



Nathan Young graduated from the OU School of Dance in 2013 and has rapidly ascended through the ranks of the Nashville Ballet. Young says his time at OU taught him to balance the many aspects of a dancer's life while taking on challenging roles.

Fine Arts flourishing with expanded programs and outstanding students

BY STACI ELDER HENSLEY

Throughout history, music, dance, the visual arts and theatre have served as keys to unlock and illustrate the profound experience of what it is to be human. No one understands the educational role of the arts more than President David L. and First Lady Molly Shi Boren.

Established in 1924, the fine arts college is one of OU's oldest. During the past two decades, it has risen to national prominence in each of the five schools, says Fine Arts Dean Mary Margaret Holt. In 2004, the college was named the Weitzenhoffer Family College of Fine Arts in honor of the many contributions of A. Max Weitzenhoffer, OU regent, alumnus and independent theatre producer. The Weitzenhoffer School of Musical Theatre became the fifth discipline in the college and offers one of the strongest musical theatre programs in the country.

"We have experienced great success," Holt says. "The School of Dance, for example, has been one of the top

three in the United States for the past 15 years, the musical theatre program is also in the top 10, the School of Music's piano pedagogy program attracts a large number of international students. The program in design and technology in the School of Drama has graduates succeeding internationally and the School of Visual Arts, in partnership with the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, is the recent recipient of a significant grant from the Mellon Foundation."

Students within the fine arts college are exposed to training and performance opportunities at the local, national and international level. Classes are kept small, giving students a great deal of individual attention from top-tier faculty and prominent guest artists. Students from all disciplines collaborate



Travis Caperton

President Boren receives a standing ovation during the Sept. 20, 2017, announcement of his impending retirement in Holmberg Hall. Boren's connection to the century-old home of OU fine arts goes back to his days as a high school student.

frequently, and together with faculty put on more than 400 performances and exhibitions each year. The college also has a vibrant outreach program — many public school students see their first opera, orchestra concert or ballet at OU, while the Helmerich School of Drama takes a production to more than 12,000 public school students annually.

The School of Visual Arts offers students a wide range of disciplines from painting and printmaking to art history and

Boren himself delivered the presentation to the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation, which supported the project with a \$12.2 million grant. Another \$5.8 million came from university funding. At the entrance to the updated Reynolds Performing Arts Center, a statue of the first fine arts dean, Fredrik Holmberg, still welcomes theatre-goers, preserving a link to the hall's illustrious past.

Extensive renovations also were made to the Elsie C. Brackett Theatre, formerly the Rupel Jones Theatre. In 2015, Betsy Brackett and her husband, Gregg Wadley, made a lead gift that not only brightened the front of the house, but also replaced the aging mechanics backstage. The combination of innovative performance spaces and outstanding faculty has led to impressive numbers in the hiring of OU

“Graduates from our five schools are contributing to the arts internationally.”

fine arts graduates. video. The art history curriculum offers the only Ph.D. program in the state, with emphases on Native American Art History and Art of the American West, which students can study first-hand through collections at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art.

OU fine arts students also have an edge when it comes to their state-of-the-art performance spaces. The former Holmberg Hall, which turns 100 this year, was completely renovated and updated in 2005, providing the School of Dance 20,000 square feet of class and rehearsal space.

The hall holds special significance for President Boren. He debated there in high school and played saxophone with the All-State Band. In 1994, he chose to announce his acceptance of the OU presidency in the hall and on that same stage in 2017, he shared his decision to retire with students and faculty.

“Holmberg Hall has been a special venue to me throughout my life,” says Boren.

When funds were needed to renovate the aging venue,

fine arts graduates.

“Over 75 percent of our dance alumni have a professional contract by graduation,” says Holt. “Sometimes that number has been as high as 100 percent. The same 100 percent post-graduation hiring rate holds true for graduates of the theatre technical design program in the School of Drama. Both students and faculty in this school produce costumes, scenery and lighting that are professional quality, giving them an opportunity to hone their skills at a level that’s exceptional in university productions,” Holt says. “Graduates from our five schools are contributing to the arts internationally.”

