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(Track 1 begins)

LF

All right. Well, we're here today with Elena Rusnak and I'd like to just start with a few basic questions. If you would tell us a little bit about your personal history, early jobs, family life.

ER

I started dancing when I was four. It was probably the one thing that made me different from my other siblings and friends. It was one thing that, from the very beginning, I kind of stood out and I think that was one of the reasons I've stayed with it so long. I danced all through elementary school and secondary school, became the school's choreographer sophomore, junior, and senior year. When I went to college there was no dance major but I did become an English major which was also another one of my loves. So I graduated as English Education but I was president of the modern dance society at the University of Connecticut where I got my bachelor's. As soon as I graduated, I started with professional classes in different areas of Connecticut.

The instructors that I was taking from at that time asked me to be in their companies so I started doing a lot of company work. I've actually been in nine (laughter) different dance companies in Connecticut. Most of them modern dance, but different kinds of modern dance. One was Anya Holm. Anya was from Germany so began modern dance in the thirties as America did. Also the Cunningham Company. His company is still in New York City and going strong. Then finally with the Humphrey Company and that's when I stopped performing – just three years ago. So it's been a long haul and I didn't regret any of it. I've loved it all.

So when I graduated from college I went right into English education, became an English teacher who always choreographed for the high schools I was teaching at, either for the gymnastics team or for the musicals that were done at the school. When I stopped teaching when I had my son, I decided I needed to do something more with dance. And after my daughter was born I decided to get my Masters in dance and I did that in my forties. And by getting that Masters in dance – I already had my masters in English – that opened up all kinds of doors.

LF

Where did you go for your Masters?

ER

At Wesleyan. So at that point I became the dance chair.

I stayed home with my kids and just substitute taught and taught dance at different studios. So I was just working part-time when the kids were small. When my daughter went to first grade, I took the job as dance chair at the Performing Arts Academy High School in Hartford and I did that for four years. Bill Foster, who also taught there, had come here, and had said, "Elena, you've got to try Naugatuck Valley. They're trying to start a dance program there. I think you should interview."

So I came down that spring to interview with Diane Minardo. That was 1993. She hired me on the spot to start a dance program here. So the courses were offered for the following fall and of course, very typical tour, the first courses didn't run because they didn't have enough enrollment. She said, "Well, you know, you can teach English, so why don't you teach English and try to get the program up and running."

So that first semester I did teach English. The second semester the dance classes, two dance classes went. While I was an adjunct I was teaching two dance classes here. I was an adjunct at Sacred Heart University in English and an adjunct at UConn Waterbury in English. I was doing a lot of (laughter) mixing around of the dance and I was still performing and still taking classes. I always took class, always had my at least weekly if not semi-weekly professional class.

So, Joe Cistulli, our retired dean, was the one who really wanted to try to make the arts program here a full ...

(Track 1 ends)

(Track 2 begins)

ER

... department, and he was very instrumental in getting us licensured in 1999.

I was hired full-time in 1997 and at that point I was teaching two English, two dance, which really split my loyalties and my time. I actually found it very difficult because I was still taking on all of the extra-curricular activities that a dance department would have, which would be master classes and guest artists and concerts.

So I was still doing all of that and still teaching English and it was really difficult. At that time I had to ask Betsy Sharpe, "What if I could teach all dance?" They let me try three dance and one English. Then they said, "If you can fill all your classes then you can do it." And it happened. And in 1999 we actually got the license for a full-blown Arts Department. We've basically been full-time. It used to be, what would it have been? Seven different courses a year. The only course that I teach both fall and spring is The

History and Appreciation of World Dance. There were different courses for each semester except for that one course. So we started off with seven courses that moved to nine; I taught them all.

Now there's 19 courses and I have 5 adjuncts. It's very exciting to see the program alive and flourishing and being able to bring in different blood than just me (laughs) running it all. It's been very, very fulfilling for me.

My dearest friend, that I've known since we were 12 years old - - we both just had a monumental birthday this past month (laughter) - - said to me, "Elena, you should have reversed your career. (laughs) You should have started out in dance and then gone to English." I suppose physically that may have worked but I find in many ways I dance much more intelligently now than I ever did when I was young.

Especially in modern dance it's such a cerebral process, that the maturity I think just adds to the richness of what you're doing, and I love teaching it. It's one of my greatest, fulfilling things that I do, I think, is teaching dance, especially modern dance.

I really like teaching my history class too. I devised all of the curriculum for the department and now that I have some new people coming on board, it's really nice to get their input, but they all fit in to the uniqueness of this program which is historically and culturally based.

