



"I think if Martha Graham came back to Bennington, she would see just how distinctive we've kept the program. Our mission is still intact. We're committed to producing new work and developing the individual."



# pas de deux

This past summer, only two American colleges were invited to France's prestigious dance festival Centre Nationale de Danse Contemporaine (CNDC). One was Julliard. **The other was Bennington.**

**T**he days were intense: classes in the morning, focused workshops in the afternoon, discussions in the evenings, and performances throughout CNDC's five-day program known as SCHOOLS. Offered only once before, in 2009, SCHOOLS repeated its successful dance festival this year by inviting 16 colleges and universities from 10 countries and involving a total of 150 students in an international exchange on current ideas, styles, and aesthetics in dance.

"We got a phone call from the CNDC director in the spring," says **Susan Sgorbati '72 MFA '86**, co-leader of the trip with fellow dance faculty members **Terry Creach** and **Dana Reitz MFA '94**, "who basically said they were seeking the highest quality programs in the dance world, especially those programs that were experimental, like Bennington's."

Thrilled by the honor, the faculty then selected four dancers, a mix of current undergraduates and alumni. "We've all worked with each other to varying degrees for the last three or four years," says **Niko Tsocanos '11**, one of those selected. "Of course, this was a whole new experience, with new challenges, but it was just great fun." Tsocanos was joined by **Marie Blocker '10**, **Emily Climer '12**, and **Lydia Chrisman '12**.

"We were the only liberal arts-focused program at the festival," says Creach. "The other programs were primarily 'con-

servatory style,' where students expect to move directly into an artistic career. I think we were a little unsure how our students would compare to other dancers at the festival—since they do not take hours of technique classes each day—but for sure, our students were on par with their European peers. [Especially] in the more exploratory realm, they seemed to be quite at home."

Sgorbati agrees. "The conservatory approach can leave room for a suspicion that if you don't spend your time dancing then you won't be proficient. Bennington's approach is that the more educated you are and the more multifaceted, the better dancer you'll be. Our dancers were beautiful, physically as strong as any of the dancers there and absolutely as creative."

Chrisman, who co-led a workshop on duet forms with Blocker, discerned that difference in approaches while at SCHOOLS. "Bennington's dance program is unique because its focus is on the creation of new work from day one. And, like the Plan Process, it's student driven, which is mostly unheard of in Europe. Another difference is the interdisciplinary nature at Bennington: We don't only take dance-related classes, we have a broad curriculum to choose from and many opportunities and support to pursue other interests and questions that may relate to dance."

No matter the differences, the SCHOOLS experience became an affirmation of why the students pursued dance in the first place. Tsocanos, who describes gravitating to dance after playing sports,

says the workshops in France made him reexamine his practice. “[They] posed many new questions about the work, questions that I hope to explore for quite a while.”

Chrisman echoes that. “The exposure to different work made me look at the work I make more critically. I questioned my intention and why I make certain choices. What do I want to communicate to my audience? What do I want them to receive and leave with? What is my responsibility as a performer and choreographer? It also made me appreciate my education and my practice of creating work. My practice has become more grounded and reflective.”

SCHOOLS does not operate as a competitive forum, and so the gathering ended up being more connective than anything. In fact, for Sgorbati and Creach, one of the most significant outcomes of attending was how the festival gave them and their students, past and present, an unprecedented engagement with the global dance community. In thinking about how to sustain that, Sgorbati has proposed building a website that would further what began in France. “We’re thinking about an online network for all young dancers in the world where we could share curriculum development, match students with opportunities that will enhance their work, offer up research and contacts, and essentially tighten this small culture of dance.”

For Creach, the workshop’s dividends were an interesting combination of the personal and professional. “My teaching

reography is just not that thought provoking. I think if Martha Graham came back to Bennington, she would see just how distinctive we’ve kept the program. Our mission is still intact. We’re committed to producing new work and developing the individual. After 32 years, even the dance workshop is still meeting every Thursday.” ●

is from a Western tradition and in the lineage of the early modern dance pioneers, but I can now say that I have a better sense of where my approach resides in the wider world of current practices. I think I can now bring a more informed perspective to students about current approaches in Europe, how the American scene is similar and different, and how all these approaches and explorations are available to them.”

Bennington’s history in dance—which boasts early involvement by such luminaries as Martha Graham and Martha Hill—has long distinguished it, but Sgorbati says that the College’s pedigree in the field is less about names and more about one ongoing value: creating new work. Particularly in an era that has begun to see a layman’s interest in dance—as represented by such television shows as *Dancing with the Stars* and *So You Think You Can Dance?*—Bennington’s abiding emphasis on originality, rather than memorization or stunts, remains noteworthy.

