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## Life in Motion

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Deahr primed students for a challenging piece that was a highlight of this spring's Faculty Choreographed Dance Concert.

## Guest choreographer Jessica Deahr '04 stretches dance students to their limits.

Story by CELESTE HUTTES

*"And-one-and-two-and-three-and-four ... back 6-7-8 ... Your left foot has to slide in first ... You came in too early ..."*

For three intense nights in the Jerome Mirza Theatre, an eagle-eyed Jessica Deahr '04 keeps time as IWU dance students flip, spin, pop, and drop — carving movement into memory.

Deahr, artistic director of Chicago Dance Crash, returned to Illinois Wesleyan March 6-8 to teach master classes and set choreography for the biennial Faculty Choreographed Dance Concert in April.

"This dance concert is one of my favorite memories from my time here at Wesleyan," says Deahr. "It is an honor to be part of it."

Along with real-life lessons from a professional dancer, these students learned they'd better grab their kneepads when Jessica Deahr comes to town.

Deahr quickly sprung to mind when School of Theatre Arts Dance Instructor Sheri Marley considered guest artists for the 2017 faculty-choreographed concert.

"I wanted to bring in Jessica because she is young, she is performing, she is now," says Marley. "Jessica has a dance company and has traveled all over the world as a dancer. She knows just what it takes to succeed."

Marley chose to feature Deahr's rigorous piece, "The Generator," as the finale for this year's concert. Inspired by the '80s sci-fi movie *Tron*, Deahr's eight-minute contemporary work casts the dancers as digital beings compelled to provide power to the world with their movements.

Peppered with acrobatics and hip-hop and powered by a pounding techno beat, the piece is "hard-hitting," says Marley. "It embraces the power the body has. It feels like the dancers are at war with their bodies, the floor, and each other."

"The students are absolutely loving this," she adds. "They will probably never do anything like this again."

Lucy Howat '18, a psychology major and dance minor, immediately noticed Deahr's gift for showcasing each student's unique talents. "On the first day she met us, Jessica was able to find a way to show us in our best light in the piece," says Howat. "She found an amazing balance between pushing us and making sure we were comfortable with the choreography."

Any comfort was hard earned, to be sure. After three nights of four-hour rehearsals, the searing speed and acrobatic nature of Deahr's choreography — bouncy squats that explode into a back handspring, for instance — left bodies bruised and feet blistered.

"I'm inspired by the courage of these students," says Deahr, who was assisted by fellow Dance Crash dancer KC Bevis. "This choreography is outside of their comfort zone. It's intense, physically demanding — near abusive."

That might feel like an understatement to music theatre major Kenny Tran '17.



Deahr (above) was featured in a 2003 Dance Concert performance

“Jessica’s choreography is, in one word, explosive,” he says. “Her use of acrobatics would be the most difficult aspect of the piece for me. It took me forever to get down one specific move — going into a bridge position without the use of my hands, only using my legs and the top of my head.

“If you came up to me freshman year and told me I’d be doing any of this,” he adds, “I would’ve laughed in your face.”



Students stretched, strained and sweated to prep for the knockout finale to this year’s concert, choreographed by Deahr.

### Shy Girl to Fly Girl

The architect of these artistic growing pains got her start in dance thanks to her own painful shyness as a girl.

“My mom was worried about me because I was really, really shy, so she enrolled me in a dance class when I was four,” says Deahr, who grew up in Arlington Heights, Ill. From that moment on, “I was hooked. For me, it’s all about the performance — the magic of the piece.”

As a dancer, Deahr had a magic of her own.

She flourished as a jazz dancer, under the tutelage of award-winning choreographer Sasha Vargas. Over the years Deahr added gymnastics to her repertoire and discovered a hunger for hip-hop.

In spite of abundant talent, Deahr doubted her ability to make a career of dance. When college loomed on the horizon, she specifically sought out a smaller school where it would be easier to sort out an uncertain future.

“When I was here at Wesleyan, I focused on cleaning up my technique. I wanted to be an employable dancer — and I started to get a taste for choreography,” says Deahr. Still, “I didn’t think I was good enough to be a professional dancer.”

Hedging her bets, she added a sociology major to her dance minor.

“I didn’t know what I wanted to do, but I loved sociology in high school,” says Deahr. “I wanted to do something to feel like I was helping people.”

By the time she was a junior, Deahr had left behind her doubts about dance — along with plans to become a social worker. Just weeks after graduating early, Deahr had booked a gig as a dancer on a Royal Caribbean cruise ship.

From Europe to South Korea, Canada to the Canary Islands, Deahr danced her way around the world, grabbing gigs in print, film and stage whenever she could. She savored a return to old-school jazz during her time with Chicago’s Joel Hall Dancers and whet her appetite for blurring boundaries as a first-generation student of James Morrow’s concert hip-hop fusion technique.

After joining Chicago Dance Crash, Deahr rose from dancer to artistic director. These days, the once-shy girl even moonlights as a “fly girl” for Too White Crew, a popular hip-hop cover band based in Chicago.

Now in her fifth year as artistic director, Deahr is well-versed in the business end of dance: planning the year’s nationally touring productions, auditioning new dancers and engaging guest artists. But she manages to balance office work with footwork, creating pieces for the company’s seven athletic dancers and joining them on stage.

“We like to blend the line between art and entertainment,” says Deahr. They are also masters at blending dance styles — from ballet to break-dancing, krump to contemporary (with a dash of capoeira).

“We are a multidisciplinary fusion company. We draw from modern, hip-hop, acro, and break-dancing to create our own style of movement.”

Deahr’s work — called “brash, funky, bright, and street friendly in style” by the *Chicago Tribune* — has been seen in settings beyond the stage: museums, fashion shows, churches, schools — even the subway. In 2015, global clothing brand



Students stretched, strained and sweated to prep for the knockout finale to this year’s concert, choreographed by Deahr.

Uniqlo hired Dance Crash to dance and flip through the tight spaces of a full commuter train to promote the launch of its Michigan Avenue store.

### **Taking the Leap**

Having created any dancer's dream career, Deahr was able to share lessons with Illinois Wesleyan students that go well beyond technique.

"These students are learning how you have to work in a professional dance class," says Deahr. For example, "I don't want to give the same correction twice. They have to get used to taking initiative."

Having gained the confidence she needed while attending IWU, Deahr happily paid it forward to the next generation of hoofers.

While Tran initially found the prospect of working with Deahr daunting, he now describes it as a defining moment of his time at Wesleyan.

"Jessica's choreography has pushed me beyond anything I thought I would be able to do," he says. "She has helped me break down my personal barriers: mental and physical."

In working with Deahr, Howat found a fearlessness she hopes will follow her through life.

"I tend to hold back from things that seem unattainable in fear of failure. This experience has inspired me to push myself beyond what I think I am capable of," Howat says. "I hope to use the drive I felt working on this piece as motivation in other aspects of my life."

While Deahr pushed students beyond their comfort zones, the return to her alma mater put her firmly back in hers.

"At Wesleyan, I was able to work closely with teachers and choreographers and was given opportunities to choreograph on my own," says Deahr. "The one-on-one attention I got helped to build my confidence.

"I have the best memories of dancing here."

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