

VDC Interview Transcript
Susan Hadley.1, OSU Dance Chair
10.7.16
Total Time: 49:36

OSUDance
316 Sullivant Hall
1813 N. High St.
Columbus, OH 43210

Key:

CF: Candace Feck
SH: Susan Hadley
JC: Jessica Cavender (VDC team member)

CF: Let us start with Helen Alkire. I wonder if you could try to say a bit about Helen and her entry into the landscape of OSU. I know you weren't even born yet — but what you know of it.

SH: Helen had a passion for dance as a young girl, growing up on her grandfather's farm in Orient, Ohio. Her mother found a teacher — and a legendary teacher in Stella Becker. Stella Becker happened to train Carolyn Cates, who was a teacher in Arlington [a suburb of Columbus, Ohio], that I studied with early, but she trained Helen, and I think Helen began at age seven or eight, studying dance. Stella Becker was a *modern* dance teacher, which was unbelievable at the time, for her to have found her. So when Helen came to OSU as an undergraduate student, she came already a dancer. And so her connection to OSU — she had gone to Clinton Elementary School — her mother and dad moved to Clintonville from the farm in Orient in order to have better schools. She went to North High School, which was a very, very good high school at the time in the Clintonville area. She came to OSU, and I think it was in 1938 that she received her undergraduate degree, then in '39, her MA. And it was Stella who connected Helen with Hanya Holm in New York. So Helen, even before she graduated from college, had experienced dancing in New York with Hanya, and then joined Hanya's company in New York, and was a professional there, so this intertwining of dancing in Columbus with Stella Becker, who connected her with Hanya, who then provided summer opportunities for her and then professional dancing for her was, I think, the thing that connected everything together.

CF: But Helen entered the PE Department, right? There was no dance here.

SH: That's one of the things to find out, Candace... Was she dancing in the Women's Physical Education Department as a student?

CF: I understand that she was...

SH: Right. So when she came back in 1946 to Women's Physical Education, the question is were they hiring her into Women's Physical Education to do Dance? My sense is yes — and with that, at some point in time, to actually establish a Dance Program, which I think came some years later. And that's what I'm not sure of, but I find it unbelievable, this story that Helen told many times, that when Women's Physical Education gave her — she had kept pushing: "I want to establish a Dance Program within Women's Physical Education" — and then, OSU said yes. She said to Merce

Cunningham, “How do I *do* that? I've been fighting to get a dance program and now they've said yes! Now, how do I do it?” And Merce said to her, “You just begin.” And that, in fact, is on her stone, at the gravesite: “You just begin.” That was such a vote — an affirming vote from — well, as we know, Merce was to become a *legend*. At that time, he was starting — perhaps he was *very* well known, but not yet the legend that he became — but for him to give that vote of confidence to Helen for that program starting...

CF: I have her joining the PE faculty in 1940 and then proposing the dance major for the first time in 1946, and it was established in '47, inside of PE.

SH: Okay, so that's going to be interesting, because what we were saying a year ago, around her death, was that she left to go to New York for those early forties — the war years — and then *returned* in '46. So okay, that's going to be something that we have to figure out.

CF: Perhaps we should talk for a minute about the Helen you knew — you knew her very well and for very long.

SH: I came to graduate school to do my Master's work here in 1979, and Helen retired from the Chair position in '83, so during my graduate school years, Helen was the Chair of the department. She was mostly administrating at that time, but she did lead a graduate seminar, and I found her *formidable* — also, very funny. And by that time, she *got* it — she didn't sweat the small stuff. She was a big-picture person. (You know, I'd love to get there as a Chair — I feel like I'm immersed in the details at the moment.) She had *so* much perspective — I mean, she was nearing really, seventy years, right? No, that's not true but, you know, she had been around the block. So, I found her vision about the department — she was speaking from on high, by that time — and I found that *that's* what I gleaned from her was a vision about the broader, important things, when I was in graduate school.

CF: What would you say were her main contributions? What did Helen do — for the state of Ohio, for dance education...

SH: If we look at the history of dance education, we have one person, Margaret H'Doubler, in the first generation, who established Dance at the University of Wisconsin — really through the lens of teacher education in Physical Education. Margaret H'Doubler brought dance into Higher Education *through* the route of teaching. And I have heard that Helen, who was the *next* generation, had a lot of conversations with Margaret about the fact that *she* wanted to bring it into higher education as a training ground for artists — *not* through the route of teaching: “We can bring it in through, you know, women going off and being teachers — but I want to train artists.”

