



International Association of Blacks in Dance UNLV Dance Captivates in Denver

UNLV Dance has a long history of invitations and performance at the International Association of Blacks in Dance, an organization founded in 1991, whose mission has been preserving and promoting dance by people of African ancestry or origin, and increasing opportunities for artists in advocacy, audience development, education, networking, performance, philosophical dialogue, and touring. Each year, IABD has a conference and students from UNLV have had the distinct honor of being invited to perform alongside numerous prestigious professional second companies like Alvin Ailey Dance II, Cleo Parker Robinson Dance II, Dallas Black Theatre II, Lula Washington Dance

Theatre II, Eleo Pomare Dance Company, and Muntu Dance Theatre. The IABD festival also presents performances by many of the first companies and students have the opportunity to see these performances. Conferences have been in numerous national and international locations like: Montreal, Washington DC., New York, Philadelphia, Denver, Dallas, and Cleveland.

UNLV Professor of Dance Victoria Dale is a member of the IABD Board of Directors, and has been the chief choreographer and coordinator of these IABD trips. We caught up with Dale, as well as three dance BFA majors, Malik Gray, Dakota Miller, and Avree Walker recently and discussed

IABD, the value of diversity, and the impact of this great conference. Avree Walker is also Performance Ensemble Coordinator of the City of Las Vegas West Las Vegas Arts Center.

How did UNLV Dance become connected with the International Association of Blacks in Dance?

Dale: Since its inception, IABD has established a mecca for the education of the African dance diaspora with groundbreaking achievements. The 2015 historical gathering of recognized ballet representatives for the “1st Annual Ballet Audition for Women of Color” demonstrates a monumental accomplishment making a far reaching impact on decades of

struggle. I have annually attended the IABD conferences. When Cleo Parker-Robinson commissioned me to choreograph two works for her company, we developed a strong sisterhood. Through that relationship, I was invited to join the IABD Board of Directors made up of founder Joan Myers Brown (Philadanco), Cleo herself, Ann Williams (Dallas Black Dance), Lula Washington (Lula Washington Dance), chairperson Denise Saunders Thompson (Howard U) and other well-recognized artists. The invitation has afforded me partnership with iconic personalities in the future development of IABD and UNLV representation on the IABD pictorial website.

UNLV Dance has a longstanding mission to be diverse, inclusive, and promote an environment of mutual understanding, shared respect and collaboration between all groups of individuals regardless of race, religion, creed, sex, disability, ethnic origin or economic status. Victoria, you have been a strong advocate, stakeholder, and driving force for these kinds of diversity initiatives within the Department of Dance and College of Fine Arts, how do trips like IABD factor into UNLV Dance's diversity mission?

Dale: UNLV's involvement with IABD has been a passionate goal stemming from deficiencies in my



undergraduate training. Integral to the quest for diversity exposure was preparation of students for the rigor of the professional world. IABD was the perfect organization to address both personal goals. Second company members are hungry to be accepted by first companies and, therefore, exhibit phenomenal energy and technique. Our dancers absorb that energy sharing the stage with second companies resulting in a synergy of focus. UNLV, consequently, has received standing ovations at the Kennedy Center D.C. and Denver's Ellie Caulkins Opera House. Through association with IABD conferences UNLV students witness a cultural community in all its essence and see diversity as a lifestyle not a fad.

What was special about this performance opportunity at the IABD conference in Denver, Colorado?

Gray: The most significant thing about IABD was the family-oriented environment, as well as a very uplifting and honorable group of people that taught many different styles of dance in a great way that keeps every dancer engaged and learning. All of the members also treated everyone like family, so whenever anyone went on stage everyone cheered and made sure that the group that performed felt accomplished and good about themselves.

Miller: The energy that was flowing throughout the entire week was palpable! This conference comes together every year and the fact that IABD is able to foster a beautiful spirit and beautiful embracing energy is just amazing, a real, diverse, inclusive, and vital dance community.

Walker: Because of my exposure to IABD, The City of Las Vegas West Las Vegas Arts Center has developed a significant relationship with The International Association of Blacks in Dance, Inc. (IABD). Our youth organization, averaging between 6–25 students a year, has traveled to Washington D.C., Dallas, Texas, Cleveland, Ohio, and Denver,

Colorado to participate in dance conference/festival activities ranging from panels, workshops, seminars, dance master classes, and professional performance presentation opportunities. The educational exchange that takes place annually between the young people and conference/festival master artists, administrators, choreographers, dancers, educators, scholars and attendees recharges the West Las Vegas Arts Center's mission to maintain excellence in the arts, using civic awareness as a base to teach and create dynamic work in dance and the performing arts. It also encourages students to pursue professional opportunities with other arts companies.

