

A Creative Endeavor by the UCI Etude Ensemble

NAACP Image Award for such works as Raisin, Sophisticated Ladies, Doctor Jazz, and A Time for Singing. His film choreography includes Bedknobs and Broom-sticks, The Great White Hope, and The Jazz Singer.

McKayle has received many honors for lifetime achievement including the American Dance Guild Award, a Living Legend Award, the Dance/USA Honors, the Samuel H. Scripps/American Dance Festival Award, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, and the Irvine Fellowship in Dance. In 1998, McKayle was the first creative artist to receive the UC Irvine Distinguished Faculty Leadership Award for Research. Currently, McKayle directs the graduate choreographic thesis

projects, and is the Artistic Director of the UCI Dance Department.

In terms of the troupe itself, the UC Irvine Etude Ensemble is an elite group of undergraduates who are chosen annually by audition. Under McKayle's guidance, the dancers are not only dynamic performers, but also historians. According to Amber Bosin, a senior member of the Etude Ensemble, each work must be "deeply understood [and] internalized in order to fully

perform the piece." In fact, McKayle says that the members of the Ensemble must "[bring] a sensitive and razor sharp mind filled with inquiry to the complexities of human communication and the transmission of ideas and artistic concepts." As a result, the dancers are challenged to personalize each movement by forming an emotional and physical connection to the story itself, as well as to the meaning behind the movement. To the Ensemble's members, it is this dance troupe that shapes their connection and commitment to dance as an art and as a mode of expression.

Since its creation in 1995, the troupe has participated in numerous projects and concerts including those for a CD-ROM Jazz Series, the UCI Undergraduate Research Symposium, the International Black Dance Conference, and

the UCI Dance Visions Concert. Members of the Ensemble have successfully pursued professional careers in such dance programs as the Martha Graham Performance Ensemble, Limón West, and Momix. According to Bosin, it is McKayle's support that "guides [the Etude Ensemble] into life after graduation and inspires [the dancers] to promote creativity in whatever careers [they] choose"; according to McKayle, the members are "true colleague[s]" who allow the "benefits of mentorship [to be] manifold and reciprocal.

¹Tolstoy, Leo. *What is Art?* London, 1899.

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Speech transmitting the thoughts and experiences of men serves as a means of union among them, and art serves a similar purpose. The peculiarity of this latter means of intercourse, distinguishing it from intercourse by means of words, consists in this, that whereas by words a man transmits his thoughts to another, by art he transmits his feelings.¹

For most, the word “research” often does not stimulate thoughts of the fine arts. However, it is the fine arts, not the sciences, that convey more than facts, more than just number-crunching, more than just experiments. As Tolstoy expresses, art, and particularly, dance, transmit the feelings through the artistic expression of knowledge.

Through dance works such as “Rainbow Etude,” Prof. Donald McKayle has encouraged his dancers to not only examine the knowledge and history surrounding the fine arts, but to also use the tools of dance to express the actions and emotions of the time frame being studied. “Rainbow Etude,” based on themes from the 1959 performance, “Rainbow ‘Round my Shoulder,” was a

dance choreographed for the UCI Etude Ensemble in 1995. Under McKayle, the piece was choreographed to depict overworked African American convicts working long, hard hours on the chain gang. Historically, the piece is accurate. However, the dance depicts more than just the facts, more than just what a person can look up in history books. Through the dancers, the audience gets a sense of the exhaustion of the overworked men. This dance, choreographed for the American Dance Legacy Institute, is part of an interactive volume, which is housed at both the National Museum of Dance (Saratoga Springs, NY) and the Smithsonian Institute (Washington DC).

The artistic expression and success of the elite Etude Ensemble continues into their other works, such as “Games,” which was originally choreographed by McKayle in 1951. Like “Rainbow Etude,” this piece demonstrates the facts: it depicts children growing up in the city. But also like the former piece, “Games” successfully conveys the feelings and emotions that accompany the ever-changing period of growing up. In a three-part series, the demonstration depicts the joys of childhood interactions, the sadness that accompanies deprivation and hunger, along with the fear and brutality that destroys innocence. By relying only on the a cappella performances of two singers, the audience gains insight of both the children’s emotions and the oral traditions characteristic of life in urban cities. Under McKayle’s

supervision, “Games” has received amazing recognition from the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, the Cleveland San Jose Ballet, and the Feld Ballet, among others. This modern dance work was also part of the American Dance Festival’s production of “The Black Tradition in American Modern Dance.”

Behind the Etude Ensemble is its founder and director, Donald McKayle, a tenured professor of dance at UCI. Since 1948, McKayle has choreographed over 50 works, including those of the Etude Ensemble, as well as various Broadway productions. He has received five Tony nominations, an Outer Critics Circle Award, and the



UCI Etude Ensemble

*Row 1: Richard Elszy and Meadow Leyes
Row 2: Maya Culbertson, Cherise Bryant,
Eddie Mikrut, and Kim Haddock
Row 3: Michelle Camaya, Leah Langelier,
and Amber Bosin
Row 4: Sheila Russel and Gabriel Ereno*

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