And that was revolutionary because it stood, not in conflict with Margaret H'Doubler, but certainly as a different point of view about what she wanted to do. She was part of a generation of women for example, Margaret Erlanger at Illinois, Elizabeth Hayes at Utah, Alma Hawkins at UCLA, and this group of women — and there weren't many of them — were that generation to establish dance programs mostly in public universities. They were each other's defenders and supporters as they made their way through the fifties and sixties in establishing dance as a legitimate discipline, both as a scholarly and practice-based — scholarly and artistic — pursuit in universities. These were the women who established the Council of Dance Administrators, CODA, and that council, then, established the National Association of Schools of Dance [NASD] which is the federal accreditation

body, giving accreditation to federal education programs all over the country. So her influence is widespread, *widespread* —nationally.

CF: Would you be able to say anything *specific* about how Helen diverged from H'Doubler's approach in terms of a training ground for artists? What did she do? What was different about the curriculum or her approach, specifically?

SH: Two of the most important things are that she brought *artists* to the program, every year, and that is a hallmark of the program to this day. She had a fierce dedication to stay connected to both the people and the developments in the professional field of dance. So, famous artists who were working in New York — really, from the '50s on — have come to OSU as visiting artists and scholars, have set work or created new work on students. When Helen came in the early 2000's to a faculty meeting and talked to us about the five things that governed her decision-making throughout the '50s and '60s in the establishment of programs — and eventually the Department in '68, those five things remain foundational principles that guide our decisions today. And one of those was to stay connected to the professional field through a vigorous visiting artist program. The other thing Helen did was personally put her students in her car — I'm thinking of Renée Wadleigh and Sharon Kinney — and drive them to the American Dance Festival at Connecticut College, drop them off, wish them good luck — and come back six weeks later to pick them up. So, she was early on connecting those students who had the intention of being professional dancers, connecting them to summer workshops and to opportunities while they were students here. And those two students of Helen's were the first two of the first three women in Paul Taylor's company.

CF: Do you remember the other four principles?

SH: I have them written down somewhere, but others were to connect — to connect with the other arts disciplines in the university, to do what we now call “interdisciplinary” work — but to connect with other departments, particularly theater and music — and to do projects together. The faculty were choreographing joint concerts, Helen was choreographing a number of musicals at that time, and that was critically important to her. One of the principles was to train her dancers in a broad-based education that included what we would call the classroom and the studio — I don't love that binary — but in other words to keep the program broad; if we would contrast her vision with conservatories that are basically oriented to not very much academic study — study towards being performers, predominantly — Helen believed that the best artists were trained in a much broader way across the discipline — in dance history, in pedagogy, production — eventually notation, analysis, performance, choreography, improvisation, creative art-making, etc. — and *every* time our faculty revisits our foundational mission, we go back to embracing the broad approach that Helen established from the beginning.

CF: When Helen was hired in the PE faculty in the '40s, she certainly was entering a “man's world” — not only in PE, but in the university. What do you know from conversations with her, if anything, about her struggles or her achievements against that background?

SH: Helen grew up with strong parents, she grew up the youngest of three children, and the only girl; she had two older brothers, she grew up in a farming community — and she was fierce, *absolutely fierce*. She understood power, and she wielded it very effectively in this university. Yeah, it was a white man's world, and she knew who had the power. She also knew how to talk about dance to people who did not come from the Arts. She knew how to talk to people for whom language was

the primary discipline — the language of the Sciences and the language of History and English — she understood how to talk about a discipline whose primary language is physical. Okay, so that language, of course, is not embraced in the academy — it was not embraced in the academy. So here she was with many strikes against her — her discipline is about the body — and the majority of her faculty was women — so many strikes against her. But she understood how to talk about dance in a way that people from the Sciences and from the Humanities understood, very clearly. And part of it was that she was very politically savvy; she strongly believed in Dance Notation, but she also understood that making the argument that Dance had a written language that you could read and that pointed to a history of documentation on the page, was an argument that people across this university understood. And so she, in a very savvy way, used the Notation Bureau and the establishment of the Notation Bureau Extension on this campus as a tool to talk about why Dance was important in a way that people from other disciplines understood.

CF: Perhaps you could talk about her contribution beyond Ohio State to the state of Ohio and perhaps to the professional world.