So, each dance course is set up with historical repertory and a study of the cultures that that particular dance genre comes out of. So it's not just learning steps and movement. It's really learning the background of the dance form. Why it is the way it is. Why it has evolved the way it has. I think in that way the students get to put their learning into a context.

So, instead of being the English teacher who danced, I'm now the dance teacher who makes all the students write about dance. (laughs) So whenever I give an assignment I say, "Remember, I'm an English professor too. So you've got to make sure you use your MLA and you have to watch your grammar." So they always get a charge out of that.

LF

In the process of developing the curriculum, did you model the structure on any existing program? Or how did you gather your inspiration?

ER

My inspiration was really my courses at Wesleyan. And of course they were all graduate courses. The work there, a lot of it was anthropologically based. It was very academic and there were a lot of thought processes that you went ...

(Track 2 ends)

(Track 3 begins)

ER

... through keeping journals, etc., in different courses. One of the courses that I had was The Dynamic Interaction of Mind and Body. Just the title kind of tells you where a course like that is going to take you. Movement analysis, improvisation, dance anthropology, it just goes on and on and on. Even though some of them were very much dance-based, I did the early modern dancers. Of course that was mostly on Isadora Duncan so I learned some of the repertory as well as Mary Wigman's, which is one of the early German modern choreographers. I guess that really influenced the way I devised the courses for here. This is actually a very unique program. Most dance programs in colleges are centered around technique and not the history and the culture of the dance form. So that's our - this program is actually kind of one-of-a-kind in this area.

LF

Do you find that the students coming into the program are up to the challenge of that kind of a rigorous program; do you work with them to get them there? What are your thoughts?

ER

I think because of the way the program is devised, it's actually easier for all students, no matter what level they're at technically, to come into the program and find something for themselves. The majority of our students are not going on to be professional dancers. They're going on to be dance educators; so that the broadness of their knowledge is more important than having a perfect pirouette, let's say.

[LF and ER discuss the functioning of recorder.]

So that I find that a student, an 18 year old coming out of high school from one of the studios, perhaps has been dancing for - - my students love to say, "Oh, I've been dancing for 15 years" and they come here and it's work that they've never had before. Dance in college for 99% of the students is completely different than anything they've ever had. So that they are learning something new. Then I have 50 year olds who have gone through the program and gotten dance certificates. They just find it so rewarding and it's something that they can also grasp because they can handle the academic side really well. And even though they may be a little more limited physically, there's still a process that they can go through and a success level that they can have. So that I find it works for all students of all ages and all different backgrounds and abilities because there's something to grasp for everyone.

LF

How does that process take place where you have, as you said, students of such a variety of abilities, and at the end of it all you put on these fantastic performances? How does that all come together?

ER

First of all, for students to be able to be invited into the ensemble class, they have to have taken at least two other courses here and/or have come in with pretty serious dance knowledge. And when I say dance knowledge, students who are coming here, their dance knowledge is physical, technical knowledge. They very seldom know anything else. (laughs) Then they can become a member of the ensemble. They are actually taught in their first semester of ensemble repertory - - the course is called Repertory - - so they are earning repertory of the masters or repertory of our guest artists. Then I have some pieces of repertory that I always include in the course, too. That course actually changes every year. It's always different. In the ...

(Track 3 ends)

(Track 4 begins)

ER

... spring they actually are taking choreographic principles. So they're learning to put dances together. By teaching them the process of putting dances together they are learning how to create. Along with that course comes the whole production end. So they also have to learn how to produce a concert. So they're kind of getting from soup to nuts, from backstage to front of house.

I find that, again, over 90% of the students rise to the challenge. I had a particularly great group this last year. And they were very exciting to work with. For a lot of them, it was their second or third year here so they had been in the dance courses continually. They really had come up to a level of understanding and of movement ability that I think made their concert the best one that we've had so far, this past spring.

LF

How do you feel that the little community dance schools prepare students for this kind of a rigorous program? The tap schools and the little ballet schools?

ER

How candid can I be on this?

LF

You can be as candid as you like.(laughs)

ER

They don't. There's an awful lot of studios out there that do not know how to train dancers. The way these particular studios, I call them Recital Studios, are set up is that students register for a course and they usually start in September or October learning their routine for their May or June recital and they are not trained at all. They do not understand how their bodies work. They do not understand how to work their muscles. All they know is that they are mimicking the teacher and her movement. And they have very, very little understanding of how to use their body. The majority of the studios do not prepare students well at all. There are a couple of very good training grounds in the

area, especially Nutmeg Ballet, for ballet particularly though. There's actually very few training grounds for modern. There's one in Cheshire that has a very nice modern program. But otherwise there's very little modern around. Which isn't unusual because modern is - - a lot of modern, basically - - students are beginning it in college.

