

Dancing from the bones

by Jennifer Mesch
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David Howard is one of the most famous and sought-after master teachers of ballet in the world, and has been for more than two decades. He has taught the very best dancers in the world, and now he's here in Kalamazoo. He'll be here all week with his entourage of musicians, teachers and doctors for an intensive dance workshop through the Department of Dance at Western Michigan University.

The students and teachers attending the workshop are from all over the world, including Japan, Finland and Canada. Several states are also represented, as well as local students and teachers from Ballet Arts, West Michigan Academy of Dance, The Patti Herm School of Dance, Kalamazoo Ballet Company and WMU.

In an interview following the advanced level class, David Howard spoke about his background and his teaching methods. "I'm from England and I studied RAD (Royal Academy of Dance) and Russian at the Cone-Ripman School. I completed examinations in everything; ballroom, tap, ballet, drama, everything. I had a very theatrical background. I really wanted to be an actor. But I found out that I had talent as a dancer, so I went that way."

Howard was invited to the U.S. in 1966 to teach at the Harkness Foundation in New York City. He planned on staying about two years, and he hasn't left yet. "I became a teacher quite by accident really. I thought I'd be a hairdresser. But then I was asked to teach a tap class, then a ballet class, and so on."

Although Howard spoke casually about his beginnings as a teacher, he was fastidious in the workshop. He reprimanded students for not remembering combinations or for improper executions of steps. "Maybe because of my British sense of humor and accent, I can get away with being brutally honest with a dancer. I can tell people they look awful, as long as I say it with a glimmer of hope."

David Howard's approach is kinesthetic rather than position-oriented, and the results are what make him in such high demand. "Many learn to dance from the outside in. I'm trying to get them to dance from the inside out." Dancers from any genre can use what they learn from him.

Sharon Garber is the ballet professor at WMU initially responsible for bringing David Howard to Kalamazoo. She began studying with Howard in New York City after graduating from college. "I went to New York and started studying at all the big schools, like Joffrey and ABT," She said at the workshop. "I soon realized that the schools were like factories turning out dancers. I needed to find a teacher who would speak to me, perhaps unconventionally, and not necessarily connected with companies."

Garber recalled with nostalgia her classes with Howard. "His classes were on a different level. His musicians were creating excellent music to dance to, and all the best professionals in New York were there, like Gelsey Kirkland. He taught us to have an internal understanding of movement rather than seeing a picture and trying to imitate it. We were dancing from our bones. It's a very effective contemporary approach to classical ballet."

David Howard gives several workshops around the world each year. This year Howard taught in Iceland, Denmark, Venezuela, and now Kalamazoo.

"It took two years to arrange for him to be here this summer," said Garber. "We're now in the process of trying to give him a home here (at WMU) every summer. We're extremely fortunate to have him here."