

Sooner Nation

Teaching is Dancer's Reward

Working with generations of young dancers,
Fine Arts Dean Mary Margaret Holt
earns international acclaim.

Much like a standing ovation is shared recognition for a job well done, the same might be said of international awards. That *bravo* moment is nice, but not essential. At least according to Mary Margaret Holt. With a career that spans decades of training, performing, choreographing and teaching, the former director of the University of Oklahoma School of Dance says for her, the work of teaching ballet is reward enough.

Holt, dean of the Weitzenhoffer Family College of Fine Arts, is a master at her craft, a bridge between generations—a keeper of knowledge that she willingly shares with the hundreds of dancers who have soared through the School of Dance. She has guided the precise placement of arms, legs and feet, along with the reasons for those exact and foundational movements. The education they receive prepares them for positions around the globe where the art and tradition of ballet is carried forward.

In honor of all she has done for the collegiate world of dance, Holt is the 2020 recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award from CORPS (Congress on Research in Pedagogical Studies) de Ballet International. A professional organization dedicated to the advancement of ballet in higher education, CORPS recognizes an individual who has “furthered the growth of ballet in higher education, and/or made valuable contributions to ballet departments, through administration, teaching, choreography, mentoring or research.”

Fair to say, Holt checks all the boxes.

The current coronavirus pandemic has forced cancellation

of the July ceremony where Holt was to be honored, upending plans of friends and colleagues to join her in New York. What matters most to Holt is not the international accolade, but the work to which she has devoted her life.

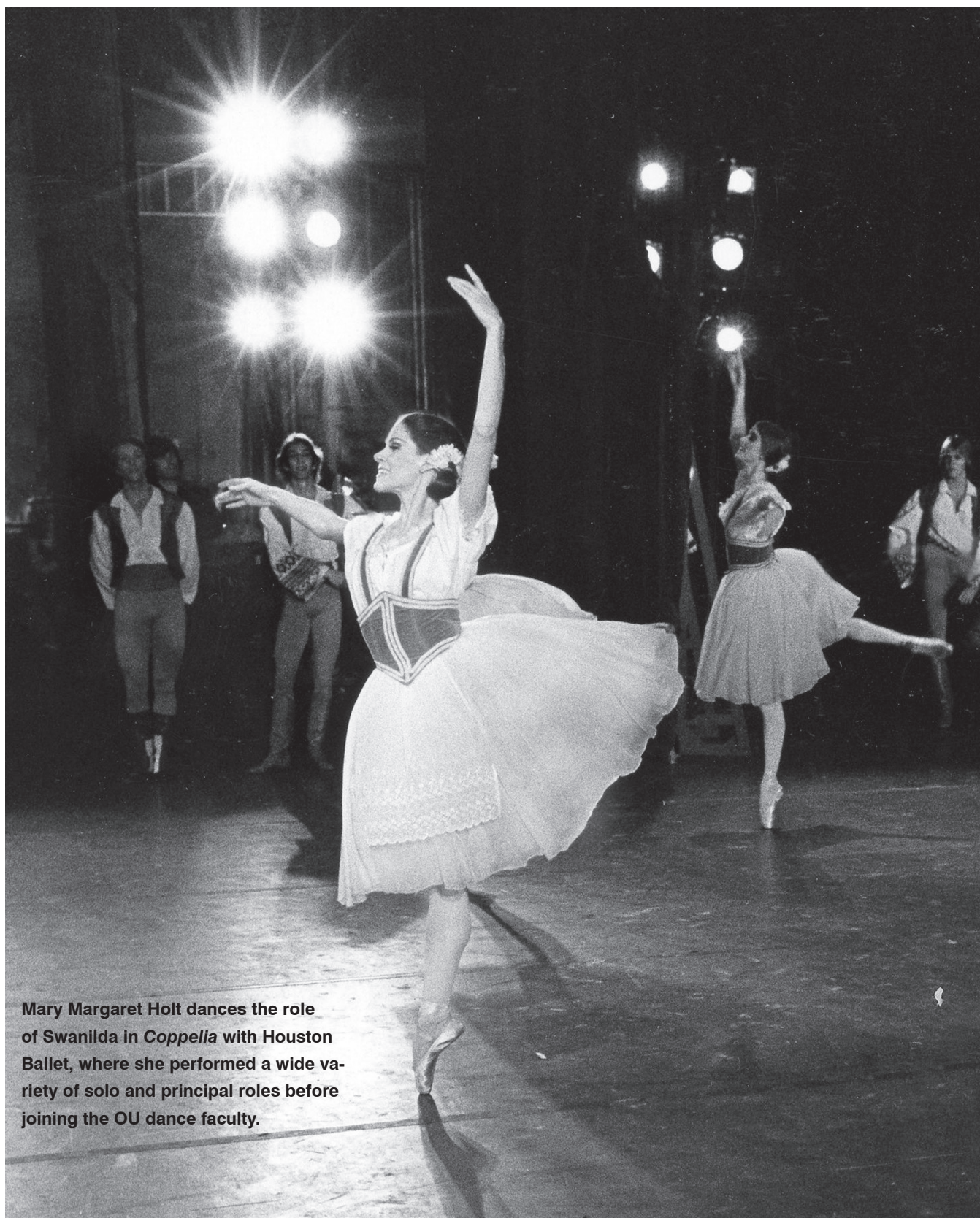
“While the ceremony would be wonderful, and I am sorry to miss seeing colleagues, family and friends, the work is truly its own reward,” Holt says, her voice wavering slightly. “The work is essential. I love it so much: the art form of ballet and handing down the art form to my students.”

