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Friends inspired her comeback

Linking art, space, community

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The American Dance Festival wrapped up its 77th season last month. While veteran Shen Wei capped the festival's performances by invited artists, the final week also shifted the spotlight to ADF's students, who had been dancing and learning in residence for the past six weeks.

Continuing our summer series of profiles on ADF participants, this week we speak with Durham resident and ADF dance student Alexis Mastromichalis. With more than 400 students attending from 38 states and 27 countries, ADF students have a wide range of backgrounds. Mastromichalis is a former dance teacher and now operates the Chapel Hill performance space Nightlight.

Q: What is your dance background and how did you get involved initially with ADF?

A: I'm a native of the Triangle and have been exposed to ADF my whole life. I attended Ligon and Enloe magnet schools that commissioned ADF teachers and artists. After high school, I attended the George Washington University in D.C. as a Presidential Arts Scholar. I obtained a BA in Dance and a BA in International Affairs in 2003. I also attended ADF back in 2000 for academic credit.

After college, I was a full-time dance teacher in Chapel Hill and Durham and traveled to Austria and South America on fellowships to teach and perform. In 2007, I was diagnosed with type one diabetes

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ADF student Alexis Mastromichalis.

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and my dancing career took a backseat to my health. After two years, I am much more healthier and was inspired by a friend – local musician Wendy Spitzer did a private ADF fundraiser for me behind my back! – and I felt that I couldn't turn down the opportunity to attend.

Q: You're one of ADF's many scholarship students – how

does that work?

A: Each year, there are auditions across the world where thousands of artists audition to attend ADF on scholarship. I was fortunate enough to be awarded a partial scholarship. In return, we are supposed to volunteer six hours a week for the festival. This includes mopping the studios after use, registering in and out video equipment and/or ushering for shows.

Q: What is it about dance, as opposed to other forms of ex-

pression, that appeals to you as an artist?

A: Dance is an art form that embodies all of those "other" forms of expression – music, rhythm, art, composition, visual forms. Dance as an art form and dance as an expression are two different entities.

My interest in dance as a technique lies in release technique. This is the idea of moving from distal points in the body, finding points of initiation and then release of the surrounding muscles.

For example, the drop of my fingers and hands propels the weight downward, thus dropping my shoulder, expanding my scapula in my back and then the thrust of the weight causes my body to turn and open.

This type of technique is essential to learn especially to prevent injuries. I work closely and constantly on physical alignment, initiations and clarity.

Conceptually and socially, my interest is in community and public spaces. For the past four years, I have been collecting and cataloging vid-

eo footage of public and abandoned spaces. I used to have an art group called "Investigating Public Spaces" where three dancers, one musician and a videographer would document these social spaces – warehouses, parks, parking decks – and dance and play music in them.

Connecting the dots between what a public space is, what is an abandoned space, what is a re-claimed space are all essential in this ongoing approach to be sustainable.

Q: How did you come to be involved with the local music

scene and the Nightlight space?

A: I have been back in the area since 2003. I was briefly living in New York City and came home to visit my friend in Carrboro, and we went to the Nightlight right when it opened. There were three super 16-mm projectors on the wall, ceiling and floor. The place was packed with artist-looking folks and I immediately fell in love. That was when I made a life-long commitment to living and supporting the arts in the South.

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