SH: The Department of Dance was at the Research One Land Grant state university, here at Ohio State. That was a good thing for Helen, because throughout the years — and certainly in the last thirty years — Dance and all of the Arts are understood to be a site of research, that research being scholarly, creative, artistic — all of it rolled into one. Helen began a campaign for our faculty to state the case that directing a production, creating a piece of choreography, performing on stage was *research*. It was her vision initially, and then the next generation of faculty who made the case and therefore, faculty were getting tenure and promotion at much higher rates, because what we do as research in the field was beginning to be recognized as research. I think that happened because the site was the Research One institution in the state. As to the student — however, perhaps even more importantly, because we were a land grant university and not a private institution (there are so many private colleges in Ohio) — Dance here became affordable for students who were Ohio kids. They were able to come at a tuition rate that was more affordable than it is now, and study at one of the finest — if not *the* finest — dance programs in the nation. As a result, this state was producing more “per capita” professional artists in the sixties and seventies than many other states — because of Ohio State.

CF: Perhaps you could talk a bit about pivotal moments, landmark moments, in the development of the department during Helen’s tenure.

SH: Again, you’re going to information of this kind when you talk with Karen Bell and Ann Lilly. But you know, again, I think *one* of the pivotal moments was this decision to bring notation — right at the moment when we were going to become a department in ’68 — or soon after, with Lucy Venable coming. Again, that was an important move and expansion — to have Labananalysis and Laban Studies, not just Labanotation, be part of the department. It established a scholarly, analytical and theoretical branch of the department that I think really set the stage for the next fifty years. Then, when Helen brought Vera Maletič here... Vera was finishing her doctorate here in *our* years (gesturing to me), when we were in graduate school. During the seventies, there was this incredibly cohesive point of view that pervaded everything we studied and did. It was an analytical frame that was integral to the composition classes taught by Vickie Blaine, it was in Vickie Blaine’s work, in the notation classes — as graduate and undergraduate students, we took Effort/Shape, we took Space Harmony — required! And so certainly through the seventies and early eighties, bringing Vera

Maletič on to the faculty, and having a lot of faculty buy-in — to look at History, to look at Choreography, to analyze movement, to make our own works based on many of the Laban principles — it was a very cohesive approach to the broad discipline in the department at that time — I think for twenty years.

SH: I think another very, very important time, though after Helen's years as Chair — and Vickie Blaine has talked about this rather amusingly — was in the early '90s when Vickie understood there was this thing called Technology. And she hired Scott Sutherland, an undergraduate student at the time, to do “technology” in the department — and she will say, “I really had no idea what that was, but everyone was talking about Technology, so I figured it must be important.” And she started to just really — I don't know — give *carte blanche* — but to basically listen to this young, undergraduate student, and to start to explore what might be the potential for dance and technology — which, as we now know, is a hallmark of our dance program now in 2016.

CF: Again, this is one last question about Helen. In the thirty-three years, I think, after she was Chair, but remained involved in the life of the department, or at the very least, *aware* of it — did she share with you her opinions about its trajectory? What did she think about the department after her years? Do you have any knowledge of that?

SH: Do you know what I respect so much about Helen? She was very hands off about that. I think that's the mark of a great leader: if you've done your job, you've left the next generation well-prepared — and she did — if not the next *couple* of generations. So, it was very much a “Carry on! Carry on!” I was with Helen the week she died; I had just become Chair of the department, and it's overwhelming, and I said “Helen, I want you to know” — I'm so, so glad I got to say this to her — I said, “Many times in the last two months when I've been faced with something I have no idea about, I have said to myself “What would Helen do? And I plan on continuing to ask myself that as I move into this position, and I want you to know that.” Oh! She just laughed, she just *roared* with laughter — and she was just like, “You'll be fine!” She was a no-muss/no-fuss person: “It'll be fine. You *got* it.” That, at the heart of it, was a vote of confidence — it really was, you know... and so I think that when Helen left in '83, she was done. She came to everything, and mostly what you heard was how wonderful everything was — and certainly if she didn't think it was wonderful, she never told me — and I think that's a great gift.

CF: Well, let's shift then, just to thinking about — not that Helen isn't perpetually intertwined with the development of the department — but speaking about the importance of the department in the state of Ohio. You've touched on it — as part of the Land Grant, Research One university — but what are the hallmarks of the OSU Department of Dance: what has it done, what has it achieved in the state, what has it achieved in its brief history?

SH: Well, I will say again that because the Department of Dance is housed in a state university, it gives access to high quality pre-professional training for the students in the state of Ohio. And how lucky are our undergraduates who are interested in being in the dance profession, to have this kind of training in a state university? It is just not true of very many states that the caliber of training here can happen for students. So I think that that is one thing. I believe that the decision of Helen Alkire in subsequent generations of faculty to train people for being citizens of the world, and of this country, to train them in transferable skills that move beyond dance, to train them for a lifetime of contributing to their communities, is a great legacy — and, again, a legacy that we continue to

embrace. Our students are scrappy entrepreneurs, great communicators, problem-solvers, analytical thinkers, collaborators — and we are understanding once again — business and industry, medicine, education, government — these professions are learning once again that they want to hire people who know how to do this and these people come from Arts training. We're increasingly seeing it — from Forbes magazine and everywhere else — that, for example, there are more jobs in the tech sector that are non-tech jobs, and where do we go for those? We go to people who have had a broad-based education, and who can think outside of the box: Welcome to the Department of Dance!

