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## **Capturing the Muse: Fine Arts Professors Discuss How They Create Art**

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – 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 the music.

Here at Illinois Wesleyan University, our fine arts professors are more than instructors. They are active participants in their art. Three of our professors were posed the question, “How do you create art?” The answers from Associate Professor of Dance and Movement Jean Kerr, Professor of Composition and Theory David Vayo and Professor of Art and Design Sherri McElroy were dynamic and perhaps strikingly similar, reflective of a line from poet John Keats, “That which is creative must create itself.”

“There is a moment in the creative process when you have to give up all control,” said Professor Kerr. “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. “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.”

Kerr leaned back on a bench in a Shirk Center gym, where she prepared 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,” said Kerr, who admitted 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 said she once created a dance named “Something Happens,” because she built it completely from experimenting with the dancers during rehearsals.

Professor Vayo seconded the concept of letting go. "I want to be a receptor for the music, a medium," he said, adding that he will set aside time each day for composing. With an upright piano consuming a wall of his office in Presser Hall, Vayo is surrounded by examples of the music he has composed for more than three decades. From posters and pictures on the walls, to stacks of music sheets near the piano bench – all are reminders of work he has done for musical productions, bands and orchestras, including the St. Louis Symphony and Orchestra "De Volharding" in Amsterdam. "I do believe strongly in making an appointment with the muse. Artistic creation needn't be a passive thing. Inspiration is more of state of mind that you cultivate than something you are at the mercy of and cannot control," said Vayo, who has been a recipient of a Standards Award from the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers for an impressive 21 years in a row.

To create music is to see how elements flow together, said Vayo, and be aware of those elements. "It's less about contriving and making, and more about noticing. I take a lot of pleasure in noticing the little things," he said.

McElroy also follows the idea of "what if?," but to a more fanciful end. A graphic artist for more than 20 years, her latest work is a series of prints interweaving fantastical creatures with images inspired from the prairie. "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," said McElroy, posing a striking figure herself in a black and white houndstooth dress, offset against the bright red chair where she is seated in her office at the Joyce Eichhorn Ames School of Art. "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."

Appreciating the obvious – and envisioning what lies beyond – is a theme McElroy says runs through her work. 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," said McElroy, who created the piece by scanning a dried milkweed pod into her computer and surrounded 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 said.

Every artist has challenges, a time when the muse seems otherwise occupied. It is these times our professors infuse their skills with their imagination to create. Kerr said she draws on her computer science background. Though dance has saturated every aspect of her life since she

was a child, she received a computer science degree from the State University of New York at Potsdam. “What intrigues me is the process of assembling little bits and pieces and creating a jigsaw puzzle where all the pieces fit and become a whole,” Kerr said, who has mastered reading annotated choreography, and uses that in her creations.

Kerr recalled 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 want to create a fugue, or a canon, so the dancers will 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.”

Vayo will also look to the individual elements when he approaches a new piece. In his case, this means the instruments that will form his composition. “Usually before I start writing something, I know the performing forces,” said Vayo, who often is acquainted with the people for whom he is writing. “It is something concrete, I can imagine the sounds they will be making, It provides a context for what they can do,” he said.

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 said. Vayo has recently been writing for traditional Chinese instruments for the Vancouver-based group The 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?’” said Vayo, who added he 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 said.

McElroy said she reverts back to her own 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,” said McElroy, who now frequents antique shops and junkyards, wandering until she finds something to catch her eye.

“I’m a gatherer and hunter, seriously. Take a look around here,” she said, motioning to the array of items scattered through her office. 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.”

The mood of all three professors can be summed up by Kerr’s admission that working on her art fulfills her. “If you are an artist, you don’t have a choice whether or not to continue creating,” she said. “It’s who you are. When doing that kind of work, you feel whole.”