

San Francisco  
Conservatory  
of Dance

SUNNER LEE RHATIGAN, DIRECTOR

NEWSLETTER

Compiled by Dance Students for Dance Students

October 2007

...Editor's Note...

When I sat down with four fellow Conservatory students to begin planning this newsletter, we met after a day of dancing during the Conservatory's Summer Intensive Program—an 8-hour day of classes and rehearsals. The Conservatory's performance company had just performed the night before in the WestWave Dance Festival, an annual two-week event that tends to feature predominantly professional dance companies from the Bay Area and New York. Reading the program, I noticed that SFCD was mentioned throughout. Of the 5 pieces on the program, dancers associates with the Conservatory were involved in four: Chloe Felesina, Hallie Hunt, Megan Kurashige, Heather McCladen, Daisy Phillips, and Miguele de Quadros representing SFCD's own Performance Company in a work by Les Stuck, faculty member Christian Burns in his own work, and alumnae Norma Fong and Maya Hey in pieces by Martt Lawrence and Mark Foehringer respectively.



For me, that night exemplified how SFCD serves as a meeting ground for artists in various stages of their journey: the students who train in our summer intensive, the young adults who have come to our year-round program and are now professionals in Bay Area dance, and the faculty and alumni who return to contribute to the Conservatory and continue their artistic growth.

While SFCD always seems to be teeming with activity, this past summer was particularly momentous with the addition of a new 6-week program focusing on the choreography of William Forsythe and a new residency for aspiring choreographers. Rather than try to wax poetic ourselves, as five busy dancers the newsletter's contributors decided to let what makes the Conservatory unique speak for itself: we enthusiastically offer you this compilation of interviews from our students, alumni, and faculty.

[Julia Hollas](#)

**Student Interview: Jordan Morley**

"Everything is a blank book. Once you put words in it the story can go anywhere... Movement exploded into shreds of possibility and reformed back on itself. It was invigorating and challenging."

[more from Jordan ...](#)

**Alumna Interview: Chelsea Ainsworth**

**Faculty Interview: Christian Burns**

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[more from Christian ...](#)



...What is Was: Summer '07...

There are two sentiments shared by virtually every student in the SFCD summer programs.

The first is: I am so tired. Six days of the week are filled, morning to evening, with an extraordinarily rigorous schedule. A two-hour class in ballet technique anchors most days, preparing dancers for multiple rehearsals with different choreographers. Here and there are additional classes for Pilates, stretching, modern and hip hop. Just dancing for that many hours would be tiring, but in each class and rehearsal teachers ask for the fiercest commitment and effort that the dancers can manage. No sluffing off, no coasting. Every dancer finds him or herself in the environment in which he or she is expected to pursue work with nothing less than dedication.

The second is: I can't believe what I'm learning. This year dancers had the opportunity to learn important works from the repertory of both Jiri Kylian and William Forsythe. Taught by Glenn Edgerton (former artistic director of Netherlands Dance Theater) and Thomas McManus (former dance star with Frankfurt Ballet), these works introduce students to the vocabulary and aesthetic of two of the most significant artists in contemporary dance. Along with learning set works, dancers also helped create entirely new pieces with choreographers Alex Ketley, Christian Burns, Cheryl Chaddick and Robert Moses. This summer also saw the introduction of our new choreographic residency program, giving 7 students the time, space, dancers and guidance from accomplished choreographers to explore making their own work.

[Megan Kurashige](#)

...Bulletins...

"...in my very first "sprout bar" led by Summer she asked the question, "why?" And this forced me to really evaluate, and I realized that all of this work, all of these classes and tedious hours spent practicing on yourself are for the benefits of art, that you are always touching others..."

[more from Chelsea...](#)

[More News](#) from past and present students...