CF: Great. I also want you to speak to the contribution of the Department of Dance to the state of Ohio, since this is an Ohio Dance project...I guess to connecting Ohio, for example, to the world, to other states, to other departments and to the professional field.

SH: Yeah...I think that one of the strengths of the Department of Dance is that we are not a “cookie cutter” department. We are not like some of the conservatories, training students to go to New York to become performers. Yes, we are *doing* that, but we are also training them to go back to Cambridge, Ohio and run their parents’ dance school, we are training them to work in the public schools as dance educators, as dance specialists, we are training them to be lighting designers, to be dance filmmakers, to work on interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, arts projects, to run arts programs in their communities, to become arts administrators of major arts institutions. All of those professional achievements have been done by students from our program — or to be performers, and then go to medical school or law school or be physical therapists — and that breadth, I think, adds to the richness of our programs, and I think that our grads are the proof — the proof is in the pudding — and our graduates are, in fact, doing that range of things. And many of our grads stay in Columbus and they stay in the state of Ohio. We have so many of our students come from dance programs either in high schools or in studios that are run by OSU graduates, and so there's a legacy across the state throughout our communities of OSU grads, either staying or going off — and then returning to their home.

CF: And beyond the state, as well.

SH: Certainly! You know, when our students leave — or even throughout their senior years, you know, they don't know what they're going to do — and what they don't know is that in most of the major cities in this country, they will know OSU grads within a week of arriving. They will call them, they will find a place to live on their living room floor until they find a place of their own — usually with *another* OSU Dance grad. They will be dancing in the work of OSU grads within a few months, they will be teaching in Diane Jacobowitz’s Dancewave program, in which we have three or four of our recent BFA grads performing. Diane Jacobowitz will say “Oh, I know a choreographer who needs...some dancers. There is a network across this country of generations of OSU grads, who are there, and who do step up and, you know, help to bring our recent grads into the fold.

CF: I know that it has been frequently said that the dance training of OSU dancers is obvious to people outside of the state when they see them. Do you think that's true, and if so, would you like to comment on it?

SH: Vickie Blaine’s legacy — the legacy of her comp class, which everyone — as somewhat of a badge of honor — anyone who has sort of made it through the boot camp of Vickie Blaine’s weight studies comp class, which she taught for many decades — again, came out of *her* embracing the

Laban Studies, the Labananalysis, the Laban frame that Vickie embraced in the seventies, and began to teach this *very* famous weight studies comp class. Many, many of us embrace that in our own dancing, and when we began to teach, weight became the lens through which we were teaching our movement practice classes — for me, for sure. And so I think that grads from about ten years ago came back and said that they had heard in auditions from people that “I can tell an OSU dancer in the auditions because they are so deeply in touch with weight, and with being grounded and moving from their center of weight.” It's interesting — I wonder if that's the case now, but certainly up to when Vickie was still teaching here, that was a real hallmark. But I think there's another hallmark: I heard from Joanna Mendl Shaw, when she was an adjudicator for ACDFFA at the time, that the OSU dancers at those festivals could see dance and speak about it better than any of the other students. They again — *again*, because I believe that we were training dancers broadly — in history, in their writing classes and criticism classes, in their analysis classes, it was the whole package. So that OSU dancers were smart: they could see, they could talk about the aesthetics of what they were looking at. They weren't just “bodies for hire” — and I think that's a legacy of the department.

CF: This has been great. I'm going to ask a couple more questions, and it might be that in answering them, you feel you're repeating yourself, but the editors will work with that. I wonder if you could think about how the department has responded to change over time.