It's those programs, when students come in, they can move to a higher level. Because even in those programs they're still not getting the history and the culture of the dance form. They're still only getting the technical elements. So one of the things that we're asking our students to do here is really to get in touch with not only with where the dance genre falls in the scheme of things but also get in touch with their bodies and dance from inside out. So that they understand the process that the body is going through in order to create the movement and how they can change the dynamics of a movement by using breath, by different emotional intents. It's a very different way of working than most studios work.

LF

Do you have the opportunity to follow through on some of your graduates and see how that's reflected in the way they're now teaching?

ER

I have one student in particular who has a very successful studio in Southbury and employs my students to teach for her so they're all out there together working on this together.

I have another student who just graduated with her Masters in Education. She graduated from here as a general studies dance major, went to Central and got an English degree, and then went to U.B. for her Masters in Ed., and will be one of the first teachers in the state to actually have the unique endorsement of dance and elementary ed. She teaches at a studio and teaches dance, so she's out there.

I have several students within the program, probably 6-8 students, who are teaching right now in studios. And I think even though the studio owner or the director may not have the same ...

(Track 4 ends)

(Track 5 begins)

ER

... background that, that these particular students have and ask for something else in their teaching. I think it's just natural that a lot of what they learned here is going to transfer to the students that they are teaching now. So I have a lot of students who are quite successful.

Two of my students who just graduated got into a dance company in New Haven. They had their first performance on Sunday, they were really excited, and they have about

another half dozen performances coming up for this next semester. So they're very excited about that.

LF

Do you find that you need to do anything to draw men into the program or is that not such a big problem anymore?

ER

It really varies year to year. Last year there were no men in the ensemble and this year I had three. This coming year, I hope that there will be four. The best way to draw men into the program is to have men here. So that if males see, "Oh, there are guys in the ensemble; oh, there are guys dancing." Then they don't feel I think quite as intimidated. And some of them just like to join a dance class because they like being around all the women. (laughing)

You asked one of the things that made me particularly happy. That picture of our fact sheet? That's a picture that I took and that was my Modern I class two years ago, and as you can see, it's almost as many men as women.

LF

That's true, yeah.

ER

It was a very diverse class; levels all over the place. They were a great group of kids. Alison's in there, too. (laughs)

LF

So, we have, across the board, you have faculty, staff, both men and women, different age groups ...

ER

Very different age groups.

LF

People from different cultural backgrounds coming and bringing their heritage with them in terms of how they dance, influence on the dance?

ER

Especially in the history of appreciation of world dance. I just had a student from Poland who was ...

(phone rings)

LF

Go ahead, we'll pause.

LF

We were talking about the different cultural influences that students bring and you mentioned someone from Poland.

ER

What's really exciting is when I do get students from around the world in class and they do their cultural dance form. So, I've had students from Poland, and Estonia, and Georgia, Russia, from Cambodia, several of the Caribbean Islands. It's just very exciting to have the other students in class and bring a different perspective and the Broadway and Film jazz class this past spring I had another Polish student who's a nursing student and a Russian student. The Russian student just took to American jazz so well, and she just loved it. The Polish student had a little bit more trouble with it.

Dance, like music, I think breaks barriers. It's something everyone can appreciate, or try, or succeed in because it doesn't have the language requirements.

LF

Do students who have been trained in ballet have a more difficult time because of their particular structure of their training?

ER

If they've only had ballet, lots of times they'll have difficulty breaking out of the rigidity of positions. Many times, again, depending on their ballet training, they'll lack flow. They tend to be very bound in their movements because in ballet, especially Vaganova ballet which is taught a lot here in Connecticut, and actually we even teach Vaganova ballet, which is the Russian style; it's very rigid, it's very strict. One of the things that I find is the most difficult is getting students to breathe. Really teaching them how to breathe through their movement so that there is a flow to the movement, so that the movement becomes alive ...

(Track 5 ends)

(Track 6 begins)

ER

... and it's not just positions; it becomes very static. So sometimes, if students haven't had other forms of dance, they tend to get stiff. But, they also usually have very precise technical ability and their leg movements tend to be better. They tend to have better feet and legs because of the emphasis on that in barre work, in ballet.

LF

I understand there's a lot of self-discipline involved.