As a centuries-old artistic expression, ballet and the mastery of its form comes not from textbooks and instructional videos, but from practitioners-turned-teachers who share their knowledge with the next generation of performers. Holt has been doing just that since joining the OU faculty in 1982.

Until at least August, all in-person interaction on campus is suspended. How students and faculty maneuver to finish the spring semester will be a testament to the adaptive and resilient trait required of the professional world. Classes are being conducted via online platforms. In her role as dean, Holt is working in real time to help students not only finish their work, but also to process the disappointment and sense of loss, particularly with year-end performances canceled.

“We have no choice but to move forward and find the best way of continuing to teach and support our students right now,” she says. “How do we adapt what we traditionally do in a highly structured way into formats now available? We hope our students will be taught to be their own best teachers and this is an unexpected opportunity, although not

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Mary Margaret Holt dances the role of Swanilda in *Coppelia* with Houston Ballet, where she performed a wide variety of solo and principal roles before joining the OU dance faculty.



Wendy Mutz

Then-Director of the School of Dance Mary Margaret Holt and former OU dance professor Ilya Kozadayev set choreography to Joseph Haydn's *The Seasons*, which was presented at the international Haydn festival in Eisenstadt, Austria. Featured are former OU students Nicole Reehorst and Brett Young.

one we chose, for them to apply these lessons. We are helping them draw strength from their training as they navigate through this time."

Growing up in Austin, Texas, Holt took dance lessons as so many little girls do. She read dance books from the local public library and enjoyed school. By the time she was 12, Holt knew she wanted to make dance her career. But she would need serious training. When a former dancer from the New York City Metropolitan Opera ballet moved to town, Holt's world opened up. The aspiring dancer began training with a seriousness prompted by the pre-professional training she began to receive.

By age 15, a Ford Foundation grant led to an apprenticeship with the San Francisco Ballet. The following year, a thrilling audition before Oklahoma native Maria Tallchief, the first American prima ballerina, led to a scholarship with the George Balanchine School of American Ballet. Holt performed as an apprentice with the New York City Ballet.

However, she was also curious about intellectual opportunities, and decided to pursue higher education.

Holt says of that time, "I always loved school and felt if I studied literature, art history and languages, I could be a richer, more complete person and dancer."

"Not everyone who dances loves to teach, but I was fortunate to discover that I did."

She auditioned and was offered a scholarship to become part of the OU dance program by founders Miguel Terekhov and his wife, Yvonne Chouteau, former dancers with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. The many performance opportunities available drew Holt to the Sooner State and she earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in bal-

let performance with a minor in French. Then, she joined Houston Ballet where, for a decade, she performed a host of solo and principal roles in both the classical and contemporary repertoire.

"Houston was such a great experience for me," Holt says. "When I chose to leave New York to go to school, my friends said I would never dance professionally again, that by the



Mary Margaret Holt

time I graduated I would be too old. But I was fortunate that I auditioned, received a soloist contract and was later promoted.”

During her time with the company, principal dancers were invited to teach classes in the Houston Ballet Academy. To her delight, Holt discovered she loved sharing her expertise and experience with other dancers.

“By this time, I had developed a rich background as a dancer,” she recalls. “Not everyone who dances loves to teach, but I was fortunate to discover that I did.”

Holt stayed in touch with her “artistic parents,” as she calls Terekhov and Chouteau, and learned that an opportunity to return to OU would become available. Although she remained healthy throughout her career and easily could have continued performing, Holt chose to accept an adjunct faculty position with the-then OU Department of Dance. She welcomed the opportunity to stop touring and spend more time with her young son, Chris.

