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Darryl Thomas Interview 2017

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Darryl Thomas

Professor of Theater and Dance

Western Oregon University

May 1, 2017



WOU Interview Transcription: Darryl Thomas

Conducted By: Bethany Krump, Carter Craig, Kasey Sauvageau, Katilyn Kirkman

Date interviewed: May 1st 2017

Interviewers:

BK: Bethany Krump

CC: Carter Craig

KS: Kasey Sauvageau

KK: Katilyn Kirkman

Interviewee:

DT: Darryl Thomas

Transcribed by: Bethany Krump, Carter Craig, Kasey Sauvageau, Katilyn Kirkman, 2017

Audit/Edit by: Bethany Krump, 2017

Katilyn Kirkman: We are doing an interview with Professor Darryl Thomas, today is May 1st, 2017. We are in Maple Hall at Western Oregon University. The interviewers are Katilyn Kirkman.

Kasey Sauvageau: Kasey Sauvageau

Bethany Krump: Bethany Krump

Carter Craig: And Carter Craig

KK: Thank you Professor Thomas for meeting with us.

Darryl Thomas: Sure, absolutely.

KK: So, I guess we will just get straight to the questions...

DT: Sure.

KK: So, question one would be when did you start working here at Western [Western Oregon University]?

DT: [Coughs] Excuse me. I started working here in the fall of 19, see 1997, yes. So I have been here just about 20 years, actually this is my 20th year now, yeah.

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KK: Congratulations.

DT: Thank you, thank you. It's amazing how time flies, it's gone quite a quick one.

KK: So, what are the circumstances that lead you to come and work here at Western [Western Oregon University]? Like how did you get here?

DT: So, I left, I was dancing with a group called the Pilobolus in 1996. It toured- they were based out of New York- and they tour all around the world. We performed in China, we performed in maybe 40 countries, we were on the road about 40 week a year. And so I had a son that year, in 1996- he was born then- and so I decided it was time to probably be home a little bit more and also I wanted to start my, do more of my own work, my own creative work and in an academic setting. And so I began to look for academic positions. So, I got a guest artist position at the University of, let see, Florida in Gainesville [Florida]. So, I did that for a year and during that time this position came up and I applied for this position and then I came out here, interviewed for the position, and was awarded, you know I was asked to come here and be on the faculty and took the position. Yeah.

KK: And then, have you ever had any different positions here [Western Oregon University] and if so what were they?

DT: No, I've only been just a Professor of Dance. So, you know you move up in the rank as you, you know you start off as- well I came in as Associate Professor. So, I went from associate and then I moved up in rank. You receive tenure- which is sort of a life time appointment- and then eventually- for professor- I moved up in rank [to a ten year professor].

[Tap dancing in the background]

CC: What is the basis for your job at Western?

DT: When you say basis, what do you mean by basis?

CC: I guess what is like the purpose or intent or mission?

DT: Oh! Ok. So, my job here is to teach students dance, that's primarily what I do. I teach different aspects of dance. I teach different styles of dance, such as West African, Hip-Hop,

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Modern. I also teach occasionally a little Ballet but not lately. I also teach theory courses in dance. So, those are technique- what we call technique courses, but I teach theory courses such as Dance History or Dance and Technology, Dance Productions, different aspects of dance that are not just technique. So those two things. In addition to that, I also choreograph. So, I choreograph for students. We have the Spring Dance Concert coming up in about a week or so. So, I choreograph for that. Also, I advise students who also want to choreograph for the concert I advise them as well. Then I do research as well. So, I go out and do what we call Rainbow Dance Theater. We go out and perform probably for about 1500 students a year in Oregon and the Northwest, the Pacific Northwest. In addition, we go up in Canada and perform. We've been to China, we've been to Japan, to Singapore. So many countries in the east. We perform there as well. So I do all of that and so all of that comprises what I do here at Western. But my primary role is really teaching because this is a teaching institution versus what's called an R1 institution which is a research institution where they expect you to do research, but I do both.

CC: Would you give us an example of the kinds of work you do?

DT: Sure. So, what I'll do is teach like for example the class you just saw was an African dance class. So, I'll teach that class. In addition to that I have a Hip-Hop class that's coming up, so I'll teach the students to do hip-hop. You can hear Tap in the background there, but I don't teach Tap. I also teach West African drumming that's all the drums that are here in my office. So, those are some of the examples of some of the work I would do. Also we have meetings as well, which is not the fun part of the job but I don't have a lot of those so that's good.

CC: What is a typical work day like for you?

