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Chita Rivera: an examination of her influence on jazz and contemporary dance through past, present, and future perspectives

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Abstract

This written and performative thesis examines the prestigious life of Chita Rivera and her significant contributions to jazz and contemporary dance. After reviewing her historical career, a unification of various dance styles, I intend to demonstrate how Rivera has played a pivotal role in shaping the evolution of dance in entertainment. By further delving into Rivera's contributions to popular culture and her influence on the development and direction of jazz and contemporary dance, this project aims to shed light on the significance of her legacy and the importance of her career to the study of jazz dance.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Chita Rivera: An Examination of Her Influence on Jazz and
Contemporary Dance Through Past, Present, and Future Perspectives

By

Kijaunta Lucas

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CHITA RIVERA: AN EXAMINATION OF HER INFLUENCE ON JAZZ AND
CONTEMPORARY DANCE THROUGH PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

A THESIS

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Montclair, NJ

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Introduction

My admiration and connection to the incomparable Chita Rivera and her lifelong commitment to the art of dance are deeply rooted in her fearless dancer mindset. Chita Rivera is among our most outstanding jazz and contemporary dance artists. Her career and contributions to the world of dance are numerous. The fiery, passionate Hispanic culture from which she was born, her classic jazz dance training, her solid technical background starting with the art form of ballet, and her strength in acting and singing made her a rare talent who has left an indelible mark on the stage and film as well as society. Her renowned performances were spawned in her iconic roles such as Anita in Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*, as well as numerous other roles in *Guys and Dolls*, *Bye Bye Birdie*, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, *Can-Can*, *Mr. Wonderful*, and *Sweet Charity* to name a few. She remains a formidable dance figure whose legacy continues to inspire great admiration. The choreographic part of my thesis "Ya Gotta Be Ready" and the research behind it aim to promote Rivera's importance as a jazz dance great and to demonstrate how her influence and legacy have been overlooked and under-referenced in the curriculum of teaching jazz dance and jazz dance history.

Research

PAST- Rivera's Life and Work

Understanding Chita Rivera and her influence on the world of jazz and contemporary dance is rooted in her diverse cultural background, inspirational female figures, and her unwavering faith in her religion and within herself. Born Dolores Conchita Figueroa del Rivero to Puerto Rican father Pedro Julio del Rivero and mother Katherine Rosalia Anderson of Scottish, Irish, and African American descent, Rivera began her life on Flagler Street in

Washington, D.C. (Rivera ix). The untimely passing of her father in 1940 significantly influenced her powerful future performances. Bishnu Thapa, in the article *Chita Rivera Parents Pedro And Katherine, Ethnicity*, revealed that “the musical influence of her father likely resonated deeply with Chita, planting the seeds for her future artistic endeavors.” Rivera's understanding of music started from listening to the songs played on her father’s clarinet and saxophone as he practiced playing for the United States Navy Band. Her mother, Katherine Anderson del Rivero, although left to raise five children alongside her maternal grandmother, Sallie Anderson, played a role in shaping the woman we know as Chita Rivera particularly in her ability to sustain and survive in an industry that can often be cruel and uninviting. “During her childhood, she was...led by two very strong, generous and resilient women who never looked back in self-pity or regret” (Rivera ix). Although struggling to make ends meet, Rivera's mother recognized her daughter's dance abilities at seven years old and “enrolled her in the Jones-Haywood School of Ballet” (“SAB Trailblazer - Chita Rivera - School of American Ballet”). In her memoir, Rivera explains, “Without Miss Jones as an early mentor, I don’t think there would be a Chita Rivera...like the greatest teachers, [she] also taught me character and discipline” (Rivera xii).

In 1949, Miss Doris Jones accompanied Rivera, at age 16, to her first audition at the School of American Ballet (SAB), and 61 years later, she was recognized by SAB with their Lifetime Achievement Award. In a 2021 School of American Ballet Article, “SAB Trailblazer - Chita Rivera - School of American Ballet ” Rivera explains her admiration for her SAB teachers who taught her. “The years I was at SAB were the foundation for everything I did, not just dance. I truly believe because of the great training, care, and love I received there, I am *still* dancing. The excellence of Mr. Oboukhoff, Muriel Stuart, Mme. Doubrovska, and Miss Reiman gave me

my career...If my teachers were here now, I would thank them for their profound influence” (SAB Trailblazer - Chita Rivera - School of American Ballet).