She says the college is building upon its success by increasing outreach to prospective students, donors and alumni on the national and international level.

“When parents and prospective students visit our campus they can tell the spirit of the arts is very much in evidence at OU,” Holt adds. “We have a lot to be proud of.”

Dance alumnus rising star in Nashville

“I want that.”

Those are the words that went through Nathan Young’s mind when he saw his first ballet performance during a middle school fine arts program. One look at the dancers – and their obvious joy in their craft – was all it took.

“The reaction from the crowd when they were dancing blew me away,” the OU Weitzenhoffer Family College of Fine Arts alumnus says. “They were screaming and clapping, and I knew that was what I wanted to do.”

Today, 26-year-old Young is on the receiving end of the applause as a rising star with Nashville Ballet. It’s a natural progression for the 2013 School of Dance graduate, who’s cementing his place among the school’s most gifted alumni. Young joined Nashville Ballet less than a year after graduating and is rapidly accelerating through its ranks. Most recently he’s played prominent roles in “The Raven,” “Sleeping Beauty” and “Carmina Burana,” among others.

Originally from Little Rock, Ark., Young wasted no time after seeing that first performance. He began training at age 14, and his budding talent earned him a place studying with premier dancers from the Arkansas Academy of Dance. Throughout high school he earned coveted summer workshop opportunities with the prestigious Joffrey Ballet, Ballet West and Long Beach Ballet.

Those workshops were where he first heard about OU and its top-tier dance school through fellow dancers who had performed at the university. He was actively recruited by Weitzenhoffer College Dean Mary Margaret Holt, who also assisted with obtaining the necessary financial aid.

Young says his time at OU made a significant, positive difference for him in every way. He was able to take on roles in iconic operas and ballets, including “Sleeping Beauty” and “The Nutcracker.”

Along with fellow OU fine arts students, Young was invited to perform at the annual Haydn Festival in Eisenstadt, Austria. There, Oklahoma Festival Ballet debuted an original work set to Josef Haydn’s “The Creation,” choreographed by Dean Holt.

“I met some incredible people at OU,” he says. “It was where I really found myself and my place in the dance world. I felt extremely valued, and I couldn’t have asked for better training. It all blurred together in such a great way; the bond between faculty and students, and seeing yourself grow technically as a dancer. I felt very prepared when I left the program and I would never trade those experiences.”

As a student Young also benefitted from contact with many of the fine arts college’s patrons. “Now that I’m a professional I interact with Nashville Ballet donors fairly often, and I’m much more comfortable with that after my OU experience,” he says. “It’s definitely been helpful.”

In 2016 Young returned to campus as a featured guest artist for the Summer Dance show and says he looks forward to future chances to work with aspiring dance students. Meanwhile, in his “day job,” he’s taking on more prominent roles with Nashville Ballet and continually working to hone his craft.

“It’s wonderful to see yourself grow technically as a dancer and build on that earlier training in such a great way,” he says. “It was a really nostalgic experience when I came back in 2016, and I hope to do it again.”

Staci Elder Hensley is a freelance writer living in Norman.



Sooners give their regards (and talent) to Broadway

From “The Book of Mormon” to “Hamilton,” graduates of OU’s Weitzenhoffer School of Musical Theatre are leaving their mark on Broadway and beyond. The school estimates that with Broadway shows, national tours, cruise lines and regional theaters, more than 1 million audience members see OU alumni onstage annually.

One such alumna is Dorcas Leung, a 2015 graduate, who auditioned for “Hamilton” 11 times before being cast in the ensemble and as understudy for all three Schuyler sisters in the first national touring company. She is expected to join the “Hamilton” tour on its Houston leg.

Leung recently finished her run with “Miss Saigon” on Broadway. At OU, she performed in productions of “Avenue Q” in 2012 and “The Drowsy Chaperone” in 2014.

Other OU musical theatre alumni currently on Broadway are Cory Lingner in “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory,” Kristen Beth Williams in “Hello, Dolly,” Emily Wechler in “Wicked,” Chris Rice in “The Book of Mormon,” and Dan Horn in “Miss Saigon.”