ER

Oh yeah, because it's a mind-body thing. Almost all the arts, *all* the arts are mind and body but dance more so than any one of the arts. Your person is your art form, your



whole body is your art form. So that you have to keep the body tuned up which means that if you are performing there should be discipline in diet. Certainly, with dance being a visual art form, you want it to be visually - - I'm not going to say necessarily pleasant because a lot of dance shouldn't be pleasant, some of it should be provocative; but there's still, if you don't have a toned instrument, just like tuning your piano, if you don't have a toned instrument you're not going to be able to use it to the best of its ability. And it's not going to read, onstage. It's definitely in many ways more disciplined than the other art forms because you really have to keep your body tuned up or toned all the time, all the time.

LF

What about provocative? I picked up on that. Does the content of the performance here at Naugatuck Valley, is it determined by you, by the students, do you work together on content, and by provocative, what would that possibly mean?

ER

In the fall, for our less formal concert, because it's repertory it's actually all decided by me what is being done. This past spring our concert was called Our Stories, Our Legacies. Our Stories was the students' autobiographical work, so that was their process of learning the choreographic principles and putting together a piece that said something about them personally. Most of the students were very successful in that. Our Legacies has to do with the American modern dance legacy works, which is something I'm very interested in. I've done different workshops over the last few years on our legacy works and know some of these and I've brought them back to the students or I brought people in to teach them to them.

The legacy works tend to be more provocative, obviously. For example, one of the works done this spring was "Rainbow 'Round My Shoulders, Etude" by Donald McHale and it's a chain gang. It's done to traditional spiritual music that's sung a cappella. That's very provocative. Even though this particular year women performed it, the Etude has been made by Donald who I got to meet and take courses with last summer. It's made for, especially for, college students - - any color, any size, any gender. There's no restrictions on it. That's a very provocative piece.

Another work that they did was called "Time Plus" and that's a Sokolow work, which was her response to the Vietnam War and many people found it very disturbing. Students actually use words in the piece when they're moving. And they're basically right in your face as far as the audience goes. It's very moving. Some people don't like it because they want the fluff that I think they're used to on t.v. or whatever they've seen. But I think if you're looking for something a little deeper and something that's going to move you these are the types of works that are going to move you. Even some of the students did such tender works they had some audience members in tears because their works were so tender, and had that emotional quality that spoke just to everyone ...

(Track 6 ends)

(Track 7 begins)

LF

Speaking of the audience, do you feel that you're getting a different audience as the program evolves into what it - - over the years, over the past several years - - how do you gauge what kind of audience you're going to be presenting to?

ER

Dance is considered the poor boy of the five arts. It's the one down at the bottom and when you get the percentages of audience goes from - - Connecticut Magazine does this every year - - dance is always down at the bottom along with opera. Music concerts are always up at the top, especially if they're rock concerts, (laughs) I'm afraid to say, and our audience varies a lot.

This past fall we did an Art Jam. That included our art students, it included music from the digital arts audio students, it had a few actors in it as well as the dancers, and we brought in an outside group, an outside percussion band called Blood Drum. We got wonderful press on it and our Proceeds were for Katrina. And that brought in, because of the variety of people performing, and I think that because we had a very specific place our proceeds were going, it brought in a very different audience. When we go back to our more traditional concerts like Our Stories, Our Legacies, especially here in Waterbury, it's mostly the students' family and friends, and the students' students since so many of them are teaching in studios. A lot of their students in the studios came to see them perform. Which is very nice.

But it's very hard to get an audience, and especially this is such a large theatre to try to fill for dance. An ideal theatre for dance is about 350 house, so with this house being 750 it's just not going to fill.

LF

And the smaller stage we have here is too small.

ER

It's really small to do any group work. If we were doing solos or very small pieces, it would work but all of our repertory work are big group pieces, they're 15 people, they include everybody in the ensemble. A lot of the other works are just very large works and we can't do it.

So it's a little disconcerting to look into the house and see so few people, but it's the same in New York. They don't sell out. New York City Ballet and American Ballet Theatre are performing right now at Lincoln Center and they come nowhere near to selling out those theatres, the state theatre or the Met, where they're both performing.

It's somewhat the nature of dance, I think. A lot of people are afraid of dance. They don't want to try something new. They don't feel maybe, especially with modern dance,

that there's enough entertainment in it. Because many times it's asking the audience to think. If you want to just be entertained, put on the Boob Tube.

And it's a college, so I feel that we should offer something that students aren't going to get somewhere else. Plus, to our benefit, and also not to our benefit, this area is really saturated with the arts. So there's a lot of competition especially in April when we put on our dance concert.

I think the night of our concert there were five other things going on, I think the symphony was playing at the Palace, or the Palace had some big thing going on; there's just an awful lot that's happening in this area. The arts are really competing for a similar audience, and the dance audience all over the United State is always the smallest audience, so it's just the nature of the art form.

