



TAKE A

BOW,

**CELEBRATING 100 YEARS
AND GENERATIONS OF OU
ARTISTIC EXPRESSION.**

By Dana Branham

Prima ballerina and future
co-founder of the OU
School of Dance Yvonne
Chouteau.

OU WESTERN HISTORY COLLECTIONS



WEITZENHOFFER COLLEGE

Today, Jack Swanson's opera career takes him around the world—
from Chicago and Houston to Norway, Germany and Italy. Soon,
he'll make his debut at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City.

Yet only a decade ago, you could find him on stage at the Donald W. Reynolds Performing Arts Center, where each year hundreds of University of Oklahoma students sing, dance and act.

Swanson, a tenor who graduated from OU with a 2014 bachelor's degree in vocal performance, is among the countless fine arts students whose time in Norman propelled them to careers on prestigious screens and stages. This year, OU celebrates the centennial of the Weitzenhoffer Family College of Fine Arts, one of the university's oldest colleges and the training ground for generations of esteemed artists.

"We're applauding the growth and accomplishments of the college during its first 100 years, but also celebrating our current students and opportunities that will be created in the future," says Dean Mary Margaret Holt, who served as a longtime ballet professor in OU's School of Dance before being named dean of the college in 2015.

To mark the occasion, each of the college's five schools—dance, drama, music, musical theatre and visual arts—will host its own centennial performance or exhibition showcasing the work of students and alumni.

With OU's first fine arts courses offered as early as 1893, the university's arts history dates well beyond 100 years. The OU College of Fine Arts was established in 1924 and has grown along with students' needs and interests, offering over 50 degree programs today.

"I believe that the arts are the expression of the human spirit, and they speak across generations. They speak across cultures, across time and geography," Holt says. "While the arts will continue to develop and change in ways we cannot yet imagine, I have no doubt that their place at OU is secure and that they will continue to enrich our entire campus."

She points out that, at a time when many arts organizations are struggling nationwide, programs like OU's University Theatre are finding renewed success. Season subscriptions are up 39%, a fact Holt credits to the high quality of students' work, as well as successful efforts to increase public awareness of campus performances.

Holt takes seriously her duty to prepare future generations of artists for their careers, constantly trying to imagine how the college's programs must adapt in the next century. That's exciting, she says, and a little daunting.

"What will the arts look like? What will the 'business of arts' look like for the future?" Holt says. "We will do our very best for our audiences and our students' preparation."

Sometimes, she says, an OU student arrives with a narrow idea of where their degree will take them. But Holt and her fellow faculty members take a wide view of what students can achieve.

"The path includes many opportunities that they might not imagine as entering undergraduates, so we love the ability to open those doors for them—to open their eyes to unforeseen possibilities," she says.

The college's faculty helped Jodie Cone, an OU senior from McHenry, Ill., chart a career path that she hadn't imagined.

A dancer since age 3, Cone trained in ballet. But in her sophomore year at OU, she didn't have a sure answer when professors asked, "What's your dream company? Where do you want to go?"

Cone started exploring other forms of movement, like tap and jazz.

"When I was looking at jobs, I thought, 'Well, I've become good at these other things—why not explore them?'" she says.

The college's arts management program also opened her eyes to possibilities she could pursue in a post-dance career.

"I can be fulfilled and do my craft in another way," Cone says.

After graduating in May, she will begin working as a Disney World cast member in Orlando, Fla., while completing her OU master's degree in arts management online. She plans to audition for other Disney performances and cruise lines, hoping to get closer to her dream of becoming a Radio City Rockette before exploring possibilities ranging from dance to arts consulting.

Training students and preparing them for their future careers is a great responsibility—and an honor, Holt says.

"We get to interact with undergraduate students for four years and help them be as prepared as possible. This is heightened with graduate students, who often join us after having taken steps into the professional world," she says. "It's an incredible privilege, helping to support the continuance of the arts through their creativity."

Weitzenhoffer College students receive an interdisciplinary education, honing their individual craft while learning to work with students in other specialties. Holt says part of what sets the college apart is five discrete schools of study.

"We have five schools, five directors, five sets of programs and disciplines," she says. "There's a great deal of collaboration and cooperation between our schools, yet it's a strength that they are individually organized."

The ability to train in a specific area while still getting a well-rounded, multifaceted education draws students from across the country, Holt says.

OU 2011 musical theatre alum
Adrianna Hicks in the original
Broadway cast of "Six," which
won two Tony Awards.



ARTISTS AND BEYOND

OU's 1898 production
of "Queen Esther."



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Opera tenor and OU 2014 alumnus Jack
Swanson in "La Fille du Regiment."



PAIGE OWENS

“I believe that the arts are the expression of the human spirit, and they speak across generations.”

—Weitzenhoffer College Dean
Mary Margaret Holt



TRAVIS CAPERTON



OU art students create a production backdrop in 1937.



OU orchestra, 1907.



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TRAVIS CAPERTON



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Opera singer Swanson was encouraged to come to Oklahoma from Stillwater, Minn., by his first voice teacher.

“OU gave me tons of opportunities to be on stage and to perform, which is something that a lot of undergraduate programs don’t have,” he says. “It made it really easy for me to get up on stage and prepare myself for what I wanted to do after I graduated.”

In his senior year, Swanson performed in OU’s production of Donizetti’s “The Elixir of Love,” one of his first major roles. Since then, he’s reprised the role several times professionally—once in Oslo, Norway.

Weitzenhoffer College honored Swanson with an Arts Luminary Award in March. Typically, the college selects one distinguished graduate for the award; in honor of the centennial, the college selected five recipients this year representing each of its schools.

In the 10 years since graduating from OU, Swanson has “had some really lucky breaks” and is grateful to be recognized as the School of Music’s distinguished alumnus.

“I’m honored and happy that OU is still asking me to be part of their team,” he says.

Swanson has also been welcomed back to campus to teach a master class, an experience he calls “surreal.”

“It’s fun to be on the other side of the table. I enjoy working with students; OU is continuing to give me opportunities to grow.”

Swanson encourages OU and Norman community members to take advantage of student performances. In a world ruled by technology and instant information, he says, there’s solace to be found in setting aside screens for a few hours and immersing yourself in music, dance or theatre.

“It’s great to see some of the performers that are just at the beginning of their careers—and some will have big careers,” he says. “It’s a unique opportunity to have a school that provides this level of art right in your backyard.”

That opportunity goes back a century. Sometimes, Holt says, people have expressed surprise that OU has such a long legacy of fine arts.

“But it’s the same pioneering, unassuming reputation—and Oklahoma’s vibrant cultural community—that has allowed Weitzenhoffer College to thrive. We’re dreaming big for our future.”

Dana Branham is a former reporter for The Oklahoman and a freelance writer who lives in The Village, Okla.

TO VIEW A CALENDAR OF WEITZENHOFFER FAMILY COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS CENTENNIAL EVENTS, SCAN THIS QR CODE.

