

HARVARD DANCE CENTER

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Images for the media [can be found in this file](#).

Harvard Dance Center announces departure of Jill Johnson, Dance Director and founder of Harvard Dance Project on August 1, 2021

(Cambridge, MA) Harvard Dance Center announces that [Jill Johnson](#) will depart August 1, 2021, from her posts as Dance Director of Harvard Dance Center at the Office for the Arts (OFA), Head of Dance for Theater, Dance & Media (TDM), Senior Lecturer in TDM, and Artistic Director of the Harvard Dance Project.

A dancer and choreographer of international renown and recipient of Harvard's Star Family Prize for Excellence in Faculty Advising, Johnson will return to the stage this fall as principal dancer in William Forsythe's critically-acclaimed *A Quiet Evening of Dance*. "The most consistent pleasure is from one dancer," wrote the *New York Times* of her performance in 2019, the last before a worldwide tour was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. "Ms. Johnson brings an unassuming clarity and articulation ... that feels like it comes from the deepest of places. All night long, her quiet radiance was the loudest thing in the room."

"From the moment of her arrival at Harvard, Jill had a clear vision for dance and took creative and innovative approaches to realizing it," said Jack Megan, Director of the Office for the Arts, which runs the Harvard Dance Center and supports co-curricular dance classes and groups. "Fundamentally, she revolutionized our understanding of the art form and guided us in seeing it as a broad-based tool for research, connectivity, community, and the power of process. She combined imagination with incredible resourcefulness, which led to the Harvard Dance Project, an Emerging Choreographers program, a model for equity and belonging, and countless partnerships across the University and beyond. She has left an indelible mark on our students and faculty, on the Harvard Dance Center and on the practice of the arts at Harvard."

Johnson's impact was felt both at the curricular and co-curricular levels, said Kate van Orden, Dwight P. Robinson Jr. Professor of Music Historical Musicology and Chair of Theater, Dance & Media.

"I once heard Jill say that she lives 'to move people to be moved'," said van Orden. "I've never forgotten that phrase. What a beautiful expression of the humanity Jill centers in her classes and choreography. Her work teaches all of us to appreciate the language of the body, its vulnerabilities and strengths, and the connectedness of breath, movement, dialogue, and spirit. You have to see Jill in action to appreciate that truly engaged pedagogy is visceral. She is captivating."

Johnson arrived at Harvard in 2011, as part of the fulfillment of the Task Force on the Arts at Harvard, an initiative launched by President Drew Gilpin Faust to develop art-making through new degree programs, courses, and spaces. Johnson's tenure has focused on dance research, expanding access and offerings, advancing social progress through the arts, and empowering emerging artists, innovators, and leaders.

"Jill Johnson has been an inspiring presence at Harvard," said Stephen Greenblatt, Cogan University Professor of the Humanities at Harvard, chair of Faust's Task Force and author of the [2008 report that followed](#). "Braiding together technical mastery, expressive energy, and intellectual adventurousness, her brilliant dance teaching and performance have enriched our entire community."

During her decade at Harvard, Johnson produced 91 master classes with 86 guest artists; 31 world premiere dance works for students choreographed by some of the most-celebrated artists in the dance field; helped create 18 new credit courses and free community classes that reflect changing dynamics in the arts; established multiple initiatives for emerging student choreographers and dancers; created cross-disciplinary collaborations with a plethora of university-wide programs and departments; and increased a donor base for dance education. In 2013, she founded the Harvard Dance Project, a performance ensemble that focuses on performance research, collaboration, choreographic composition and links choreographic thinking to other fields.

Tap dancer Ayodele Casel and creative director Torya Beard were among the guest artists Johnson featured at Harvard. In a joint statement, the artists said: "Jill Johnson engages artists in ways that not only honors their artistic contributions but also honors their spirits. We are in awe of her ability to transform and inspire her surroundings, students, and colleagues. Jill is a visionary artist, educator, and humanitarian. Her intersectional, non-hierarchical approach to collaboration, coupled with her authenticity,

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creates space for transformative interactions—the type of investigation that results in a deep knowing of self. That self-discovery becomes fertile ground for boundless art-making.”

