

Talk 8 At State Episode 2: Dance at NC State with Joan Nicholas-Walker Transcript

Peter Koutroumpis: Welcome to the Department of Health and Exercise Studies Talk 8 at State podcast with your host Eliza Barsanti.

Eliza Barsanti: The Department of Health and Exercise Studies has 5 minors offered to students who wish to delve deeper into their health and wellness coursework. One of these programs is a 16 credit hour minor in Dance, which is designed for students who wish to dive deeper into dance studies. Today, we're sitting down with Joan Nicholas-Walker to discuss the dance minor at NC State, and what it's like to be a dancer in the age of Covid-19.

EB: Okay so today we are sitting down with Joan Nicholas-Walker, one of the faculty at NC State in the Health and Exercise Studies Department to talk a little bit more about the dance program at NC State. How are you today Joan?

Joan Nicholas-Walker: I'm great.

EB: Awesome! So we're gonna start by just kind of talking a little bit about you, so what initially sparked your interest in dance?

JNW: I started dance because I have two older brothers, and when I was I think five, or four turning five, my mother decided I needed something to do other than going to my brothers' baseball, basketball, football games. I'm old enough, unfortunately, that in the town I grew up, Hanover County, outside of Richmond in Virginia, there weren't enough or very many female sports teams. And I just wasn't that interested in softball, much to my father's dismay. So literally, that's how it started. She just wanted to find me an activity, and I was a very physical child, jumping out of trees, that kind of thing. So, we were in a shopping center and saw a sign for Diane Hale School of Dance opening- This was 1979 I think- and I was one of her first students! And that became my thing, and not because my mother wanted me to do it after she introduced me to it. I just loved movement. And that's how it started.

EB: That's so cool. I used to be a dancer so it's something that's very near and dear to me too for sure. And I'm from a super small town so I get that. So, after that initial spark and studying dance more intensively, what brought you to NC State specifically? I know that's probably a long answer, but maybe just a little summary.

JNW: Yeah. Long road but this is my second time living in North Carolina in the Raleigh area. We moved here- my husband and my two girls from California years ago, so I taught at Meredith College and I actually was a guest artist at NC State for NC Dance so it's interesting to come back as a faculty member. We always wanted to return to North Carolina. We moved because my husband was transferred so we came here from Maryland last year.

EB: Oh wow!

JNW: Yeah! And so in Maryland I worked. Actually this is like my twentieth year of teaching dance in higher ed.

EB: Wow!

JNW: Yeah, I just realized that the other day!

EB: That's amazing! Okay!

JNW: Yeah and for someone who, you know, I danced from age 5 to 18, I went to college as an English Creative Writing major because I listened to a few people who said, "Oh, what are you going to do with dance now?" I performed in a company from age 10 all the way til 18, but I started teaching at Diane Hale's School of Dance. I think I started assistant teaching at 13 years old so I've been teaching for a long time and it was always something I wanted to do but I had other interests so I went to college pursuing those other interests. I walked into, there was a lec-dem about the dance program at George Mason University where I was attending undergrad, and I realized, "You know what? I still want to do that." And so I ended up changing my major and went on to grad school at Ohio State because I knew I wanted to teach in higher ed. And that's the full, I guess circle in a sense.

EB: Yeah, that's what I was about to say is that there's so many different full-circle moments. That's so cool.

JNW: And the dance world is so small that I've met some of the same people multiple times but different places. Yeah, very cool.

EB: So cool, so now that you're here at NC State, what are some of the unique things about the dance program at NC State and some of those components of that program?

JNW: Yeah, I think what I'm most proud of is that, for the minor at NC State, you can take any of the dance technique classes and they count. For dance in higher ed, we're starting to come around and realize that ballet and modern aren't the only dance forms and they're not the most important dance forms. And we're getting there outside of NC State. NC State is already there which I'm very proud of and I point out to a lot of the students that if you pursue a minor in Dance here, you can take social dance, jaz, all the different dance forms. It does not have to be those that are out of, you know, Western culture. It does not have to just be your ballet and modern classes. And there are a lot of universities around the country and the world that are still kind of stuck in that mode that certain dance forms are more high art and more important than other dance forms.

EB: Oh, much more rigid. That's awesome that the curriculum is so fluid, I love that. So, if a student is very new to dance but they just want to try it out, are there any courses that you would recommend to them specifically?

