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Mary Anthony: A Great Teacher Will Never Die

by Kalila Kingsford Smith

I first met Mary Anthony when I was sixteen years old, when she came to Gwendolyn Bye Dance Center to teach a series of master classes. Then, at the age of 89, she was teaching a vibrantly physical class that left me winded. An eager young choreographer, I dared to ask this mother of modern dance where her inspiration came from. Her answer was brief, but it has stayed with me: "Life. I create dance about life."

Mary Anthony passed away in May 2014 at the age of 97. As a member of Dancefusion, I had the special pleasure of performing a section of Threnody*, which she called her greatest work, at her studio just a few weeks before her death. Soon after her passing, I felt called to honor her by speaking with those Philadelphia-based dance artists who felt personally impacted by Mary's mentorship.*

What makes a good dance teacher? Is it someone who passes on the language of dance to the next generation of dancers? Is it someone who develops her own teaching methods and her own technique? Or does it go beyond that? Is it someone who mentors her students into their own artistry, nurturing them into a creative lifestyle and mentoring them for a lifetime?

I conducted separate interviews with Gwendolyn Bye, Kun-Yang Lin and Christine Taylor, whose comments are brought together in this text.

--KKS

Describe your relationship with Mary Anthony.

Gwendolyn Bye, Artistic Director of Dancefusion:
Mary Anthony was my mentor. As a younger aspiring artist, I looked up to her as a teacher and choreographer, but as I got older, the relationship changed. She once called me “her dancing daughter.” I just loved that.

When I moved to New York, I was invited to join Mary’s company. Right away, it felt more like a home than an institution. She wanted to know what you ate for breakfast; she wanted to know you were healthy. There was a humanity about her, a care that went beyond the student-teacher relationship. The majority of the dancers that interacted with her had this sense about her, that she went beyond the role of teacher to actually care about them and help them as individuals.

Kun-Yang Lin, Artistic Director of Kun-Yang Lin/Dancers:
My relationship with Mary started in Asia in 1989 when I danced in several of her works. In 1993, after my experiments in post-modernism in Europe, I moved to the U.S. and Mary immediately invited me into her company for what turned out to be nearly a decade of nurturing and development. In ’97, I became her Associate Artistic Director, and that lasted until 2002, when I started my own company.

Our relationship was not just one of a teacher and mentor. She was also a colleague who valued my input. When I was the Associate Artistic Director, I had to make all of the decisions, including program budgeting and casting. She gave me respect and the opportunity to learn how to run a company. Beyond that, she was also my friend and almost like my family. We would spend all of the holidays together, rehearsing together and creating work.

Christine Taylor, Former Rehearsal Director of Dancefusion:
I consider Mary my second mentor, of course with Gwen being my first. Mary was actually present when I auditioned for Dancefusion. I learned about Mary in college and was absolutely fascinated by her, and to have the chance to work with her was amazing. It is funny, because when I joined Gwen’s company, it was almost as though I joined Mary’s extended “dance family.”

What was unique about Mary as a teacher and a choreographer?

GB: Many choreographers of that time had a similar sense of artistry about them. They were demanding and very focused. They worked you hard in class and rehearsal, and if things weren’t going right, they’d go back and pull it apart. These are standard things that all good master choreographers do. Mary was the same. But what was unique about Mary was her need for expression in the classroom. She didn’t want you just to execute something well in class; she wanted to know *why*. Otherwise it would be an arbitrary gesture.

KYL: Her classes were highly physical, but at the same time, each exercise she gave always had stories that added meaning. They had a purpose. That’s what makes her such a great teacher—it’s not just about the technique and what you learn and what you do. You have to dig further and embrace the technique with some imagination. What is your intention behind the movement? That was a very crucial question that she asked.

GB: One of her favorite stories she would use in class was: “One side of the studio is New Jersey, the other side is California. Now dance across America.” Mary felt that a performance wasn’t as strong if you suddenly ask an artist to emote. So she asked for that expression from her dancers in the classroom—it was a deliberate part of her training. That was one thing that was very different from a lot of the teachers that I worked with.

How has Mary impacted you artistically?

KYL: I came to New York to research through my body the full history of American modern dance—Limón, Graham, Cunningham and whatever else I could squeeze into a long day of dancing. But the most important for me was my work with Mary: she helped me to grasp that the essence of the American modern dance spirit centered on finding humanity beyond the form. She was always talking about male and female energy, the contrast between sharp and soft. It was sometimes very easy to divide them both, but her question was “How do you embrace the qualities of both genders?” That impacted me a lot about how she approached making work. She gave me the opportunity to really allow my artistry to fully blossom, to perform regardless of my gender, my race and my height.

CT: As a young dancer, I was so focused on the physicality of movement, and I didn’t have as much of a deeper understanding of the intentions and purpose. Coming into her world, where you search your soul for the story, what you’re doing and why, really changed how I looked at performing dance. It took me much deeper. Her focus on truth also impacted me—be true to yourself, be true to your story, be true to the stage. She taught me that I could be happy living in my own bones. Of course, a lot of other teachers were trying to convey that, but with Mary I finally understood that my dancing is not like anyone else’s. It is what I do and that’s why it is special.

GB: She impacted me the most as a teacher. Many people don’t know this, but Mary taught all levels, she didn’t just teach the company, and she was absolutely amazing with children. She used to go all over the country and teach in the schools. She had a whole syllabus of material that the company would then take into the different grades and teach dance as a tool for education (which I still teach today). I had never seen a woman walk into a room full of wild kindergarteners (one of the toughest age groups) and then have them standing straight, up and down, and doing things in less than ten seconds, and all without raising her voice. It was amazing.

KYL: Mary’s artistry, teaching and unending commitment to dance constantly reminds me that being a “contemporary” choreographer does not mean that I cannot seek to honor and elevate our common humanity. Mary has given me many gifts over the years for which I always will be grateful—encouragement, support, commitment, inspiration—but most importantly, purpose. She stoked the flame that continues to burn in me.

What do you believe is Mary’s lasting impact on the modern dance community?

KYL: I believe that a great teacher will never die. Mary’s inspiration will carry through her students and her friends, through different countries and generations, because she taught for her whole life. How many teachers can continue teaching until they die? Even right before she passed away, she was still teaching! Her greatest contribution to the community is really that inspiration—she continued to do what she did until she died. All of her life was dance. That is something that I strive for in my life. Sometimes, when reality wears me down, thinking about Mary gives me a certain kind of strength. You just keep on doing what you’re doing and you keep practicing what you believe. I think we can all learn from her example.

CT: Her impact is about truth in storytelling, being genuine with your intentions, and I hope that young dancers will still have the opportunity to learn that from those whom she impacted. Because so many young dancers still don’t know about her, I think it is up to us to spread that big love of art and dance in her name.

GB: It’s interesting, but I think you can’t help if you’ve been trained by her to be impacted by her. She was not just teaching dances—she was teaching beyond dance. She was teaching the artistry of every step. As Mary’s “dancing daughter,” that is something that I strive for as I educate the next generation of dancers.

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