It was clear at a very young age that dance was her nucleus. Throughout her extraordinary career, Rivera firmly focused on her identity as a dancer, prioritizing her artistry above all else. She explained her motivation, “The natural inclination of dancers is to keep to themselves. It’s the work that matters. We are always looking ahead to the next challenge, the next assignment and the next discovery” (Rivera xx). The profound journey of self-exploration she embarked on reflected her vast creativity, her groundedness in her culture, and unwavering support and mentorship she received by the talented individuals who shaped every chapter of her professional life.

The names Jerome Robbins, Bob Fosse, Jack Cole, and Gwen Verdon are consistently referenced in teaching jazz dance history. Chita Rivera performed and worked with each of these jazz dance pioneers. Her talents brought acclaim within the industry, and she was the “muse” for numerous works that constituted significant firsts and historical moments in jazz dance. For example, the iconic choreography of Jerome Robbins’ “America” in *West Side Story*, which Rivera was the first to perform, is often used as a lab-focused studio exercise in educational facilities. This exercise's rhythms and intricate footwork intertwine Latin culture and jazz movement, making it a notably recognizable piece in the history of jazz dance repertoire. In addition, Rivera brought the character of *Anita* to life in her very own and dynamic way.

Scott Hocker, writer and editor of *The Week US digital*, spotlights the lasting influence she has wielded over generations of artists, past and present in saying,

... *West Side Story* is now canon, not only in the world of Broadway or theater generally.

It has also achieved legendary film status, thanks to the 1961 film adaptation and Steven

Spielberg's 2021 reconsideration. Of all the performers who have played roles in "West Side Story," Rivera might have the most long-standing influence. She birthed the role of Anita in the original Broadway production. People, including Rita Moreno and Ariana DeBose, have gone on to win Oscars in the role. (Hocker)

Rivera fearlessly and unapologetically transformed herself into a character that had never before been allowed to be seen or explored. The power of Rivera's voice, acting, and impeccable dance technique captivated audiences and set a very high standard for anyone to follow. To many Rivera fans, it will never seem fair that Hollywood thought she "appeared too old" to play a role in the film, but that never stopped Rivera from knowing she was the original Anita. To all who loved her, the only Anita.

The work of Bob Fosse is a staple in the world of jazz movement and history, and Rivera worked closely with Fosse on numerous projects. Her beautifully blended elements of traditional jazz vernacular, dance technique, and personal style made Rivera an artist highly sought after. Originating the role of *Velma* in Bob Fosse's Broadway Musical, *Chicago*, Rivera once again contributed to one of the most recognizable pieces of choreography and music associated with the jazz dance classroom. Rivera worked on numerous projects alongside both Bob Fosse and Gwen Verdon for years. With Verdon her connection ran deep.

There were crackerjack pairings on Broadway. Then there was Gwen Verdon and Chita Rivera in *Chicago*. Long before Renee Zellweger and Catherine Zeta-Jones inhabited the roles in the movie adaptation of the musical, Verdon and Rivera originated the roles, respectively, of Roxie Hart and Velma Kelly during the debut run of "Chicago" in 1975. Look at how the two slither and strut in glorious tandem during the show's final number, "Nowadays." (Hocker)

Rivera's collaboration with Bob Fosse and Gwen Verdon proved artistically fruitful. Their creative partnership produced some of the most iconic pieces of choreography and music in the jazz dance genre, including *Chicago*, *Cabaret*, *Sweet Charity*, and *All That Jazz*. The influence of her work with Fosse and Verdon continues to inspire generations of dancers to push boundaries and redefine the art form.

Rivera also performed alongside Jazz dance legend Jack Cole. Their portrayal of *Beal Street Blues* answered the long-winded question of 1957 Sid Caesar, "What is Jazzzzzz?" (ChitaRiveraVideos). Chita Rivera spoke candidly about working with the icon Cole at the start of her career, "Jack was extraordinary," Rivera says. "The style he created was like nothing else you'd seen. He could be exciting and scary, and maybe you didn't always want to hang around with him - but I'm delighted we got to dance together at the beginning of my career" (Dowd).

