For the Love of Dance

by Jessica Levine-Pizano ’98

Seven a.m., a much dreaded time for the average college student, but these are not average students. Every morning, Hartt dance students leave the comfort of their dorm rooms before the University Commons even opens for breakfast to take the shuttle bus to Dance Connecticut’s quarters on Farmington Avenue in Hartford. They arrive at the school by 7:50 a.m. and by 8:30 in the morning have to be changed and ready to dance. Meanwhile, across town on the main University campus, most of the students are still rolling out of bed or are sipping coffee through an early-morning class.

No coffee is allowed in dance classes. Dancers must be awake and ready to go. By 4 o’clock in the afternoon, these dedicated young artists have finished just half of their day. In order to fulfill their academic requirements, Dance Division students have to take two evening courses a semester. “It’s a long day,” says Division Director Peggy Lyman, “and then the cycle begins again the next morning. They work hard. This is a very intense program.”

The dance majors’ demanding schedules are part of a carefully planned training program, says Lyman. “It is the goal of the division,” she says, “to graduate professionally trained, intelligent dancers capable of adapting to the varied demands of careers in dance performance or teaching.

“In preparation for the successful transition from student to professional, dance students must practice sustaining the long, arduous days,” according to Lyman. “The rigors of the professional dance field require tremendous physical, mental, and spiritual stamina. Dancers, choreographers, and teachers make hourly and daily creative decisions not just with their minds but with their big toes, their abdominal muscles, their shoulders, their quadriceps, their eyes, their hearts, musically and poetically, and spirits. The dance faculty are committed to creating a supportive environment for student growth and learning from both the dancers’ successes and, sometimes even more valuable, their blunders.”

The idea of a classically trained dancer’s receiving a college
A degree is a relatively new concept. When the program opened in the fall of 1994, it was one of the very few intensive, conservatory-level Bachelor of Fine Arts degree programs that focused on creating a professional-level dancer. This unusual collaboration between The Hartt School and Dance Connecticut, formerly the Hartford Ballet, gives students the opportunity to have the best of both worlds: a high-quality college-level education and a rigorous training program within a professional dance company.

Three years later, following the trend that began here at the University of Hartford, Denise Jefferson of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center created a similar partnership with Fordham University. Now, just eight years later, Hartt’s Dance Division is 39 students strong. Its current freshman class of 19 is its largest class ever.

Hartt has fully embraced its new identity as a performing arts training center with the successes of its Dance Division and Theatre Division, the latter created in 1996 with the addition of the Actor Training major. The additional programs have presented artistic possibilities that were previously impossible. Collaborations between the divisions abound and stunning performances are the result.

In February 2001, Aaron Copland’s rarely seen ballet, Grohg, newly choreographed by Dance Connecticut’s former principal dancer, Tim Melady, with a new scenario, Metamorph-Phing, by playwright Arthur Kopit was presented. Dance students performed, accompanied by the Hartt Symphony Orchestra. The audience that weekend was also treated to the fruits of additional collaborative efforts, as the senior dance majors presented their final choreography projects using music written by Hartt student composers, mentored by Composition Department Chair Robert Carl, and accompanied by the orchestra.

February 2002 marked the first all-School performance, with the Broadway classic West Side Story, under the direction of TheaterWorks Associate Artistic Director Rob Ruggiero. Featured in the production were music theatre and dance students accompanied by the Hartt Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Michael Morris, director of music for the Theatre Division.

While Hartt-based performances are a requirement in the Dance Division, students find additional experience dancing with Hartford’s professional dance company, Dance Connecticut, and with the Connecticut Opera and the School of Dance Connecticut’s Touring Ensemble. Students have danced in Hartford and on tour in professional productions of The Nutcracker, Giselle, Coppelia, Sleeping Beauty, Serenade, and Romeo and Juliet. This past December, Hartt Dance Division students joined Dance Connecticut on stage at Hartford’s Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts, dancing the holiday classic The Nutcracker, with live accompaniment by the Hartford Symphony and conducted by Hartt faculty member Glen Adsit.