DT: So today for example I came in at- my first class was at one o'clock [PM]. So I have a one o'clock, three o'clock, and four o'clock class. Then officially I'm done, but since we have the Spring Dance Concert coming up we come back for rehearsal in the evening ____ [Inaudible] the rehearsal. I also do- I work this weekend, I work that Saturday and on Sunday because we have Spring Dance Concert- I wanted to rehearse. And these are the things that I set for myself, but in terms of what's required of me, I'm required to be here for those three classes and then other things are sort of additional things that I do because I want to do them. Because I enjoy doing them.

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CC: Thank you.

KS: What is the most interesting while working at Western?

DT: I think one of the more interesting experiences, probably is- I did a piece recently called *Selfie*, I received a grant for \$125,000 to do this one dance, so in this one dance we used cellphones, we had the audience take pictures of themselves, text the pictures to a specific number here at Western, and then those pictures allowed us to then take the photos and put them on the stage, and so the dancers dance around and manipulate those images and so we do those kinds of things. So that's one of the more interesting things I have done in terms of research and technology. We also did a dance using light wire- I don't know if you can see the little wire in the costumes in the bag right there, but don't see the dancers you only see the outline of the dancers because it is completely done in the dark. So those are interesting things I can do at Western and that's one of the reasons why I took the job here because it's really open to me doing that kind of thing and developing that kind of work in an interesting way. We also did a show, America's Got Talent Show at one point- the judges hated us which was okay but that was an interesting thing to just experience that side of it. Art and entertainment are really two different kinds of things, with entertainment such as America's Got Talent those kinds of things they look for something that's really quick, they want to see something in 60 seconds, that wow's us. With art you have much more time to explore an idea and expand on it and develop an idea and sort of, it's like a meal if you want to think of it in that way; where entertainment is more like a fast food or a snack, you eat it really quickly and it happens there. So I knew we weren't really compatible in that way but it was an interesting experience just to try that to see what they would say. We did a commercial not long ago- like about probably about ten years ago now- for a car commercial, where we created these shadows and different shapes using shadows to create the cars eventually the idea was taken on the Opera Winfrey show, Conan O'Brian they did a did a 2000- I think it was 2008 Super Bowl- so all of that came out of this car commercial that we did for the client in Santa Fe. So that was also something interesting I did as well.

KS: That's great

BK: What are your plans and goals at Western now and for the future?

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DT: So first- so now I think it's, it's to continue to develop regular dance theater, which is the dance company that I co-directed by my partner Dolly Burton so we want to continue to develop that, we have lots of performances that are out here, we want to develop a larger market so we do predominately the Pacific Northwest right now, but we want to get more into the Mid-West and eventually the Eastern USA, to be able to tour that, tour there as well. So that's one of the goals that I have, the other goal here is to develop a program so we have more dance majors here, we have approximately 35-40ish so we want to get up to probably to about to double that easily, so 90 and I think we can do using our emphasis on dance and technology as a way to draw students here for the arts, and also computer related kinds of creative coding to bring them together, so that's another goal that I have here as well.

BK: Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience working here at Western?

DT: Just that I really enjoyed the faculty, and the people that work with; because, for me I've learned, I learn so much from being here at the university, for example, I didn't know anything about soldering, which is what I had to learn in order to make those light wire suits, I knew nothing about coding, I do a lot of things where the computer manipulates information, nothing about that but I have lots of colleagues and people that I can draw from, and I can ask them, hey how do you do this? How do I do that? Or where do I go to learn to do this and learn to do that, so that makes it an exciting job, it's always, I'm always learning something new am around people who are who can tell me about things that I know nothing about- working with students teaching technique classes keeps me engaged physically, so it's not like I have to go to the gym in order to stay physical, but I get paid to stay to be physical, so I just have to do my job, and it's like a workout every day, and to get paid to do that then on top of that, I enjoy what I do.

So I get paid to enjoy what I do, so it's not like I wake up in the morning and in my job, you know, I only got so many years before I retire, and then I can really go out and do what I really enjoy doing, I do that already, so I think that retiring- I mean I don't think of retirement in the way many people think of it as; Phew, I am done with this job and I can finally get away from it. I think, oh man, if I have to retire that would be an awful thing, I mean what would I do? Because I enjoy doing this so much. So that's one of the things I would say, that I hope people

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find here when they are here at Western is that they really find something that they really enjoy doing because you're going to do it for a long time, and you can do it for a long time. And so if you really enjoy doing it, it will just go by like that. So that's why 20 years has gone by so quickly for me, because I have been so engaged in what I call almost play, I'm getting paid to play. So that's why the time has gone by quickly. So that's what I'd to say.

KK: well, I think that concludes our interview, so thank you very much for...

KS: Thank you...

KK: This interview.

DT: Yup, absolutely. Alright, nice meeting you all.

BK: Nice meeting you.

Interview concluded