With the strong presence Rivera upheld during her numerous years on the stage and the plethora of pivotal artists she performed with, it is not difficult to argue that Chita Rivera deserves to hold more value within the pages of dance history. Her passing on January 30, 2024, marked a moment that concluded her astronomical connections to the most notable jazz dancers.

Rivera's career instilled a newfound strength for female dancers to embody, specifically within her roles as *Anita* in *West Side Story*, *Rosie* in *Bye Bye Birdie*, *Velma* in *Chicago*, *Aurora* in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and her Tony award winning role as *Anna* in the 1984 Kander and Ebb Broadway Musical *The Rink*. In the *Washington Post* Article, "Chita Rivera's Webbed Victory," writer David Richards describes Rivera's role as *Aurora*, "she kicks as high as any Rockette, shimmies like Josephine Baker in her prime and dances a tango that leaves scorch marks on the floorboards. As the alluring Spider Woman herself, she even picks her way seductively (and fearlessly) over a web of steel dozens of feet above the stage. And she's barely

panting afterward” (Richards). In an interview on *The Today Show*, Ariana Debose spoke candidly about her connection to Chita Rivera and gave thanks by saying, “ She was our North Star. She showed us what was possible. She was the blueprint” and although she admits that there will never be another Rivera, she was grateful to share the role of Anita especially because she grew up watching Rivera, saying, “I want to do that” (Ariana DeBose Talks ‘Argylle,’ Special Connection to Chita Rivera). The development of Chita Rivera’s many roles and the dances she performed introduced power, technique, and diversity. Not only was her talent rich in versatility, but she paved the way for more diversity and representation on Broadway.

PRESENT- Rivera’s Influence on the Current Dance Scene

Dance is a valuable tool in education due to its development of self-discipline. Rivera was the epitome of hard work and dedication throughout her life and career. Her historical attachments to the field of jazz dance are substantial and should be studied, and dare we say codified, within dance departments, dance studios, and dance education courses. Rivera herself speaks in an interview with the *New York Times* about how much she constantly thought about paying it forward, saying, “I really wanted a memoir that kids could read and apply themselves to...It’s not as much of a memoir as it is an opportunity for kids to realize that if they want this, they can have it, but they have to work hard” (Ramírez). On February 16, 2024, shortly after the passing of Rivera, professors from the University of Southern California spoke of their inspirations taken from the career of Chita Rivera in an article titled, “*USC Kaufman faculty reflect on the life of Chita Rivera.*” Saleemah E. Knight, a Professor of Dance Studies at USC Kaufman, describes,

“Her legacy has been integral to the culture of dance history and the celebration of diversity in dance,” said Knight, adding that in her course, Dance and Popular Culture, a GE-A (General Education-Arts) course for all university students at USC, investigates Rivera’s work as a Latin American woman making strides in a discriminatory industry. ‘As her legacy stands on the shoulders of previous Latin American icons in entertainment such as Carmen Miranda, Ms. Rivera was able to break through many stereotypes and preconceived notions for roles for women of color in entertainment relative to her time (De La Pena 2024).

For instance, the iconic choreography of Jerome Robbins’ “*America*” in *West Side Story*, which Rivera was the first to perform, is often used as a lab-focused studio exercise in dance education facilities. This exercise's rhythms and intricate footwork intertwine Latin culture and jazz movement, making it a notably recognizable piece in the history of jazz dance repertoire. That is how significant Rivera's blueprint is — and forever will be.

From professionals on the stages of Broadway to the youngest dancers at a dance competition, the presence of Chita Rivera remains undeniably strong and covers decades. The *Journal of Dance Education* published an article by Karen Schupp that explained, “Competitive studio dancers are familiar with entertainment-based dance styles in which what is ‘correct’ is clearly defined”. [D]ancers that are brought up within this vast and ever-changing curriculum of myriad styles often “...struggle with understanding what is considered ‘good technique’ (Schupp 26). Rivera’s efforts will contribute to a better understanding of the visual aid and attachment to jazz technique by including a deeper dive into acting and music appreciation to encompass alongside the practice of the movement. Rivera was known for her impeccable acting skills and keen understanding of music, which all fed into her mastery on stage as well as her technical

