

VDC Interview Transcript

Kathryn Karipides

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Key:

CF: Candace Feck

KK: Kathryn Karipides

CF: Before we talk about the development of the organization that is now called DANCECleveland, I wonder if you would mind revisiting the dance landscape that you found here when you came, as you've just said, fresh out of Miami University in 1956, and took that position at Flora Stone Mather College.

KK: Yes, the position at Flora Stone Mather College in the Physical Education Department was simply supposed to be for one year, because the woman who had been teaching the Dance but also other Physical Education classes, was going on maternity leave. So they needed someone for just one year, and it seemed absolutely perfect for me, because I was just fresh out of the university with only a Bachelor of Arts degree, and thinking if I wanted to continue in Dance, I would have to either go to New York. Or, at that point in time, the University of Wisconsin had this wonderful graduate program. So, I took the position, and I was so lucky! I felt I was in the right place at the right time, and the women in the Physical Education at Flora Stone Mather College, which was part of Western Reserve University, were just wonderful! They were great mentors, and although none of them was in the field of Dance, at that point in time Rhythmic Gymnastics was a very important part of Physical Education training, so they had this wonderful appreciation and understanding of the aesthetics of beautiful movement and of course, Modern Dance, which was relatively new. So I had this wonderful group of women who were supportive of what I was doing and wanted to do, and then they immediately told me that there was this new organization in Cleveland that had just gotten together and organized as a group in January. They put me immediately in touch with Marian Holmes, who is now deceased, but she was one of the leaders, and she had done some part-time teaching at Flora Stone Mather College, as well. And... it was a life-saver! (She laughs, thinking of this.) Because, here I was this neophyte, having to teach the modern dance classes, but also having to learn this rhythmic gymnastics, and body mechanics, and then also doing some of the individual sports. But I immediately got in touch with them, and they told me about their weekly classes. At the time, I didn't have a car and I couldn't get a direct bus route to Shaker Square, and from there to Fernway School — it was Fernway or Ludlow School — but they said “Oh, we'll have someone pick you up — or if you can meet them at a certain place...” — which I did! So that was my introduction — and then my lifeline — to continuing my profession. As it turns out, I stayed longer than one year: I stayed for forty-two! And I got so much of my training through what was called at that point the Cleveland Modern Dance Association, because of their weekly classes, but then their workshops. You know, they brought the trailblazers of modern dance — the pioneers! I remember that first year they brought in Charles Weidman, and then they just continually held their summer workshops. And I was able to schedule many of those workshops *at* Mather — it was Mather

Gymnasium, and now we call it Mather Dance Center — but at Mather Gym. It was wonderful for the students I was teaching — and of course, very nurturing for me as well.

CF: Could I ask you to step back a bit to your studies at Miami University? I know that you had a kind of family history in Greek dancing in the community in which you grew up. But what happened at Miami? Who did you study with there?

KK: Well, that was another really fortunate thing, because there were two dance instructors there at the time: one of them, Frances Benz, was like an adjunct professor, who had trained at the Graham School in New York. And the other one, Elizabeth Hetherington, was on the permanent faculty, and her training was with Hanya Holm —so they were as different as night and day, and I had the opportunity to study with both of them. And, you see, I didn't know (laughing) modern dance from ballet from tap dance from jazz dance — it was just this very new thing for me, although I had always loved moving, and the dancing that I had done was the folk-dancing from our Greek community in Canton (OH). And I loved it, and I also just loved to move. So I didn't declare a major; I was in the College of Arts and Sciences, just following a Liberal Arts program, and we had a Physical Education requirement to fill, and fortunately we could choose from this long list of things — and I saw “Modern Dance.” And I thought “Ah! That's what I'm going to do!” That was my introduction into modern dance — in college, as a first-year student: I was completing my PE requirement. Well, of course, I got very, very involved in it, and they had an Orchesis group,¹ so I did as many dance courses and activities as I possibly could, along with carrying my regular academic schedule. Then it came time — it was, like, my third semester there, and my advisor said, you know, “It's time for you to select a major,” and I said (laughing) “Well, I really love this dancing!” — although they did not have a major — and everything that came with it — I mean, you know, the choreography, the improvisation — “but,” I said, “they don't have a dance major here,” and he said, “Well, if you want a concentration in Dance, you're going to have to major in Physical Education.” So that's what I did!