Are you a past Conservatory student involved in something noteworthy in dance? [Let Us Know!](#)

## Faculty Interview: Christian Burns

**Q: What do you enjoy the most about working with the Conservatory? How is it different from other places where you have taught?**

**A:** I would say that the Conservatory is a very unique and special school. It is a very rare thing in this field to find an institution that really understands that creativity is at the heart of technique. It is essential to continuously put established ideas on the table for further investigation and challenge. It is also important to keep practicing and getting deeper into the heart of the material that is being developed. For me it comes down to forging a language of creativity. I would say that in terms of the Conservatory offering a ballet-based foundation, it is an exceedingly unique educational environment.

**Q: Do you come each summer with a particular plan for what you want to teach or specific directions to explore? How do you prepare?**

**A:** Throughout the year I am always exposing myself to dance artists who work in different kinds of methods. I am always interested in seeing how people explore (seemingly) the same thing – "I have a body; how can I communicate through my body?" That seems to me to be the nutshell of what all dancers are ultimately concerned with. And I suppose that as we change throughout our lives, those same questions become relevant again in different ways. When I come to teach for the Conservatory in the summertime, I bring with me new ideas and skills that I have picked up and put them into the dialogue of teaching. I engage with the students as well as with my own ideas every time I teach or facilitate a rehearsal. I try to teach as a conversation.

**Q: Do you ever find yourself learning from your students in the working process? Does this influence you in your own work outside of the Conservatory?**

**A:** I only know as much as I do because of the verification my students give me. We feed each other and we teach each other. I always thought "Teaching" should be called "Learning" instead.

In fact I often wonder if a deep state of dancing can actually be taught... I know it can be learned. There are no shortcuts to that process. You just do it every day and in time things change and shift and eventually move forward. That's the big secret. Just work every day.

I still feel like I'm a student in dance. Every year I keep putting myself in scary situations performing in very unfamiliar and insecure ways. But I enjoy that. I enjoy feeling myself in unknown territories, whether it's being in a foreign country faced with eating a meal I never imagined I would eat, or being in a foreign improvisational technique wondering how I am going to get myself out of a difficult dance. We have a lot to learn from putting ourselves in challenging places.

I happen to feel that our creative potential is infinite; and I want to spend the rest of my life exploring those possibilities through dance. That is the reason I enjoy teaching, because we—the students and myself—get to practice the things we are working with at that point in our development. I don't like to see myself as an expert, but rather as another student who happens to be at a different point in my development.

**Q: How does a particular group of students affect what you decide to teach or how you structure the choreographic process?**

**A:** The students who I happen to be working with in a given session decide an enormous amount about what I will introduce and initiate. I devote a lot of attention to trying to figure out how I can reach the students energetically. If I can connect on that level, finding a charged energy together, we can really go someplace. If I am in a situation in which the energy isn't working and the students are drifting away, in most cases it's because I am not initiating the right combination of interaction or inspiration. It's a tricky balance sometimes.

When I start a choreographic session, I consider the tangible energy in the room as the actual material that I will be working with. Energy emerging from the dancers is the material. This energetic material is sometimes a very delicate thing to find and maintain, it can appear and disappear with the drop of a hat. So I am often working hard at listening for it so I can hold onto it as long as possible. It's a way of letting the situation lead the session or the choreography and I try to give that situation some form. I follow their lead and see where we can go together.

**Q: What are the themes/issues/ideas you've tried to get across most this summer? Why did you focus on them?**

**A:** I brought with me some new interests in speaking with moving. I had spent a few weeks in the spring working with an artist who only talks when he dances. It was an incredible experience to be a complete beginner at something all over again, having done very little speaking in performance. So I brought exercises from those sessions into my teaching with the Conservatory students. I recall that lots of laughing was the consistent outcome. Laughing... after having been so utterly serious about my work for a long time, I hadn't realized how much I was craving some humor. So perhaps a desire to explore bringing some lightness into my process was an element I was initiating this summer. I never foresaw that I would be getting the advanced dancers to be making little critter forest sounds and goofily whispering surreal children's stories within their dance. We had marvelous fun.