Now, as one of the top performing-arts educational centers in the nation, The Hartt School has outgrown its home. As a result, the University has exercised its option to purchase the 70,000-square-foot, former Thomas Cadillac site, a

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three-building complex located just down the road from the main campus. The planned performing arts center will become the new home for Hartt’s Dance, Theatre, and Vocal Divisions as well as elements of the Community Division. The new facility is scheduled to open in the fall of 2004, coincidently, the 10th anniversary of the Dance Division.

The new complex will have three dance studios as well as access to additional rehearsal space that the division will share with other departments. Also planned for the building are other performance venues. Most significant will be the integration of Hartt’s divisions. With the new facilities proximity to the main campus, Hartt dance students will be able to feel a stronger connection to their fellow students.

In the past, the dance program was outsourced as part of a contractual agreement with Dance Connecticut to manage and staff the division. Currently, all of the faculty are employees of Dance Connecticut. When the new complex opens, the dance faculty will gradually become a part of the University. “The goal is for the Dance Division to have a standing similar to the music and theatre programs of the School,” said Hartt Dean Malcolm Morrison. “In terms of our students’ participating with a professional company [Dance Connecticut], we plan to continue the collaboration.”

“Having a more intensified feeling of being a part of Hartt is definitely going to benefit our students,” says Lyman. “We’ve always enjoyed collaborating with the other disciplines in Hartt; this will make the logistics so much easier. Because the collaborative process is sparked by informal conversation in hallways, the move will facilitate these face-to-face meetings in a much more immediate way.”

Scheduling will become much easier for those in the Dance Division, as they will no longer need to vie for dance studio space with Dance Connecticut’s preprofessional and adult programs. “To have the studios available all day and not have to give them up at 4 o’clock will give our students much more rehearsal time. We will have the freedom to let our students take morning academic classes and rehearse in the evenings,” said Lyman.

Meanwhile, as plans are developed for the new space, Hartt dance students continue to perform. This past summer, they performed at Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival in Lee, Mass., with the New Haven Festival of Arts and Ideas, the Connecticut Choreographers Forum, and the Connecticut Dance Alliance.

Alumnae Stephanie Risser ‘99 and Heather Johdos ’00 are currently teaching in the School of Dance Connecticut. Alumna Amy Lesko ’98 has performed with Hartford Ballet and Dance Connecticut and is now the coordinator for the Dance Division. Other alumna successes include Kristen Haggerty ’98, who performs with the David Taylor Dance Theater of Colorado; Grace Barton ’98, who performs with the Full Force Dance Theater in Connecticut; and Marissa Starnes-Zuniga ’98, who directs the dance division at a Texas public arts magnet school.

This spring, Hartt’s Dance Division is preparing a performance of a new ballet and modern works by resident faculty members Katie Stevinson-Nollet, Alla Nikitina, Hilda Morales, Peggy Lyman, and guest artist Pascal Benichou on Friday and Saturday, April 19 and 20, at 8 p.m. and Sunday, April 21, at 3 p.m. in Millard Auditorium.

Dance Connecticut faculty are inspiring role models for Hartt’s students. Lyman and Stevinson-Nollet maintain active performance careers, and all studio faculty are highly sought-after master teachers in the profession.

Lyman performed this past fall in New York City for the 75th anniversary of the Martha Graham Center. She was a principal dancer with this company and danced leading roles in many of the most famous Graham ballets. She had three classic solos: Frontier, Lamentation, and Ruth St. Denis’s The Incense, recreated for her by Graham. This past summer, she performed at Jacob’s Pillow in James Cunningham and Tina Croll’s innovative evening of improvisation, “From the Horse’s Mouth.”

Dance Division students are constantly challenged by a demanding but invigorating schedule of classes. Their hours are long, their work hard. But in the end, they are doing what they love and receiving a dance education of the highest quality, with all of the benefits of being part of the University of Hartford.