



Summer 2009

Creative Approach

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Recommended Citation

Hatch, Rachel (2009) "Creative Approach," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*, 2002-2017: Vol. 18 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol18/iss2/7>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

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CREATIVE



APPROACH

(Above) Jean Kerr finds the flow of the dance.

How three Illinois Wesleyan professors find and fulfill their artistic visions

Story by Rachel Hatch

Photos by Marc Featherly

Art can come in countless forms — a melodic symphony that leaves an audience in hushed awe; an image that invokes the power, pain or beauty of a moment in time; the graceful sweep of a dancer moving across a stage to the ebb and flow of music.

We may feel we know true art when we see it, but where it comes from in the first place is more of a mystery. When creating a piece of art, what is the balance between instinct and craft? Is art created better in collaboration or as a solitary pursuit? We recently asked three Illinois Wesleyan Fine Arts professors who both teach and make art to share personal insights on how the act of creative expression works for them.

Something happens

“There is a moment in the creative process when you have to give up all control,” says Jean Kerr, associate professor of Dance and Movement in the School of Theatre Arts. “You have to trust that what flows out of you is coming from somewhere that is smarter than you.”

Kerr has been creating dance and fight choreography for the stage for more than 20 years on the basis of that trust. “I do believe in a rhythm in the universe, in life, in physics. I do believe that this thing we call our existence is a miraculous dance, and if I am quiet and open, I can tap into that.”

She leans back on a bench in a Shirk Center gym, where she prepares for her early-morning class on stage fighting. Even with the vast expanse of the gymnasium around her, the energetic redhead dominates the space. “One of the most valuable lessons I ever learned is to play the ‘what if?’ game, because there are no wrong answers if you play that game,” observes Kerr, who admits she has walked into rehearsal a time or two with no idea what will be choreographed for the day.

“You have to give yourself permission that it is okay to say to the dancers, ‘I have no idea where we are going or where this will take us.’ From imagery, something is going to happen.” Kerr once created a dance named “Something Happens,” because she built it completely from experimenting with the dancers during rehearsals.

Though dance has saturated every aspect of her life since she was a child, Kerr also draws on experience she received earning a computer science degree from the State University of New York at Potsdam. Kerr — who has mastered reading annotated choreography and uses it in her creations — recalls choreographing the introduction in *West Side Story* of the Sharks and Jets gangs, with her husband and longtime collaborator Paul Denhardt directing.

“The composer, Bernstein, put in all these pops — ‘*Bop, bop, bop.*’ I wanted to create a fugue, or a canon, so the dancers would all perform the same moves, but ‘pop’ at different times. Paul noticed I was looking frustrated and asked what was wrong. I told him ‘I am trying to find the algorithm. There has to be a mathematical formula that I can use so that all of the pops will work in my canon.’ He just shook his head, but I found it! I found Bernstein’s algorithm. I don’t know if he intended it, but I found the mathematics. It is there. I had my canon and I had my pops.”

“What intrigues me is the process of assembling little bits and pieces and creating a jigsaw puzzle,” says Kerr, “where all the pieces fit and become a whole.”

Putting life to sound

Professor of Composition and Theory David Vayo says, “I want to be a receptor for the music, a medium.” A look inside his Presser Hall office demonstrates just how prolific a receptor Vayo has been.



“I do believe strongly in making an appointment with the muse,” says Vayo. “Artistic creation needn’t be a passive thing. Inspiration is more of a state of mind that you cultivate than something you are at the mercy of and cannot control.”

Beside the bench of a piano that stands in the corner are stacks of sheets filled with compositions he’s written over the years for musical productions, bands and orchestras — including the St. Louis Symphony and Amsterdam’s Orchestra De Volharding.

Vayo has been a recipient of a Standards Award from the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers for 21 years in a row — a testament to the notion that his creative drive is grounded in a strong work ethic. Vayo sets aside time each day for composing. “I do believe strongly in making an appointment with the muse. Artistic creation needn’t be a passive thing. Inspiration is more of a state of mind that you cultivate than something you are at the mercy of and cannot control.”

To create music is to see how elements flow together, says Vayo, and to be aware of those elements. In his case, the

elements are the instruments involved in his composition, as well as the performers of those instruments.

“Usually before I start writing something, I get to know the performing forces. It is something concrete — I can imagine the sounds they will be making,” he says. “It provides a context for what they can do.”

Composing since he was 12 years old, Vayo said he has always loved to put life to sound, even when it was “just improvising at my parents’ piano when I was 6 or 7, making up stories I could set to some kind of music.”

These days, he composes two to three original pieces a year, saying his favorites are the ones that challenge him. “I love to work outside my comfort zone,” he says. Vayo has recently been writing for traditional Chinese instruments for the Vancouver-based Orchid Ensemble, which has played at Illinois Wesleyan several times.

“I had little knowledge of the instruments before I started, so I would e-mail the musicians with questions such as, ‘What kind of chords can you play? What are the highest and lowest notes you can play? How far can your finger stretch?’” says Vayo, who looks at the instruments as an exciting new canvas for creation, both for himself and the artists. “I think I’m getting the people who play these instruments to go outside their stylistic boxes,” he notes.

“It’s less about contriving and making, and more about noticing. I take a lot of pleasure in noticing the little things.”

Mystery in the backyard

For inspiration, Professor of Art and Design Sherri McElroy is not afraid to risk getting a little dirty. Whether exploring her large backyard or searching around thrift shops and junkyards, she seeks things that catch her eye and capture her imagination.

“I’m a gatherer and hunter — seriously. Take a look around here,” she says, motioning to the array of items scattered through her office in the Joyce Eichhorn Ames School of Art. Picking up a thick, metal letter “E” she adds, “I photograph textures I like and save papers with different patterns. It inspires me and I build my own library of images.”

It’s a habit that dates back to McElroy’s childhood, when she grew up around the family fabric business in Bloomington. “That was my creative outlet — the tactile quality of textiles and the colors and patterns of fabric have always been important to me,” says McElroy, whose black-and-white houndstooth dress, offset against her bright red office chair, seems to illustrate her point.

Another inspiration during her 20 years of work as a graphic artist has been the natural world. “A lot of my work has been influenced by living with a prairie in my backyard, and the ecosystem that holds so much mystery to me,” she says.

Appreciating the obvious — and envisioning what lies beyond — is a theme McElroy says runs through her latest work, a series of prints interweaving fantastical creatures with images inspired from the prairie.

She motions to a piece called *Prairie Fairies III* that looks to be a richly colored leaf drifting over a branch — or could it be a small figure?

“I’m most intrigued by the prairie plants after they have lost their leaves, so that I am looking at just lines and stalks,” says McElroy, who created the piece by scanning a dried milkweed pod into her computer and surrounding it with lush rose watercolors and the silhouettes of prairie flowers. “For me, it’s a scene that brings back the magic of childhood,” she adds.



In Sherri McElroy’s *Prairie Fairies III*, a richly colored leaf drifts over a branch — or could it be a small figure? In her art, McElroy takes inspiration from the textures of discarded objects and from the natural world.

“I know the science behind it, but when the fireflies are flying, you get a sense that there are creatures you cannot see and a world you cannot know.”

Perhaps it is this sense of mystery that gives art its enduring power to both fascinate and transform the artist and her audience. “If you are an artist, you don’t have a choice whether or not to continue creating,” says Jean Kerr. “It’s who you are. When doing that kind of work, you feel whole.”