A recent diversity, equity, and inclusion strategic planning process, undertaken in collaboration with Equity Based Dialogue for Inclusion (EBDI), reaffirmed the Dance Center’s commitment to the hiring of diverse faculty and staff, the use of adaptive teaching methodologies, and the empowerment of BIPOC, LGBTQIA, and disabled students and teaching communities.

“The arts and artists are uniquely positioned to help bring about systemic cultural change, and a more equitable and healthy society,” said Johnson. “It has been an honor to collaborate with exceptional students, artists and colleagues at Harvard to reimagine the teaching of dance, and how it can impact and include all people.”

Under Johnson’s direction, the Dance Center has been a campus leader in accessibility, increased its faculty to an 80 percent BIPOC cohort and implemented a curriculum that reflects dance practices from around the world.

Johnson has also consistently reached across various fields to find a place for dance in far-ranging academic realms. She was central to The Garden, a transdisciplinary collective co-taught in the Fall ‘20 by faculty mentors, resident artists, scholars, and curators in music, visual art, dance, and other areas.

Vincent Brown, Charles Warren Professor of History, Professor of African and African-American Studies, was among the teaching cohort.

“Harvard University is few people’s idea of fun, and yet play—open experimentation, improvisational collaboration, the joy of discovery—is fundamental to the production of knowledge,” said Brown. “Jill Johnson is among the most playfully engaged colleagues I have encountered in two decades on the campus. A formidable thinker, a graceful artist, and a dedicated bridge builder, she has a unique talent to draw creative people together across fields, disciplines, and social differences. Jill encourages those she summons to explore the possibilities of new connections, allowing students, researchers, and teachers to see the artistic dimensions of scholarship and the intellectual depth of their art. She will be greatly missed at Harvard, but the influence of her example will continue to shape the way many of us learn, create, and know.”

“You will write our history in art, and you will write art into our history,” said Johnson in a commencement address at her alma mater, Canada’s National Ballet School. Her students at Harvard have been the beneficiaries of this belief.

“I received the rare gift that only true teachers can give,” said Rossi Lamont Walter ’14. “Jill continues to practice and model a manner of deep listening and open, thoughtful engagement with students, colleagues and the Harvard community at large. From her rapport with us the students, to the curiosity and rigor of her research process in-studio, every encounter with Jill has continually guided my judgment in all my encounters with human beings, humanity, and creativity.”

“Suddenly it all made sense,” said Elizabeth Terry-Kantor ’18. “I understood math because I wasn’t thinking about math. On the first day of lecture, Jill said something that stuck with me: ‘Dancers move in vectors and learn in equations.’ I never realized how true this is.”

“Jill was the first mentor that I felt I could share ideas with, and that they’d have weight as worthy and important,” said Anna Antongiorgi ’19. “I cannot imagine what my Harvard experience would have been like without her. I owe much of my artistry and my understanding of what art can accomplish to her teaching and to her care.”

Read the [joint letter released today](#) by Theater, Dance & Media and the Office for the Arts at Harvard.

The [Harvard Dance Center](#) mission is equity, dignity, and transformation for all people through artistic, academic, and civic leadership in beloved community, and to advance dance literacy on campus and for the world. Dance education across all offerings aims to foster agency for students and promotes the arts as agents of social change in the world.

[Theater, Dance & Media](#) combines the study of theater, dance, and media practices with the histories and theories of expressive and embodied culture. TDM’s mission responds to both the Report of the Task Force on the Arts’ demand “to make the arts an integral part of the cognitive life of the university,”

The [Office for the Arts at Harvard](#) supports student engagement in the arts and integrates the arts into University life. By supporting the development of students as artists and cultural stewards, the OFA works to enrich society and shape communities in which the arts are a vital part of life.

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