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Students shuffle, swing and sway at dance concert

By Amelia Benner



Student Amy Bannon (in orange) choreographed the West Coast swing piece “Move your Body.” From right to left are Tom Duncan, Caitlin Borek, Bannon, Seth Reid and Abby Root. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Student choreographer Evan Kasprzak began his dance piece, “Truffle Shuffle,” by walking on his hands toward the hushed audience. As hip-hop music blasted from the sound system, nine other dancers, dressed in red and blue sweatshirts, appeared and began to enact a stylized “battle.”

It was the junior music-theatre major’s third year taking part in the Student Choreographed Dance Concert (SCDC), which is one of the biggest performance events of the year at Illinois Wesleyan.

“I knew I wanted to do a hip-hop piece, and I knew I wanted it to be a battle of some sort,” Kasprzak says of “Truffle Shuffle,” which drew enthusiastic applause at its premiere.

Hansen Student Center was filled to capacity for the two SCDC performances held on the last weekend in January. Latecomers stood at the back of the room, straining to see through the crowd, while Hansen crew members hunted for enough chairs to seat the audience. The pieces in the show were all choreographed and performed by Wesleyan students, and their themes and influences varied widely, from traditional Rajasthani dance to break-dancing to West Coast swing.

“I think it’s a very popular event,” says junior Lizzie Schwarzrock, one of the student producers who planned the show. “It feels like it’s gotten bigger over the past few years.”

This year’s performance was produced by Schwarzrock and Miranda Kiefer, a sophomore, both dance minors. The two women also danced in the concert, Kiefer in three pieces, Schwarzrock in one.

“It was fun watching every piece come together,” Schwarzrock says. “A couple of months before, they were just ideas on paper. It was amazing to see how far they’d come and know that was part of what Miranda and I had done.”

“I don’t think I’d be able to produce the show without performing in it,” Kiefer adds. “We both love to dance, and not being able to perform in it would’ve been torture.”

The process of planning the dance concert began in September, four months before the event. Dancers were invited to an open audition, and choreographers presented their ideas to the producers.

Twenty-one choreographers submitted proposals this year, the most in recent memory. They were required to show the producers two eight-count segments of their pieces. “We had to take their past participation, the style of the piece, and much more into consideration,” Kiefer says. “It was really hard because we had to cut [the number of pieces] from 21 to 16.”

While some choreographers transfer their ideas to the page, Kasprzak says he’s “never really been able to write choreography out” on paper. “It feels like book work.” Besides, he adds, “there are a lot of steps, especially in hip-hop, that don’t really have names.”

The process of choosing dancers for each piece is “complicated and kind of informal,” Kiefer says. If a certain dancer specializes in one type of dance, he or she will be recruited for a piece that fits that style. Other times, choreographers plan a piece with certain dancers in mind.

After being accepted for the show, choreographers were responsible for all aspects of the piece, from costumes and props to finding appropriate music.

The music for “Truffle Shuffle” was a mix of hip-hop tunes from contemporary artists like Busta Rhymes, Sisquo and Common, interspersed with a few spoken-word interludes. “Because it was a mix of music I didn’t have to fall in love with two-and-a-half minutes’ worth of something,” Kasprzak says. His process for choosing the eight songs used in the mix was simple. “I just started listening to music, and things just hit me,” he says. “A lot of times I hear a piece of music and say ‘I want that.’”

Unlike some more elaborate pieces — senior Kyle Blair’s “Power Coupling” involved a two-person elephant suit — Kasprzak’s costumes were simple.

“I just went out and bought five blue and five red hoodies,” he says. “I’m a firm believer that you dance best in what you’re comfortable in.”

When teaching his choreography to the performers, he showed them the steps section-by-section until they had learned the entire four-and-a-half minute routine. He held rehearsals once a week on Saturday afternoons and escalated the schedule to twice a week as the concert approached.

Meanwhile, Kiefer and Schwarzrock checked in with the choreographers, sitting in on rehearsals to make sure everything was running smoothly. They worked closely with Assistant Dean of Students Kevin Clark at the Hansen Center to prepare the stage and

reserve times for performances and final run-throughs. They also assembled a light and sound crew and organized tech rehearsals.

And finally the big weekend arrived. Because they both performed in the concert, Kiefer and Schwarzrock didn't have much time to sit back and watch their producing efforts come to fruition. But they say they're pleased with how it turned out.

"Watching the show, I felt like a mom," Schwarzrock confesses.

"It was like letting your baby leave the nest," Kiefer agrees.