JNW: Any of the level I classes- Ballet I, Jazz I, Social Dance- any of them- African Dance- All of those classes are. The first day of class I ask how many have previous experience. So I just finished teaching my Ballet I class, and the first day I asked by show of hands or thumbs up thumbs down, or whatever- the check. Who has never danced before? Raise your hand and let me know. And I tell them, this class is for you. Because that's how I approach the level-1 classes. It's introducing them to this dance form. Now, if you have previous experience, can you still get a lot out of class? Absolutely. So, I think that's what all of us in dance are just used to doing, is, you know, students come with different experiences and excel at a different rate. So we always teach a bunch of levels within one level. It may say ballet 1 but, for instance, I'll give options for a specific combination or exercise. If you have more experience and you're ready to do, say for instance a grand plié instead of a small demi plié then you may do that. So that's why I feel like any of our classes, I mean they're perfect for that. I have a couple and I was just telling them, you have grown so much. Now, at one of the last classes I can say a combination and they know exactly what the steps are. I can just say it without demonstrating it so they've come a long way.

EB: A lot of growth.

JNW: A lot of growth and in a short amount of time.

EB: Definitely. So you mentioned briefly, the element of Zoom and everything being online, so that's something I'm a little bit curious about is how has being a dancer and taking dance classes and teaching dance classes changed amid the limitations of Covid-19?

JNW: That's something that I spent a lot of time this summer thinking about, and meeting with others through NCDEO which is an organization. They had a couple forums for people like teachers in higher ed and dance to talk about. And it really comes down to shifting your expectations. So for instance, I still expect my Ballet I students to experience growth. Right? Will we cover as much information? Maybe not. So for instance, in ballet, you have your bar work, you have your center work, you move slowly with adagios, you move quickly with petit allegros, little jumps, and you know there's just a system- A way that these are the things that are taught in class. We will hit all those categories but will we do as many things in them? Maybe not. So for instance, grand allegro in ballet is big jumps across the floor. I have to keep in mind that the students have limited space. Now I take from the studio but I give myself a small space also so they won't feel like, "Well she has all this space!" You know, so I can keep in mind the limitations of their space. But I still expose them to that movement. So for instance, today I said, "Okay so this is one of your standard kind of grand allegro leap combinations across the floor. I gave them those elements, they did what they could in their space, and the goal is for them outside of class to find an open space, to go outside where it's safe, to find a long hallway, you know, because some of them are taking in their bathrooms. Like that's the best wifi connection, they can hold on to the sink for their bar, you know, we're making do. So I think it's just about shifting expectations. Not necessarily changing them so much but just shifting them a little bit. It's hard not to, in dance we use a lot of hands-on correcting, so I'm just talking, talking, talking. Like way more, just as many analogies. Like, "pretend you are dancing in a big vat of syrup." I mean,

whatever it is. "Your legs are like rubber bands." So, it's challenging but I also feel like it's a good challenge for educators because I'm definitely using all the skills, all the tools in my box. Some of them I haven't used in a little while because I didn't have to.

EB: Right, definitely. That's really cool. And it's cool that you're still seeing that same growth coming from those students. That's amazing.

JNW: Right, because the expectation is you still keep working. And there is a little bit, in terms of shifting expectations, students have to do a little bit more work outside of class.

EB: Right, absolutely.

JNW: So there's a little more time and the expectation that, for instance, try this when you have more space. Try this again when your dog is not stepping on you.

Both laugh

JNW: Your dad keeps going into the refrigerator in the kitchen.

EB: Exactly, oh my goodness.

JNW: I had that the other day.

EB: Online learning, what can we say? So, I'm gonna close out our interview with one more question, and that is what is one of your favorite memories associated with your time as a dance instructor at NC State?

JNW: Oh wow, let's see. This is my second year. I think last semester I had a student- she was in a jazz class- and she contacted me over email and she was in another class and needed to interview someone about, I forgot what the subject was, it was something arts-related. And she was like "Oh, could I interview you?" And at the end of that interview she said, "I just want to let you know that your class meant a lot to me." She was going through some things and coming to that class, listening to that music, just being in her body took her away from all of those other things. And she said "you made it fun, you always had good energy, and I felt like you cared about me." And so it was like, as a teacher, that's exactly what I want to hear. When it comes down to it it's not about how high you can lift your leg, if you can jump higher- It's about feeling good in your body and feeling good about yourself because you're in your body in whatever way and form and whatever that body looks like. I try to be very inclusive. Dance is not about- you know, we see all these images. I grew up with those images about what a dancer should look like. I didn't look like that typical dancer. Whether it's skin tone, hair texture, body shape, etc. So, that's what I want students to get out of my class, that anybody can do it, and to keep doing it even if outside of class, you know I give exercises that aren't just about ballet, it's just to make your body feel good when you're for instance sitting on Zoom all day. Get on the floor, do some constructive rest, do some other things that you learned from class so you can just keep it in your life.

EB: I have chills, oh my gosh! Well thank you so much for sitting down with me today. It's clear that you're having a tremendous impact and thank you so much!

EB: For more information on the Dance Minor at NC State, visit hes.dasa.ncsu.edu, or head over to their Instagram [@ncstatedance](https://www.instagram.com/ncstatedance/)! Stay healthy, stay active, and go pack!