



DANCE WRITING, feet first

BY DAN SULLIVAN

"And contract—and release— and spiral around —and contract —and release! Good work, everybody. Five more minutes and you can all go home and take a nice hot bath."

Welcome to Jour 4171, Covering the Arts: Dance Writing Demystified. We're in studio five, Northrop Memorial Auditorium, where Judith Brin Ingber is helping 13 aspiring dance critics to understand—from the floor up—how Martha Graham reinvented modern dance in the '30s.

It's November and they'll be reviewing Graham's rarely seen "Clytemnestra" at Northrop next week. They've been doing their homework: watching video clips of Graham productions, discovering how critics like Edwin Denby and Deborah Jowitt had reacted to Graham's work, becoming familiar with Graham's imperial presence in her wonderful backstage film, "A Dancer's World."

All useful background material for the young dance critic, but the critic's real job is to get inside the work: to figure out how it's wired. Could there be a better way to understand Graham's jagged movements than to explore them yourself, under the eye of a dancer/scholar who had trained at Graham's

studio? Moreover, one who could make the experience fun?

In short, Judith Brin Ingber proved to be the perfect person to run the dance-lab portion of our experimental course, just as Camille LeFevre, longtime arts journalist and dance scholar, brought her knowledge of and passion for dance to the writing aspect of the course.

This left the third member of our troika—me—with little to do but supply the class with writing tips and the occasional war story from my 30-year career in arts journalism, very little of it devoted to dance.

In fact dance reviewing had always been a mystery to me. I had done enough of it to know that reviewing theater was a lot easier. Plays have plots and characters and, above all, dialogue. No problem getting any of that on paper.

Dance generally pretends to tell a story, but its basic subject is itself. We don't go to "The Nutcracker"—or the premiere of the

Royal Winnipeg Ballet's "Moulin Rouge," which our students also reviewed—to see how the plot turns out.

It's the dancing that counts, but try to do justice to its complexities! I used to fall back on empty adjectives like "kinetic" when I didn't know what else to say, but that didn't help. As Camille and Judith would agree, a good maxim for critics is "Write thoughts."

My cluelessness in this area came in handy when we were planning this course last winter. Ben Johnson, Northrop's director of concerts and lectures, was looking for a way to attract more students to its events. Could the SJMC put together an arts-writing course

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that would further the connection?

Al Tims, director of the SJMC, was interested, but wanted to be sure the student reviewers avoided becoming part of Northrop's publicity apparatus. Assured

LEFT: As part of the course, students attended and wrote of a review of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet's performance of "Moulin Rouge" at Northrop Memorial Auditorium on Oct. 17, 2009. PHOTO: TIM RUMMELHOFF

that they'd have total independence, Tims encouraged a Northrop/SJMC partnership and even provided the seed money for it through the Cox Innovation Fund, which was created in 2001 by David Cox, retired CEO of Cowles Media Company, and his wife, Vicki, to support innovative, collaborative, field-based courses.

Having taught arts reviewing at the SJMC, I joined the planning team, which would shortly include Camille and Judith. Our challenge: Build an arts-writing course around Northrop's new dance season that would have a spine of its own.

How much of the season, though? Rather than going wide, we decided to go narrow. Instead of tracking the Northrop schedule for a year, what about an eight-week course built around the most anticipated dance events of its fall season—the premiere of the Royal Winnipeg's "Moulin Rouge" (not to be confused with the movie of the same title) and a restoration of Graham's most ambitious foray into Greek tragedy, "Clytemnestra."

We'd make the spine of the course the issue just mentioned—how to write well about dance without lapsing into jargon. We'd open the class to dance students as well as journalism majors. We'd give as much time to ballet as modern dance. (Judith would see to this.) We'd give the students spot assignments as well as full-length ones. We'd let them read each other's reviews. We'd discuss arts reporting as well as arts reviewing. (A press conference with the Graham company's artistic director, Janet Eilber, was a highlight of the course.)

Finally, at Camille's insistence, we'd be perfectly frank about the pickle that arts journalists of any stripe find themselves in these days: Critics have become just as poor as artists.

What should we call the course? Dance Writing Demystified was the best thing we could come up with, and it didn't scare people away. The course was announced in early spring; within a week, a dozen students had enrolled and many were studying dance.

"A lot of us have been dancing since we were in third grade," one student reminded me. "It's a plus if you can link that with a writing course."



ABOVE: Adjunct instructor Judith Brin Ingber leads students in movement exercises, giving them a firsthand exploration of modern dance pioneer Martha Graham's aesthetic.

PHOTO: TOM ARCHIBALD

So much for the course's backstory. Was the class a success? Not for everybody. Some students didn't like coping with three teachers at once. For others, the cross talk in the classroom was distracting; it wasn't clear who was deciding the grades (all of us, in concert); it could be hard to get what a teacher was driving at, what you were expected to do.

But most students went with the flow. "Getting three individual responses to my writing really helped," said Sophia Anastazievsky. "Everyone had their own expertise," offered Allison Hall. Jennifer Lagos added, "The difference of ideas was good."

Had we managed to demystify dance writing? Somewhat, and not just for the journalism majors. The dance students enjoyed abandoning dance-speak and having a conversation, so to speak, with the average reader. Hall commented, "Even though I had the technical vocabulary, I found myself thinking about dance more directly and feeling it more deeply."

How to improve the course if it's offered again? There was general agreement that eight weeks was a little too short for such a class—which doesn't mean it ought to run for a full semester. Its future will be pondered by the powers that be, who seem to feel the experiment justified its cost. "I would love to see activities like this happen in the future," says Ben Johnson. "Hurray for the Cox Innovation Fund!" says Al Tims.

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BELOW: From left, acclaimed arts journalist Camille LeFevre, longtime theater critic Dan Sullivan and renowned dancer and choreographer Judith Brin Ingber team-taught the course.

PHOTO: KELLY MACWILLIAMS



THIS SEMESTER, the SJMC expanded the Jour 4171 course offerings to include a second section of its popular arts journalism class in addition to the traditional offering of *Covering the Arts: Backstage at the Jungle Theater*, taught by Dan Sullivan. *Covering the Arts: Backstage at the Guthrie Theater*, allows students the opportunity to participate in interactive activities that introduce them to, broaden and deepen their skills as an arts journalist. Camille LeFevre is the instructor. Throughout the course, students learn to apply the core principles of critical writing to arts journalism—writing previews, reviews and commentary on two of the Guthrie's 2010 productions: "Macbeth" and "M. Butterfly," with behind-the-scenes access to Guthrie Theater personnel, such as directors; set, lighting and costume designers; movement coaches; and marketing, communications, production and development staff.