How was it different performing at IABD opposed to UNLV?

Gray: This wasn't a group of people coming to watch because they had to or because of their class or because they are family. It was a group of people that have an appreciation for dance and understanding of what we all go through on a daily basis. Miller: I enjoyed the continuous positive feedback from the people putting on the conference and also my peers.

Walker: Having the opportunity to represent Las Vegas, Nevada amongst the nation's leading arts organizations lifts up and exposes young artists to the greatest examples of how and where our hard work will take us. The impact is immeasurable!

These trips are more than just great opportunities for students, often they become significant and meaningful life events for the young dance artist. How has IABD changed you?

Gray: The main way that IABD changed my view of dance was to treat it not as a competition, but as a learning experience and obtain what I will need to share with the world instead of keeping it focused so much on myself.

Miller: There was something that teachers, performers, and the faculty at the conference kept saying to us, "You have everything to show and NOTHING to prove!" That is so powerful. Spending the whole week with such an encouraging message changes the way you process dance. It forces me to enjoy every movement and reminds me that I just love to move my body. The first person I'm always dancing for is myself. I learned this at IABD.

Walker: I truly believe in the value of the IABD. My horizon is ever expanding because of the relationships I build annually at the conference. Developing contacts with renowned artists and directors such

as Garth Fagan, Milton Myers, Troy Powell, Hinton Battle, George Faison, and many other wonderful icons who continue to uphold the legacy of dance in America is more than encouraging. I am charged and forever grateful to Professor Victoria Dale for planting this seed in my life. Every dancer, regardless of ethnic background should experience IABD and UNLV Dance gave me this opportunity.

UNLV Dance is indebted to some very generous individuals whose funding made this trip possible: UNLV Vice President for Student Affairs Juanita Fain, Victoria Fertitta, and Councilman Ricki Barlow.

The January 2017 IABD conference is returning to Dallas, Texas. Congratulations are in order to Victoria Dale, who has once again been invited to bring a group of UNLV Dance majors. We look forward to the great things in 2017. Bravo Victoria!

Support UNLV Dance and our travels. Many of our trips will be posted on UNLV's new crowd-funding platform: rebelraiser.unlv.edu.

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Alumni Spotlight:
Keena Smith
BA in Dance Performance and
Choreography, 1995.

Dance majors often come into the department with certain career talents and focusses—some performers, some choreographers, some teachers. Alumna Keena Smith left UNLV with talents in performance, choreography and teaching. After graduation, she attended Summer and Winter dance



intensive workshops with the Martha Graham Dance Company in NYC and the American Dance Festival, in Durham, NC. She performed on the Las Vegas Strip in *EFX* starring

Michael Crawford for just over a year, then left the show to attend graduate school at University of California Irvine where she completed her MFA in Dance. She had the opportunity to train with with modern company Cleo Parker Robinson in Denver, CO and then perform with Loretta Livingston in Los Angeles, CA, before joining the cast of the national touring company for the Lion King.

What did you find special about UNLV Dance?

I especially enjoyed the diversity in training that I received. I received an excellent technical foundation within a wide range of genres, which prepared me to audition and ultimately work alongside other professional performing artists. I'm small in stature, so I had to dance big and remain confident. The personal example that the instructors and guest artists at UNLV exhibited definitely provided an excellent example which prepared me for what to expect in the competitive world of professional dance.

What was it like performing in the touring company of Lion King?

The touring lifestyle was both thrilling and exhausting. I loved every moment, but it was nice to return home (to Las Vegas) and settle down after nearly 10 years. We would reside and perform (8 shows a week) in cities for anywhere from 8 weeks to 1 year. I left the National Tour for just under a year to perform with the Broadway cast of *The Lion King*, then returned back to tour to complete another 4 years on the road.

I was very fortunate to have worked closely with so many talented, beautiful, and amazing artists from all walks of life and experiences. I learned priceless lessons about nurturing your professional passion, maintaining a strong work ethic and to never take for granted the gift to work in the field that you love.

What has kept you inspired about dance and movement?

Current innovations in movement, choreography and technology today, absolutely blow me away!!! I always keep my eyes open for the newest

hybrids of dance genres, though I am especially thrilled when I see reference and respect for the pioneering, classic and fundamental techniques. I will always be a performer at heart, raised in the 80's...so, I still want to be a Solid Gold Dancer.

How has it been returning to UNLV as a teacher?

I am forever grateful to have amazing dance mentors and examples throughout my career. I try my best to pass on the strong, structured technical training, and life lessons that artists endure to my students. Dance can be a fickle field, so you've got to set goals, work hard, and remain open minded at all times. I realize every day through teaching, that I am continuously learning and growing as both instructor and artist.



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