“At the time I came to OU, I had a happy, healthy dancing life, but the chance to bring my son to the kind of environment Norman provided, work with Miguel and Yvonne, and develop a career as a teacher was too good to turn down,” she says. “Although I kept performing as a guest artist in those

early years, when Miguel decided to retire, I knew I could not do it all and do it well. I love teaching as much as dancing. It is just as exhilarating, only in a different way.”

Almost a decade on faculty was followed by her appointment as chair of the Department of Dance in 1990. Under her leadership, the department was elevated to the School of Dance in 1998 and is consistently ranked among the top dance programs in the country. Holt oversaw the planning and construction of the dance wing inside the Donald W. Reynolds Performing Arts Center that was unveiled in 2005. The holder of the John W. and Mary D. Nichols Chair in Dance, Holt has led Oklahoma Festival Ballet, the OU ballet company, on many international tours and taught every course in the school curriculum.

Holt added choreography to her repertoire as a faculty member and administrator, choreographing dozens of ballets, musicals and operas. Learning this aspect of dance was a new challenge and an opportunity to grow.

“When you are a dancer, you are responsible for yourself,” she says. “As a choreographer, your role is greatly enlarged. You share responsibility for every aspect of a production, from lighting, to costumes, to music, with all the people involved. It is a wonderful challenge because of the collaborative nature of this aspect of the art form.”

Of Holt’s many OU career highlights, one that stands out is co-creating original choreography for Joseph Haydn’s masterpieces *The Seasons* and *The Creation* with former ballet faculty member Ilya Kozadayevev and Steve Brule, respectively. Both productions were staged at the *Internationale Haydnstage* in Eisenstadt, Austria, where the maestro himself premiered his work. Another is establishing the Ballet Russes Special Collections and Archive housed at OU. This collection preserves the history of the companies, artists and dancers of the preeminent 20th-century ballet companies bearing the name Ballets Russes, and honors Chouteau and co-founder Terekhov—who received the Lifetime Achievement Award from CORPS in 2004.

Most important to Holt are the number of students she has empowered with her teaching. Nathan Young received a bachelor’s degree in ballet performance in 2013 and spent four seasons with the Nashville Ballet. Currently with the Grand Rapids Ballet in Michigan, Young describes the OU School of Dance as a conservatory-like program set in a public university. He credits Holt for the rigorous training he received, with its adherence to strict standards of the ballet form.

“A masterful teacher codifies the practice of ballet and puts the reasoning and theory behind each step,” Young explains. “In ballet, there is a definite standard of how things should be done. Mary Margaret gives you the archetype.

From Diaghilev to Terekhov & Chouteau

ANDREW L. PHELAN

An Exhibition of Material from the
Ballets Russes
Special Collections & Archive



Holt established the Ballet Russes Special Collections and Archive at OU to preserve the history of artists and dancers of the preeminent 20th-century ballet companies.

She explains why something needs to be done a certain way, whether it is the extension of the leg, or the point of the toe, then leaves it to you to execute that to the best of your ability.”

Julia Wilkinson Manley, a graduate of the School of Dance, former professional dancer, and now artistic director of Colorado Conservatory of Dance, adds, “I am incredibly proud to model my school on the ideals Mary Margaret gave us—creating a culture of hard work, deep exploration, full immersion in the art, and, above all, a deep, undying love for dance and its power to make lives better. I will forever cherish the meaning she has given my life.”

When Michael Bearden succeeded Holt as director of the School of Dance, he jokes that not only were the shoes he was filling impossibly large, but stylish ones at that. As just the third school director in 54 years, he says Holt has given him the freedom to do things his way.

“It has been intimidating to follow in the footsteps of someone who has accomplished so much for the School of Dance,” he says. “We have beautiful facilities, dedicated supporters and a culture of excellence that can directly be attributed to Dean Holt’s influence as director. I have appreciated working with her very much, as she has given me guidance and mentorship when I ask her for it—yet at the same time

has given me space to explore my own vision for the school—even if it means doing things differently from the way she would. I value her wisdom and experience as a leader at OU and in the art form of dance.”

Given her current responsibilities as dean of the Weitzenhoffer Family College of Fine Arts, which encompasses the disciplines of not only dance but also art, musical theater, drama and music, Holt still finds time to teach.

“The things I love about students of dance are their devotion, sense of discipline and realization that they are taking part in an art that is much larger than any dancer or group of dancers,” says Holt. “We become the servants of the art, knowing that our best efforts are required every time we step into the studio or on the stage. I think it is that endless devotion and pursuit of excellence that first drew me to dance, although I could not have articulated it at the time.

“My life in dance is and has been inordinately full due to the beauty of the art and the selflessness of those who taught and guided me. I am forever grateful.”

Susan Grossman is the director of development for the Myriad Botanical Gardens in Oklahoma City and a freelance writer who lives in Norman, Okla.