

Contact: Jenny Mays
434-924-8137
jmays@virginia.edu

U.Va. Dance Program Collaborates with Engineering School to Explore Mobility and Disability

November 18, 2009 — A semester-long collaboration on mobility/disability between the University of Virginia Dance Program and School of Engineering and Applied Science will culminate in "Structurally Sound," a performance and discussion Nov. 23 at 8 p.m. in the Helms Theatre.

The collaboration was conceived by Rose Pasquarello Beauchamp, head of the Dance Program in the Department of Drama, and Bradford Bennett, assistant professor of research in the Department of Orthopaedic Surgery, who specializes in the biomechanics of gait and regularly teaches engineering courses. Their vision was to engage students in an interdisciplinary study on the process of improving and limiting mobility.

Collaborating also allowed students from the two disciplines to learn about working together on a real project and to appreciate their respective approaches and processes to problem solve. It also affords them an opportunity to learn about "what each other does in life. It's a place for them to come together to appreciate that. It's a cross pollination of ideas and an opportunity to promote that philosophically," Bennett said.

Ten students from Bennett's Introduction to Engineering course were assigned to design devices that improve mobility for a handicapped person. Seven student and faculty choreographers were then asked to choreograph a dance integrating the devices. In addition to the two devices the engineering students designed, the choreographers will use other devices such as leg braces and crutches.

The project is poignant for the engineering students, Bennett said. "They see that they can help people through engineering. The bottom line is that engineering is to help people and society."

The engineering and dance students met weekly to share ideas. The experience was eye opening for students from both disciplines.

First-year engineering student Kyle Smalkowski welcomed the challenge of having a hands-on project that took him and his team into "the mechanical engineering lab to make these metal objects."

Smalkowski said the shared experience, at times "stressful but always good," helped the students develop respect and understanding of each others' needs and goals.

Justin Paxton, fourth-year drama major with a minor in dance, said the experience helped him to articulate what he wants and needs to convey with his dance and learn to work with others. "We both speak different languages. The hardest part was the communication between the dancers and engineers," he said.

"Working together on a common idea is like making a painting," Paxton added. "They are providing the paint and canvas and the dancers create the picture."

In their compositions, the choreographers will restrict their dancers' movements, representing mobility challenges faced by a paraplegic person, an amputee, or someone with legs damaged by polio. The devices will help the dancers move around the stage.

"Limiting changes the whole pattern of movement," Bennett said.

"The idea is that a device that helps a person with disability in one area can allow dancers to break out of their boundaries. The hope is that the dancers find freedom in the restrictions," Beauchamp said. "We are interested in proving the ability to dance regardless of physical limitation."

The Nov. 23 performance is free and open to the public. The event will showcase the dances as well as feature a discussion on the students' experience, both in designing and in dancing with the devices. Faculty mentors, choreographers and students will lead the talk.

The dance-engineering collaboration kicks off a series of events exploring physically integrated dance. From March 23 to 26, the U.Va. Department of Drama and Dance Program will welcome AXIS Dance Company to Charlottesville. AXIS' focus is on creating and presenting contemporary dance by artists with and without disabilities. During its guest artist residency, AXIS Dance Company will teach a series of master classes, hold a lecture and demonstration for middle and high school students and perform modern dance choreographer David Dorfman's new piece "A Light Shelter." For information on AXIS Dance, visit www.virginia.edu/drama/axisdance.

For information on the U.Va. Dance Program, visit www.virginia.edu/drama/danceminor.htm.

For information on the School of Engineering and Applied Science, visit www.seas.virginia.edu.

By Jenny Mays and Jane Ford