“In the world of pop culture,” says Sgorbati, “dance is about celebrity, or doing 10 or 15 turns and then landing in a split, but the cho-



Marie Blocker '10, Emily Climer '12, Lydia Chrisman '12, and Nick Tsocanos '11 rehearsing in the Bennington College dance facilities.

my  
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spot

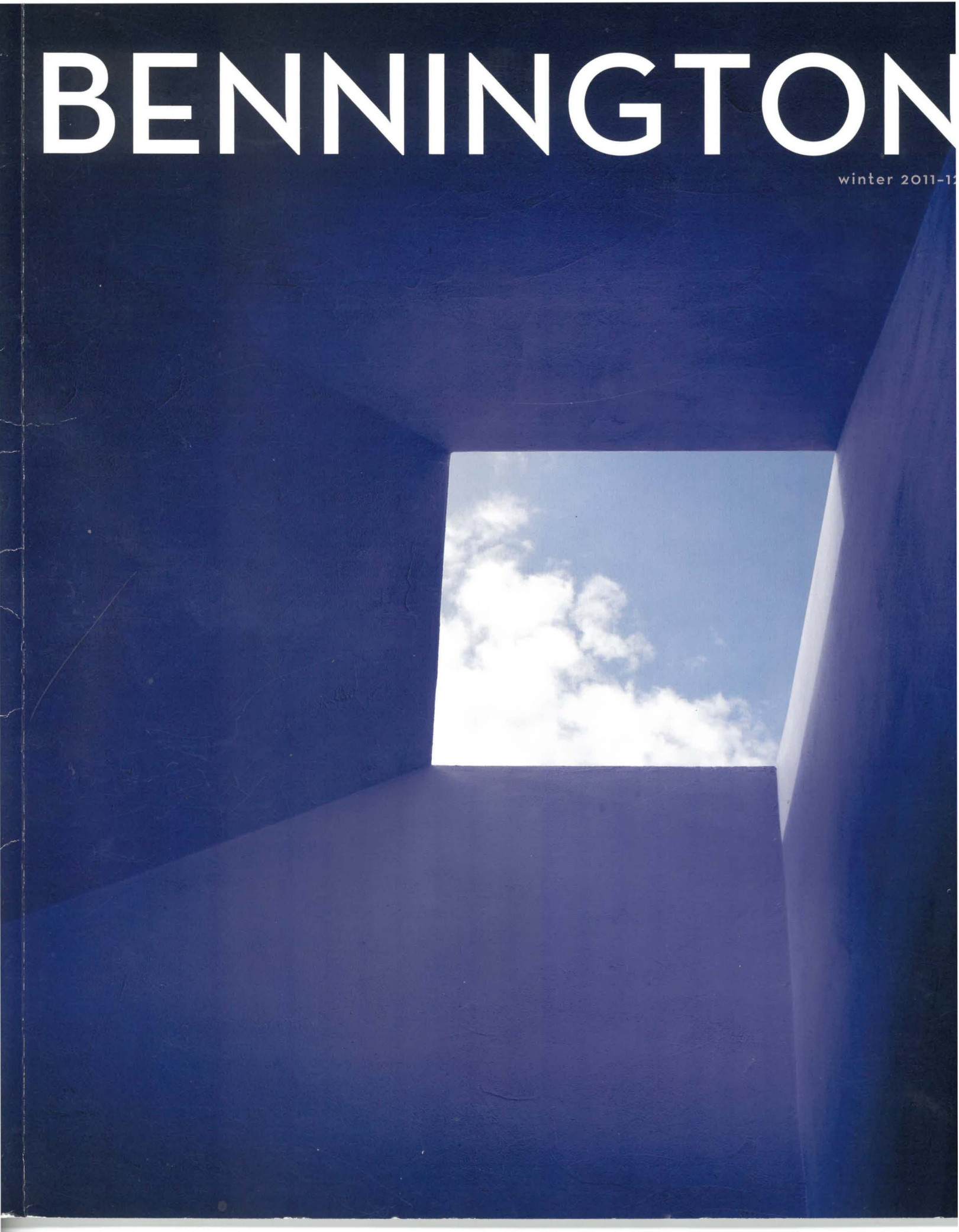
“My favorite place on campus is in my office looking out at the pond. I get to see great blue herons, and one time a bald eagle was perched in a tree right in front of my office.” —faculty member Susan Sgorbati '72 MFA '86

“The Secret Garden is a somewhat private place inside the public campus. I love the brick walls that enclose the space with the two entrances and exits. It invites movement and stillness at the same time. A lot of memories come with the Secret Garden: music concerts, dance pieces, sculptures, and long conversations while looking at the stars.” —Lydia Chrisman '12



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