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Endless Possibility - Dance Teacher

Michael Crabb

9-12 minutes

Jill Johnson joins the Harvard faculty.



Jill Johnson and dancer Sokvannara (Sy) Sar at Manhattan Movement & Arts Center studio.

For Jill Johnson dance is an unfinished project. “It’s not defined by the dances that already exist,” explains the newly installed director of dance at Harvard University. “We don’t know all there is to know about it.” Johnson’s belief in the open-ended nature of dance is what fires her hunger for inquiry and innovation. Her journey is a lifelong quest for knowledge, one

she is eager to share with Harvard students and colleagues.

Canadian-born Johnson, who spent 10 years as a principal dancer with celebrated dance visionary William Forsythe's former Frankfurt Ballet, has pursued a wide-ranging career as a dancer, choreographer, producer and educator. Now 41, Johnson sees her new role as a natural progression. She says, "It's an incredible opportunity to lead a vision for dance education that I've been thinking about for quite some time."

Johnson emphasizes that, in her view, performance is only one aspect of dance. She approaches her role at Harvard as a way to apply dance principles to other disciplines both in the arts and beyond. "The inquiry and the kinds of research we can do around dance can be such fascinating and valuable learning tools," she says.

This vision seems particularly relevant in that the Harvard dance program is not a degree-granting university department, nor is its primary aim to train students for a dance profession. It's the eager participation of a large number of students from other disciplines that excites Johnson. She wants to activate a broader curiosity in dance, forge new alignments and collaborative approaches among different disciplines and highlight dance's relevance to other fields, from architecture to cognitive neuroscience to mathematics.

Dance at Harvard falls under the bailiwick of the Office for the Arts (OFA), whose mandate is to support student engagement in the arts and integrate the arts into campus life. As such, it offers co-curricular, noncredit professional instruction in a

range of dance styles to undergraduate and graduate students, staff, faculty and alumni, either at the Harvard Dance Center near Radcliffe Quadrangle, or at the Director's Studio a mile away. In the course of a year as many as 800 students participate. Artist residencies, master classes and intensives have historically aimed to connect students with the work of such dance pioneers as Martha Graham, José Limón and George Balanchine. Johnson plans to introduce students to the practice of such contemporary choreographers as Forsythe (her own mentor), Ohad Naharin, Crystal Pite and others.

The program also functions as a resource for Harvard's 25 student-run dance groups—from ballroom and ballet to capoeira and Irish step dance—and itself stages two concerts annually in which students perform in the Dance Center's large studio theater and the New College Theater.

Former Harvard dance director Elizabeth Bergmann retired in February, after 11 years of leading an evolution of dance that included the 2005 opening of the Dance Center. Under Bergmann, the program became fully part of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, and she helped design nine secondary-field credit courses. Bergmann says the structure of Harvard's dance program may seem complicated but has the advantage of being flexible enough to cater to the cross-disciplinary interests of exceptionally gifted, adventurous students—a major reason Johnson was attracted to the job.

Mary Cochran, the former Paul Taylor soloist who has headed Columbia University's Barnard College dance department

since 2003, describes Harvard as a “unique” situation in the way it contrasts to more regimented, conservatory-style dance programs. She’s taught at Harvard and was on the dance-director-selection search committee.

“The level of training and inquiry is high,” says Cochran, “but it’s more varied and allows students to pursue their own path, which, ironically, is the artist’s life.” Cochran commissioned Johnson to choreograph a work at Barnard earlier this year and praises the way she pushes students aesthetically and intellectually. “Yet Jill is completely grounded in a deep physicality,” she adds. Cochran believes Johnson’s approach is a perfect fit for the unusually adaptable structure of a research-oriented institution such as Harvard.

Johnson jokes that there’s a genetic source for her passion to teach. Her grandfather was a school principal. Her mother is a music therapist. Born in Hamilton, Ontario, an industrial city on Lake Ontario about 40 miles southwest of Toronto, Johnson began dance classes at age 4: “All kinds of dance,” she recalls. “I wanted to know about all of it.”

