

Alum Winifred Haun returns to SIU with esteemed dance company

By Carly Gist, Staff Reporter

Winifred Haun is a renowned choreographer, dancer, instructor and artistic director. But before she was an award-winning artist, she was a Saluki.

"I have been interested in making dances since I was about six...I've literally been doing it from the beginning," Haun said. "...And a typical path for a dancer is like, you're a dancer, and you want to get a job in a company, and you work for that company...My path to doing that, it kind of mostly started here at SIU."

Haun was invited to return to Southern Illinois University as the Fall 2023 Glassman Distinguished Speaker. The endowment was brought to the University Honors Program by alumni Michael and Nancy Glassman.

"This offers us the opportunity to bring artists, scholars,



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The Winifred Haun Dancers prepare to bow after a performance during practice at Shryock Auditorium in Carbondale, IL. Nov. 17th, 2023

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scientists, makers [and] creators to our universe," Honors Director Jyotsna Kapur said. "Our ethos is learn, lead, serve. It is about comprehensive thinking. We want our students to think broadly across disciplines...So we want students to be exposed to the arts and the humanities and the sciences."

Kapur said that professor Darryl Clark suggested Haun be this year's speaker. Clark is a professor from the School of Theatre and Dance and teaches the "Maternal in Movement" honors course.

"It's really exciting to come back [to SIU] for a lot of reasons, because I used to watch Pilobolus and Hubbard Street and all these famous dance companies in this very theater," Haun said after a company warmup at Shryock Auditorium on Nov. 16. "And so it's really exciting to get to bring my professional dance company back here, and we wouldn't be here without Darryl. Thank you, Darryl."

As part of the Michael and Nancy Glassman Distinguished Lecture, Haun's company, Winifred Haun and Dancers, completed a one-week artist-in-residence program at SIU. The residency kicked off on Nov. 12 with an open audition for SIU students and community members, and concluded on Nov. 17 with a public showcase.

"It was really fun," Haun said in regards to blending the two different groups of dancers together. She said it was hard to recruit SIU dancers since the department is so small, but several musical theater majors auditioned, which allowed the team to "[create] things that worked with their strengths."

"I always say to choreograph for whoever's in the room...And there was just a really nice connection between the dancers and myself," she said.

Clark added, "There was a lot of joy in the room on the stage when they were doing the work."

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SIU freshman Nicholas Steinberger said working with one another was a great experience.

"They understand that you're not as skilled as them so they help you with everything you need," he said.

Assistant choreographer Crystal Gurrola agreed it was "a lot of fun."

"At our performance, [the] opening piece showcases that group of people who just wanted to come in and participate," she said. "And they were super open and willing to be creative."

For first-year student Ty Lunn, this opportunity allowed her to perform again after six months.

"It was a bit challenging but I was able to overcome it by being confident in my abilities and in the choreography," she wrote.

Lunn also said this experience gave her a "new dance perspective."

"This experience has opened my eyes to how fun dance is," she said. "It definitely makes me consider doing dance as a profession."

The residency wasn't just an opportunity for local dancers to learn and grow, however; it was also a chance for Haun's company members to experience new endeavors. Throughout the week, the company hosted several workshops. Gurrola was given the opportunity to teach a few of these.

"On Wednesday, I taught a contemporary dance class, and then earlier today [Thursday], I taught a ballet class," she said. "I really enjoyed that experience and giving the students a different perspective. I threw out some very challenging classes, but it was fun to get them out of their comfort zones and just try stuff."

Gurrola also said that working on a college campus was inspiring, and she hopes to work with other schools in the future and possibly return to SIU.

"There's just such an energy of being on a college campus where everyone kind of has the same common goal of achieving something great for their future, and you can just feel that being here," she said.

Antrell Brown, an apprentice for the company, said the opportunity allowed him to enhance his ability to adapt to change.

"One thing I can really take away from this is just being open to exploring all the different possibilities that other spaces can bring; other people, other energies," he said.

The residency was Brown's first time participating in a show. He said it allowed him to familiarize himself more with his fellow dancers.

"Because I am an apprentice, I don't get many opportunities to perform," he said. "It's my first time actually traveling and performing with the company. So getting to know everyone a little bit closer, a little bit more intimate, it's been a very nice experience."

Haun's Chicago-based company has been around since the early 1990s. But when she began her studies at SIU in 1981, she contemplated giving up dance.

"When I came to SIU, I thought I was quitting dance, and I was trying to look for something else to do," she said. "And I thought, maybe a physical therapist or a psychologist, I mean, I had so many majors, it was ridiculous. But I got to study things like anthropology, Chinese, philosophy and history, and for a while I was going to be a history major, because I loved it. And so SIU gave me that to begin with."

She credits the opportunities the school provided her with for helping her find her way.

"There was a really awesome dance instructor, Linda Kostelic, who taught dance composition, and that really helped out a lot," she said. "And there were lots of other smaller things, but these are the ones that I think really impacted my career: I studied advanced lighting design in the theater department, and also acting, and I took voice lessons. So I got to do a lot of things that I think helped inform what I'm doing now, like I just used my advanced lighting design skills to set cues for the show. And a lot of choreographers, I think, could use that."

Haun advises students to explore their interests and discover their passions before deciding on a career path.

"A lot of times when people try to put their careers together, they go, 'If I do this, it will lead to that, and it will lead to that, and then here's the thing that I want to do.' But life does not work like that. I wish it did, believe me," she said. "When you make decisions about what you're going to do next, like your major, or whatever it is, you have to decide what you want to spend your time doing."

She said the reason she never ended up going into physical therapy is because she realized she did not enjoy the steps it took to get there.

"My mom said to me, because I [didn't like] the statistics and the biology and all of that... 'If you don't like the path that you take to get to the goal, it's not going to be worth it when you get there.' And I think that's really true," she said.

Haun also wants to remind others of the countless options they have for their future. She hopes to leave students with this advice: "don't worry too much about your decisions."

"There is never one decision you make that's going to make you or break you. That doesn't exist," she said. "Just make a decision based on the information you have in the moment and see what happens."

"And nothing is permanent," she added. "You can always change direction."

Winifred Haun and Dancers has had an eventful year, she said, and still have several upcoming projects.

"We just started a new program called the Third Coast Contemporary Dance Program [for] dancers between the ages of 17 and 25. They come and take class with us, rehearse with us and they perform with us," she said. "So that started, we had our gala and then we came here."

The company will be performing at Links Hall in Chicago on March 1-3 for a project Haun calls "First Draft."

"It's an opportunity for choreographers to create new work, especially for the showcase," she said. "And then in May, we're going to be at the Ruth Page Center [for the Arts]. And that's Memorial Day weekend, I think. And then next fall, we're going to be at the Studebaker Theatre in downtown Chicago."

As for the School of Theatre and Dance, Clark said there are no events planned for this spring, but he is working with Rosanna Cauti, director of the SIU String and Youth Orchestras to bring students together for a "live music and dance concert" in spring 2025. Clark plans to revive a piece he choreographed for the American College Dance Festival this year and create a "dance on film."

"Professor Cauti came to me with this piece for solo violin and said, 'You have to dance this,' and I'm like, 'Yeah, I could.' But I came up with an idea, and this idea is to do a dance on film," he said. "I want to call it Phoenix, and I want it to be about a rising spirit. It's going to be dedicated to Elijah McLean, who died in Aurora, Colorado, as a result of police violence. He was a violinist, so that's a perfect tribute to him."

The SIU Dance Company will also be hosting two showcases, one in December and one in April. Clark said their first performance called "Snowfall" will take place the first week of December.