SH: When the department was a bit smaller, and again the Laban frame was really governing many of our courses in the seventies and eighties, it was in the mid-eighties that the MFA came on board, and it was also at that time when the department expanded, that Vicki Uris was brought into the department, John Giffin — and it wasn't any longer just Rosalind Pierson and Vickie Blaine making work. Vickie hired a number of choreographers: I came in the early '90s, Mike Bruce came, Melanie Bales — there were a lot more choreographic faculty, and we choreographed from, really, much more diverse points of view. Then we had some retirements in the early nineties, and I think that combination of the MFA degree coming in and the addition of more choreographing faculty, that that broadened the department at that time. And I think in around 2010 when the faculty made a very definitive choice to make hires in the area of Africanist aesthetics, and the legacy of the African diaspora in modern and contemporary dance, in terms of bringing those voices on the faculty — that is also a stated goal right now of the department — to continue to expand aesthetics, choreographic voices, to embrace the tradition in this country of the African and African American diasporic traditions — that, too, was an important shift in the department. I believe the fact that Vickie Blaine embraced a move towards Dance and Technology in the early nineties — we're now across the hall from the Advanced Computing Center for the Arts and Design [ACCAD] — is a hallmark of our department that sets it apart from many programs in this country. Ten years ago, we established a PhD program in this department — it's one of four PhDs in the nation and so we are the site of very important scholarly work in Dance Studies.

CF: Is there anything else you'd like to say about Helen or about the Dance Department as an important site of knowledge-making in the state or the country?

SH: When we established our PhD program, the dance field was at a point in its history when we were still doing a lot of research through theoretical frameworks that did not come from Dance; we were looking at Dance Studies through very important frameworks, for example, Feminist Studies, Cultural Studies, Psychoanalytic theory — and I believe that we made a great contribution to the field of dance by deciding that theory should bubble up from the *practice* of dance itself: choreographic practices, creative practices, dancing, performance — that our PhD program would

have at its heart the developing of frameworks *from* our discipline as opposed to being placed *upon* our discipline. I think we're still leading in that area, and that has been a significant contribution in the last ten years.

Something else I'd like to add that may not fit here: I believe that in the language that we use about the field, that we are perpetuating some binaries that we use that do not *serve* us, and that Ohio State and the research that we're doing here could begin to break down binary thinking around things such as differentiations between “the classroom” and “the studio”: the studio *is* a classroom; the classroom is a studio. Scholarly and artistic... creative activity and scholarly... *Why* is writing a book not a creative activity? And “scholarly” *pervades* the creative practice of making a dance or directing a production. So I believe Ohio State — because we have a legacy of thinking broadly about the field — is going to be a pioneer in the future of breaking down these binaries between those who *do* the thing, and those who *think* about the thing, because in our program and in our research, we're doing both at the same time here at Ohio State.

CF: What's next? What do you see as the future for Ohio State?

SH: I'm seeing a lot of work in our field that has lost the *body* as the center. It is work that's cerebral, that is theoretical work *onstage* — yes, important. But for many of us, the act of moving still lies at the heart of our discipline. It's what makes dance different than visual art or music or film. I hope that we can continue to explore, continue to do fabulously interesting work at the intersection of theory, analysis, multidisciplinary work with the visual arts, music, theatre, film. We are perfectly poised to continue to explore that — as Helen asked us to do fifty years ago. But for me, the strength of this program is that *dancing*, and the *dancing body*, and *movement* remain at the core.

CF: Would you like to say anything about the new building as the launch of the Arts District, as a landmark in the history of the department?

SH: Sullivant Hall is the first building — and at this point the *only* building — that is completed and renovated that is going to be the new Arts District at the Ohio State University. The OSU Arts District will be the official entrance to the Ohio State University here at 15th and High St. Plans that were unveiled two months ago include a straightening of 15th Avenue, with a hotel, a renovation of Mershon Auditorium, bringing Theatre back from its location on the river, back to this location. It speaks to the Board of Trustees' and to our president's and provost's commitments to the Arts on this campus, and to another fifty years of growth in the arts — not only within our departments but between our departments, and of collaborations with all of the disciplines across campus. It's a very exciting time!

CF: As always, I will ask my colleagues here if they have anything they'd like you to address.

JC: There's a word that keeps coming to mind, and it's “legitimizing.” There's something about this broad program and it being a state university... So, all of these new students have access to Dance, and then they go out and they're the leaders in programs all over the country; you're saying that people perceive OSU students as being some of the smartest of dancers... So, does that legacy help to legitimize dance as an academic field across the nation? Would you say that by having a rigorous, broad program here that is what actually lifts the field?

SH: Yes, I do think so. I think that, again, when Helen, Margaret Erlanger, Elizabeth Hayes — a number of these women in the '50s were saying dance is a legitimate discipline to study. These programs — Ohio State is a flagship program across the nation — you know, the fact that OSU Dance thrives in BFA, MFA and PhD programs and is serving 1500 elective students in the dance program, both in movement practice classes, in writing and in history classes: 1500 elective students every year are served by this program. This is the biggest dance program in the nation, and it becomes the flagship, model program for how dance thrives in a university setting.