**Christian's bio**

- Megan Kurashige



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### Student Interview: Jordan Morley

**Q: Why did you decide to come to the Conservatory?**

A: I was sure the minute I finished my master class/audition with Summer that I needed to go there. I found freedom and power flowing into the room as she taught class. I was enthralled. Ballet was not my thing at the time and I was struggling, but her knowledge put me at ease for most of the class.



**Q: What were you expecting? How were your expectations challenged/fulfilled?**

A: I was expecting ballet bootcamp with bunheads and pink tights. I expected to be challenged physically, but not so much emotionally. I was surprised by how much I grew as a person as well as a dancer. The first day was hard for me. I sat in the corner and was scared out of my mind. I had no warm ups and just my bright green tights. I thought, oh gosh what did I get myself into? Then I noticed that tights could be worn, or not, and that it was your choice. That let me breathe a bit. I don't think I fully came into my own though until my first taste of Alex Ketley's choreography/ballet class.

**Q: If you had to compress what you learned in the Forsythe workshop into a single image, what would that be? Why?**

A: Everything is a blank book. Once you put words in it the story can go anywhere. I would choose this image because of the number of ways we learned to manipulate even the tiniest phrases till they evolved into something completely different. Movement exploded into shreds of possibility and reformed back on itself. It was invigorating and challenging.

**Q: What is the single most vivid, personally important thing that you've learned? What are you going to continue to work on and explore?**

A: Breathe and trust in your work. Also: "A bad pirouette does not make a bad person." Everyone has the ability to see their own potential and grasp it if they take the time to look and learn. I am going to continue to work on releasing tension from my shoulders. Okay, that was a bit technical. I also think I am going to work on remembering that dance is fun and meant to be challenged. That technique is a great place to explore and learn about more than just what is happening in class. To actually allow the mind to be creative while presenting a regimen of codified steps.

**Q: Describe a favorite moment.**

A: Oh gosh. This is rather hard. To pick one moment over another is so taxing that it actually hurts my mind. I will only answer the question like this: my moments with everyone that I encountered during my ten weeks with SFCD have really been some of the best. I will always remember the good friends and great energy brought from everyone. Dance will continue to grow stronger by the amount of love you all put into it. Thank you for sharing your time with me.

- Megan Kurashige

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### Alumna Interview: Chelsea Ainsworth

**Q: How did you first hear about SFCD and what initially drew you to the Summer Intensive?**

A: I heard about this wonderful summer program through Alex Ketley, who while sitting backstage at the Stevens Center [at North Carolina School of the Arts] handed me a copy of the SFCD flyer. We had been working with Hubbard Street on a new piece and I decided to follow Alex because he was an incredible teacher and choreographer.

**Q: This is your third year in a row coming to the Intensive. What about this program makes you want to return again and again?**

A: This is the only summer program I have ever been to. Before I started coming here I would either go to either LA or NY and take classes on my own. When I came to this program I was amazed by the amount of care and generosity that each and every teacher had for their students. And I decided that coming back was beneficial not only for the high quality dance training, but for the personal growth and connection I have felt as well. As opposed to my past summers, at this program I am no longer just taking class but delving deeper and deeper into certain reps and styles of movement. Oh yeah, and of course the Kurashige family—a perfect example of how loving the community at SFCD is, are always worth coming to visit.

**Q: You just completed your freshman year at Juilliard—How do you see your summers at the Conservatory complementing your year-round artistic training?**

A: Freshman year at Juilliard was mentally, physically and emotionally very demanding. My technique that I had worked on for four years at NCSA was completely broken down and I had to retrain my body again. Then right after school the first thing I did was work for five weeks in an arts camp for impoverished children in Homestead Florida, called "Artists Striving to End Poverty" or "ASTEP." One day later I was back in San Fran for my third summer intensive. With all of this information swirling in my mind from school and the ASTEP program SFCD was my first time dancing outside of Juilliard and it felt great! Returning to the same program, even as a completely different dancer, was exciting and therapeutic. The Conservatory allows each student so much individual attention that it is absolutely impossible not to grow emotionally, physically and mentally.