LF

Does it benefit at all that there are extreme performance groups like the Blue Man Group that sort of catch everybody's eye for a little while. Maybe I got the name wrong ... Blue Man Group?

ER

I don't know that group.

LF

I haven't seen their performances myself. But they're I think out of New York, they perform in Boston. Or, what's the other one, the Cirque ...

ER

Cirque de Soleil.

LF

Cirque de Soleil, and those are getting more attention? Does that help at all?

(Track 7 ends)

(Track 8 begins)

ER

What I think the groups like that, and certainly the Palace had Lord of the Dance last year, and a lot of people who will never go see dance will go see Lord of the Dance if they're Irish; to me, any thing, any hook that can bring people into a dance performance is appropriate and great for the world of dance. Because if you need that hook to get people hooked on dance, then why not use it? So the more people that go to see whether it's Lord of the Dance or the Sokolow Archive Dance Company that I hope to have here in the fall; to come to see something like that, which is going to be very, very different than a very splashy, very visual and easy-to-follow performance of something like Lord

of the Dance, more power to them. Anything that can bring especially students into a concert hall I think is great because then maybe they'll take that step one step further.

You asked earlier about students who stick out in your mind. Students have to write critiques of performances. I had a psych major, a Hispanic fellow, who was in my African Caribbean American Vernacular jazz class this past semester. He came to the students' concert; it was the first dance concert he had ever been to in his life. This gentleman was in his late twenties, and he was so moved. He did not expect a dance concert to move him the way that the students' concert did. If you can touch the emotion or the humanity of someone through what you're presenting to them then I think then maybe people will come to appreciate it.

But I think a lot of people, especially Americans, they're afraid of dance. A lot of it has to do, especially in New England with our heritage and where we've come from; here we began as Puritans and Puritans didn't dance. (laughter) It's kind of a long legacy in New England and certainly throughout America where so many of our original settlers were not allowed to dance, it was not part of their culture. I think it's always been a battle in the United States.

When I went to Indonesia, I loved seeing the kids, especially in Bali, seeing the children at recess having a dance lesson. If you go to almost any African village everybody's going to be dancing and drumming. It's part of the culture, it's what people do, it's what children do. But it's not necessarily what Americans do.

LF

Or have done as part of the ritual aspect of their lives.

ER

I think there's starting to be a little bit more of that. I always query my students in the history class about how many of them dance and where they dance, and lot of them are getting up and dancing at weddings where they may not have before. In the rock concerts they may dance in their seats or get up in the aisles. Anything that's going to get you up and moving, I'm all for it. (laughs)

LF

Where do you see the program going from here?

ER

We've definitely taken a turn for dance education. We've added three dance pedagogy classes. That's because the Dance Certification K-12 is going through in the state, and also because so many of my students are already teaching in studios, I really feel they need to be taught how to teach. They're kind of going on what they've learned from their studio people, and in some ways it's just kind of been passed down by their childhood teachers, many of them have never been trained in dance or have never been trained in the art of teaching dance. We definitely are kind of going that dance education route. The course ...

(Track 8 ends)

(Track 9 begins)

ER

... that were devised initially are the courses that are required for the Dance Education Certification K-12. We added Kinesiology for Dancers this past semester because that's a requirement by the state. We had students I think there were three or four students with Masters degrees and Bachelors degrees in that one course because it's something that they need to have. We pretty much have those courses in place. The new course that we're hoping to devise for next spring is Creative Arts Therapies. The dance therapist from Waterbury Hospital is one of my adjunct teachers, and she has taught this course at Post University and she would like to bring it here, and we're trying to partner with Connecticut Hospice, so that's something that we're looking to do for this coming year that will be new.

We're also looking to partner with Tinker School. We did a pilot last spring with my students, the newer students going out to teach an African dance for them. They were invited out for Black History month which was very, very successful. The school and the students loved it. My students gained so much from it; *they* loved it, that we're hoping to start this partnership with other schools in the area, elementary schools, to this dance teaching basically where our students would get the opportunity to teach youngsters in the Waterbury elementary schools and use that as the practicum for our dance pedagogy classes. So those are the two projects that I'm actually working on for next year.

LF

Exciting.

ER

I don't know if it'll happen or not. I just worked on a grant and found out that we're not eligible for it. They tried to go for another grant, which would have been great which I'm sure we could have gotten, but was told that there're too many other people at the school who are going through the same foundation so I'm not allowed to do that; they don't want to see so many coming out of the college. So I'm a little disappointed.

LF

I know you're on a tight schedule. I'm going to just say that we'll leave the door open for a follow-up interview towards the end of the summer if we find that we need to do that. Thank you so much.

(Track 9 ends)

End of interview