CF: I'm curious about the way in which your career — I mean, you had a company, but you were really based at Case University, eventually, as your academic home — and the Cleveland Modern Dance Association/DANCECleveland. The two seem to be quite connected... Could you talk about that? Or are they really just connected through you?

KK: I think it was primarily connected through me, because of my allegiance to CMDA at that point, and the fact that they were welcome to have their classes at Mather Gym. It was a collaborative kind of partnership, and my Chair — the Chair of the Physical Education department was really very welcoming and open to that kind of partnership. Then also there was a performing group — the CMDA had a performing group, and I was part of that. But at that point in time — it's so different from today — I mean, there wasn't that much going on, so we had the attention of the entire community focused on what was going on in the Cleveland Modern Dance Association, what was going on at the university, and then, of course, there was Karamu Theatre, too, and I was very much involved with them. So, believe me, I was performing when and wherever it was possible, and then

¹ The following note from the January, 1944 *Journal of Health and Physical Education* may be informative here: “The following information about dance activities in Ohio has been sent in by Helen Alkire. At Miami University, 100 girls are participating in Junior Orchesis. A joint program by the University Orchestra and Orchesis is planned. Dorothy White is in charge of Dance.” (p. 144). (The article goes on to mention Orchesis activities at Denison University, and also at Ohio State.)

it was in the very late '60s when my colleague Henry Kurth², who was a scene and lighting designer at Eldred Theatre, came forth and said “Well, you know, why don’t we form a company?” He was anxious to design, and I was anxious to choreograph. We had a wonderful group of students — and we didn’t have a dance major, but [had it as] an extracurricular activity. We also embraced dancers in the community who had done some professional work, and then we formed our company. It was the Dance Theatre of Kathryn Karipides and Henry Kurth.³

CF: I’d like to ask you about the thread of dance therapy that has run through Cleveland Modern Dance Association, perhaps through Lillian Weisberg’s work or interest — and this Dancer/Wellness program at Case. Could you talk about your involvement with that?

KK: Actually, that was pretty much Lillian Weisberg’s baby, and she just did it beautifully. And often the group would meet at Mather Dance Center when she had her workshops and their classes. It was not that I wasn’t interested; I just didn’t have the time to also be thoroughly involved in that. But as far as the wellness piece, I mean, the base that I got — the core for my teaching of dance and teaching technique, came from my work with Helen Smith and Emily Andrews, who chaired the department, and it came through the Rhythmic Gymnastics, and also they taught a course called Body Mechanics. Now that sounds [awful], but it’s pretty much what we teach today, with maybe a different name — Dance Wellness or Movement Wellness, or what have you. It was basically the anatomy and the mechanics of movement. We had small classes in body mechanics, and would check and assess each of the young women in their alignment, and then set up a certain program for them with certain exercises, and then check them again at the end of the semester. So we were giving them a really good base to work from for movement, and that was helpful for them in Dance, in Sports, or just in their life work.

CF: I also understand that you were the recipient of the first scholarship CMDA offered.

KK: Oh, that was absolutely thrilling! You know, it was in the summer of 1960 — or perhaps it was 1962 — and it allowed me to go to Colorado College to study with Hanya Holm for the summer. I had, prior to that, done several summers at the American Dance Festival when it was in New London, at Connecticut College, which was also wonderful. But that opportunity to study with Hanya Holm, and to work with *her* specifically — just with her philosophy and with people who were Holm-trained teachers... That was my first summer of having Dalcroze Eurhythmics. So it was the music program, improvisation and then also her dance technique — but she didn’t have an actual Hanya Holm dance technique — again, she was doing some general exercises. She was doing some Pilates floor exercises at the time, and just preparing us to move. It was composition with Hanya Holm that was quite wonderful!