**Q: What classes, repertory or faculty members have you found to be particularly effective and/or influential in your approach to dancing?**

**A:** I think that the great thing about this program is that each faculty member is so extremely helpful and influential. This past summer, unlike the first two, I was not able to take any classes with Cheryl except for Pilates. However because the faculty is so focused on the dancers I was still able to talk to her a lot about placement and energy while dancing. All the teachers—and the students as well—are great role models and incredibly influential in the choices they make while dancing. Even if there was no rep and no new pieces being made I believe that every student would benefit completely. But there are new pieces and a lot of rep, so that's even better I guess!

**Q: You participated in our launch of the Choreographic Residency, both choreographing and dancing for a fellow student choreographer. Why did you want to take part in that program? What was the actual experience like?**

**A:** Well Juilliard is a school where each dancer is encouraged to learn and soak in as much information as possible to become a well rounded dancer. Choreography is also becoming a big part of their program. While I've dabbled in choreography, I thought that this experience at SFCV would allow me the opportunity not only to choreograph on other dancers but also to get feedback. The program was great for both of these reasons. Alex and Christian gave me great ideas and obstacles to work with that I have carried with me in my mind back to Juilliard. Dancing in another student-choreographer's piece was nice because you had the perspective of both sides at the same time. And I feel that if you know both sides then you know how to handle what either the choreographer needs or the dancer needs.

**Q: How did your experience in the Choreographic Residency influence your day to day work in the studio?**

**A:** I was constantly watching and experiencing even more than ever exactly how Alex and Christian and Glen made choreographic decisions and choices. It broadened my mind and my eye as a dancer in the studio as well.

**Q: What moments from this past summer did you find particularly memorable?**

**A:** I always find that the moments that I learn so much from and are the most memorable are the moments when I am completely and utterly exhausted. So, basically, the whole summer camp! The questions of "why I want to be a dancer" and "what it means to be an artist" were also on my mind a lot. The transition from working at the ASTEP camp, where I was constantly using my art to reach out and give to others to dancing for my own benefit at the Conservatory was difficult for me. But in my very first "sprout bar" led by Summer, she asked the question, "why?" And this forced me to really evaluate. I realized that all of this work, all of these classes and tedious hours spent practicing on yourself are for the benefit of art. That you are always touching others, and when you genuinely find yourself through what you love to do and practice—dance or whatever art form—it is honest and just as giving.

- Gabrielle Zucker

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**Newsletter Contributors**

**Emily Hite** was glad to finally attend the Conservatory this summer after admiring it from afar for several years. She was a member of the Sacramento Ballet and John Clifford's Los Angeles Dance Theatre before receiving her BA from Stanford University in 2007. She is currently a member of Hope Mohr Dance in San Francisco and writes dance critique for several publications.

**Sara Hoenes** has danced professionally with Oregon Ballet Theatre, Alonzo King's LINES Ballet, James Sewell Ballet and The Foundry. She is excited to be assisting with outreach and development and has planned one outreach day in conjunction with the non-profit City of Dreams and two fund raisers. She is honored to call the Conservatory home.

**Julia Hollas** came to the Conservatory's first summer program in 2004, and has been following her belief in the school ever since. After graduating from the University of Utah in 2006, she now dances with the year-round program and works as their Administrative Project Manager.

**Megan Kurashige** first came to the Conservatory in the summer of 2005. She fell in love with all the people there and has been dancing with them ever since. Before this happy relationship, Megan danced with Ballet Pacifica in Irvine, California. She reads incessantly and is currently obsessed with the Proclaimers.

**Gabrielle Zucker** has performed with the San Francisco Opera and Alonzo King's LINES Ballet, but is proud to call San Francisco Conservatory of Dance her home. When not dancing, she can be found enjoying well lit dinners, and brief walks on concrete.

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