Five years later she was accepted into Canada’s National Ballet School, which provides an integrated dance and academic education under one roof. Johnson credits NBS with providing a rigorous training. Among her most-treasured memories is working with the inspirational Erik Bruhn when, shortly before his death, he rehearsed his version of *Swan Lake* for a 1986 school showcase.

In 1987 Johnson graduated from NBS with top honors, and

after further studies in Monte Carlo with revered Russian-born teacher Marika Besobrasova, Johnson joined The National Ballet of Canada. Her career took an unexpected, transformational turn when William Forsythe arrived to choreograph a new work for NBC. She was cast in the 1991 premiere of Forsythe's *The Second Detail* and was "over the moon" when he invited her to join his company.

She spent the next five years in Germany but returned to her homeland in 1996 to become an NBC soloist under then artistic director James Kudelka. "I wanted to reconnect with Canada," explains Johnson. Although she enjoyed the varied roles that came her way in the large classical company ("The National Ballet has always had an incredibly diverse repertoire and always had a creator around," says Johnson), she found that her true artistic home was Frankfurt, and she rejoined Forsythe's troupe in 2000. She remained there for five years and then relocated to New York City, a suitable hub from which to continue her career, teaching or choreographing for several prestigious institutions and academies, including Princeton, NYU Tisch School of the Arts, Ohio State, the Joffrey and Ailey schools.

The Forsythe connection, however, remained. In 1999 he asked Johnson to stage his Duo for the Batsheva Dance Company in Tel Aviv. Since then Johnson has staged more than a dozen Forsythe ballets for almost 20 major companies, most recently *The Second Detail* for Boston Ballet. She's also been working with Forsythe on the creation of a new solo for

Mikhail Baryshnikov. “Imagine being in the same room with these two legends and visionaries of the dance world,” says Johnson. “The amount of information their bodies hold is incredible.”

She credits her long association with Forsythe with shaping her understanding of dance and teaching philosophy. “Bill fostered my development as an artist and teacher in profound ways. He is incredibly generous in trusting dancers and enabling their best selves in a cerebral/visceral equation that is so wonderfully balanced. It was such a rich artistic experience and I grew as a person as well,” she says.

From Forsythe she learned the inherent collaborative nature of dance and improvisational techniques that have become central to her teaching methods and choreographic process. During her first year at Harvard, Johnson will teach two courses that, in part, draw on this experience: “Fundamentals of Improvisation and Composition—Dance” and “Master Work: The Choreographic Process of William Forsythe,” an in-depth study of one of the many works in which Johnson played an originating part, culminating in the creation of a new work for students to be performed next spring.

“Jill’s approach is a fascinating and rare fusion of intellect and physicality,” says David Norsworthy, a third-year Juilliard student who has studied with Johnson there and at the MOVEMENT INVENTION PROJECT, a summer program in New York City for college-age dancers focusing on improvisation and collaboration. “Jill is one of the most verbally

and kinesthetically articulate people I know. She also has a really mature view of the dance world and talks a lot about removing ego from art and transitioning out of what she calls an 'I-centric' world."

Johnson's predecessor at Harvard feels confident her own achievements are passing into good hands and is encouraged that Johnson has been appointed to a full faculty position. "That's a major move for Harvard," says Bergmann, who despite a distinguished academic background remained an OFA staff member throughout her 11 years as dance director. "It's one of the few jobs left that you can make of it more or less what you will. I think Jill is going to be very successful; but it's a job with many hats to wear and a lot of different constituencies to serve."

Johnson—co-appointed as senior lecturer in the Department of Music— will lead a team that includes three other full-time staff members and six part-time teachers. Apart from teaching an advanced ballet class and two credit courses, and sitting on OFA and Music Department committees, she'll also be choreographing for Harvard's 37th anniversary celebrations and plans a collaborative installation involving music and dance students "and many more collaborations we'll do throughout the year," she says.

Says Bergmann, with the wisdom of past experience: "Jill's going to have to decide just how much she's willing to take on; but the possibilities are endless." **DT**

[Click here for a video of rehearsal with Jill Johnson at](#)

[Manhattan Movement & Arts Center in NYC.](#)

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Photo by Rachel Papo