CF: I’m trying to understand your own amazing career trajectory in terms of its intersections with DANCECleveland. As you’ve said, you were associated with CMDA right away when you got here: they were your lifeline, and you danced in a performing group that they supported, and you got the scholarship from them. Meanwhile, you were launching your academic career, moving from Flora Mathers through the various other institutions of higher education that are now Case University. Currently, you serve on the Board of DANCECleveland... What are the other points of connection between you and CMDA/DANCECleveland?

² (1917 – 1999)

³ Karpides and Kurth formed the company in 1969.

KK: I think I've served on the Board for about five years. But early on — I suspect it may have been about five years after I was here — we each, those of us who were with the organization in the beginning, had the opportunity to be President for a year. So there was that opportunity of leading the group for a year or two. And what was wonderful is the fact that those women who started the organization were always there, and I learned so much from them, as well — for instance, my colleague Lillian Weisberg. They were so supportive, and when we had our company at Case Western Reserve, they were very supportive in coming to performances, and it was quite wonderful because there wasn't that much going on; we performed in a very small theatre so when we had our seasons, we were always sold-out! You know, if you're in a small theatre, it's much better than being in a humongous theatre...besides which, I think that modern dance is such — and now they're calling it contemporary dance — I think is a very intimate artform. Yes, it's nice to see these big productions in big theatres, but I like that relationship [of the audience] to the performer, and really being able to feel that kinetic connection, which you don't feel when you're so distant from them.

CF: Looking back for a moment, I have to imagine that you couldn't have *fathomed* that that little organization, Cleveland Modern Dance Association, would now grow to be DANCECleveland, this major presenting organization — not to mention that your supposedly one-year stint at Flora Mathers would become a 42-year career — beyond 42 years, because you went back as Associate Provost, right? Could you share with us some of the highlights of those amazing trajectories —either one, or both? The development of Cleveland Modern Dance Association from this little basement group of visionaries into this world-class presenting organization...

KK: You know, I think it has to do with when someone has a passion for something. It's like nothing can stop you because you have this passion — it feels like the right thing, the correct thing, this generosity to bring it to as many people as possible — and to, as well as you can, educate them by offering classes, bringing in teachers to teach classes, and then bringing in the final product. But I think it has to do with passion.

CF: I'm afraid our time is almost up! Is there anything more that you would like to add about DANCECleveland, dancing in Cleveland, or about the Cleveland Modern Dance Association?

KK: Yes! I want to thank Cleveland Modern Dance Association, I want to thank the university because they allowed me this freedom, you know, to really grow — so it was a wonderful opportunity! And I think Cleveland is a great place to live, and there were so many enhancing elements — you know, so much enhancement from the other arts. We have the Cleveland Museum: when I first got here, I was probably at the museum every other day because I could go between classes, and just walk in and see one specific painting or sculpture. There was the Cleveland Orchestra, with George Szell. There was the Cleveland Institute of Music, there was the Cleveland Institute of Art. So I want to thank all of those organizations because they really were part of my development. Each of them played a very important part — to the point where when I was teaching, they allowed me to do improvisation over at the museum. I would take my improvisation class or my composition class over, and you know, they allowed me that. I can't tell you how lucky I've been! You know, I think of so many young people now who are going to universities to study dance, and I love that, but I think "Oh my goodness!" How much more difficult it is than it was then... Yeah, and that opportunity to have studied with the pioneers! I mean, you know, taking classes with Martha Graham, with José Limón, composition class with Doris Humphrey. And with all the people that they [CMDA] brought in — and I mean, they did it on a shoestring!

Lillian Weisberg probably told you the story of when they had to make sure that Board members would step up with a check if they didn't sell enough tickets! That concert with Jean Erdman – you know, she just celebrated her 100th birthday — and I remember down at the WCLV Building, on Euclid Avenue and they had this small auditorium...

CF: Thank you! I wish we had much more time.

KK: Thank you! It was a pleasure!