian flutes. When asked why Melanie chose to choreograph her own solo she replied, "I have had the experience of choreographing other people and I wanted the chance to choreograph something that was me, not something that was mine that I changed to fit around someone else's style."

Like Melanie, Nami also choreographed her own solo that showed the best of what she can do. Her meditation between intense strength and delicate elegance stunned the audience.

Following Nami came my solo choreographed by Nathan Makolandra, a senior at The Juilliard School. Leading up to the performance, I had been hesitant in letting myself go in the choreography and losing myself in the music. I don't know if it was the fact that I was dancing alongside friends with an incredible group of people unafraid to take risks, or that months of practice had simply paid off, but when I danced I could breathe. I was grateful.

Cacia subsequently danced the ethereal solo built for her by Lea Ved, a junior at The Juilliard School. Watching Cacia perform and the self-discoveries she made through her movement was an extraordinary experience felt by the entire audience.

Emily completed the presentation with the solo that her aunt created for her in her home country of Panama. On dancing with Kate for the first time and how it felt to perform her solo Emily explains, "it was very fun but stressful at the same time because I had no idea what it was going to be like. It felt great to do my solo, especially after being prepared so well in Kate's class."

There was unanimous agreement among the dancers that being able to share the studio with these artists was nothing less than inspiring. There was a lovely contrast in their work. Although it was exciting when the music was fast and what they were dancing was incredibly difficult, the moments when their movement was seemingly unhurried and the dancers would stop and slowly look into each other's eyes proved to be the most powerful.



Perhaps the most gratifying part of the trip was having the chance to connect with alumni there. Even though some may have graduated three decades ago, we realized that they were all exactly like us once. They too dealt with the same stress and joy that we experience now. We met alumni that are directors, talent agents for rock legends, and even organic farmers. They shared stories of what Walnut Hill was like for them and the many

ways it made them who they are today. There were many, many laughs! They asked us what dorms we lived in, what faculty were still on the hill, and gave us a wealth of encouraging advice for our futures. One alumnus asserted that "now is the time to play. If you are worried about the results you are not living in the moment. It is not about getting in, it is about expressing yourself. Let go."

They also spoke of more simple things. Another alumnus stated, "I met my best friend at Walnut Hill when I was 15. I'm 41 years old and we are still best friends. Walnut Hill is forever. We will always have each other no matter what. Welcome to the family."

(Photography by Nami Miwa '12)