execution. She became the music itself because she understood every aspect of the music and allowed herself to become someone else on stage. In a recent interview, Broadway legends/dancers/performers Llyod Culbreath and Lenora Nemetz, who worked and performed with Chita Rivera, shared their thoughts on what they felt Rivera brought to the field. Culbreath stated around three minutes into the interview as he spoke about both Rivera and Gwen Verdon, “Within their dance and within their singing they really understood music and a lot of that has been lost” (Culbreath). He compared the original show *Chicago*, which was developed on Rivera and Verdon in 1975 by Bob Fosse, to the revival that most people of younger generations are more familiar with and expressed, “...not only the orchestration, but vocally and the actress understood ‘Jazz’” (Culbreath). Bringing more awareness to live jazz music in general would benefit the classroom of young jazz dancers. Developing more sound musical understanding would allow them to develop the “nuances” of the achievement of Rivera’s style. This would better showcase and differentiate their use of dynamics and character, which are essential to achieve in jazz technique.

Lenora Nemetz, known for her years on the Broadway stage, spoke candidly about her admiration for Rivera and how acting significantly influenced her style and success. Nemetz says, “I do believe that Chita was one of the first triple threats” (Culbreath). The Broadway dream of being able to sing, dance, and act is tested in every audition that young professionals attend. Through studying Rivera more intensely students would benefit from redistributing their efforts in a broader perspective and be inspired to accomplish these tasks necessary to develop their artistry and knowledge of the styles within jazz dance technique. Chita Rivera’s culturally rich and percussive style in jazz dance is a testament to her unparalleled skill and artistry. In the thesis paper by Columbia College of Chicago’s student Sarar R. Van Koningsveld, titled, “*Effort*

and Personality According to Rudolf Laban: An Artistic Inquiry of Mobile State,” the author discusses through quoting movement specialist Carol Lynne Moore ‘Quality of movement is influenced by inner experience and becomes visible through the use of effort life, or patterns of effort use over time’ ...It is effort that becomes the observable and distinct thread within movement expression” (Van Koningsveld 23). This statement encourages the idea that movement is a part of life experience, in which Chita Rivera had in abundance while being surrounded by music, culture and iconic jazz dance figures and in fact used them as a constant source of information and inspiration to guide her movement choices and qualities. “The use of effort analysis has become the primary tool for observing personality characteristics within individual movement patterns” (42). Years could be spent studying this aspect of Rivera’s movement qualities in order to understand how her actions were executed, performed and mastered.

In a 2023 *New York Times* article written by Juan A. Ramirez entitled “*A Dancer’s Life: Chita Rivera on Working Hard and Learning From the Best*” they express, “Rivera, with her sharp, sensuous agility, has been a regular stage presence, from her professional debut in 1952 as a featured dancer in the national tour of ‘Call Me Madam’ to her final Broadway bow in 2015 for, ‘The Visit,’ (Ramirez 3). Her ability to effortlessly transition between sharp isolations and storytelling through her movement hold paramount in her performances on stage.

The lack of recognition within dance curricula nods to the historical whitewashing and cultural appropriation that often appear in many ways at educational institutions and in the entertainment industry. In the book *Rooted Jazz Dance*, the co-editors, Guarino, Jones, and Oliver sum it all up with, “The most mainstream narrative of jazz dance history is obscured when the lens shifts to consider who the storytellers have been, what biases may have been present, and what parts of the narrative were left behind” (Guarino 48). In her memoir, Rivera

recalls the early start of Michael Stewart's creation of the character *Rosie* in *Bye Bye Birdie* which she made her own. While attempting not to allow her personal feelings about the role to interfere, she proceeded. "It's what minorities have to put up with all the time, this sense that we aren't as 'American' as whites, Asian Americans are forever being asked 'Where are you really from?' even though their family might be five or six generations in this country" (Rivera 128). As Rivera premiered in *Bye Bye Birdie* while dancing Gower Champion's historical jazz choreography and into the hearts of the Broadway audiences, she continued to bring authenticity while showcasing her ethnicity. Rivera explains, "My first instinct when I'm asked to focus on my ethnicity is to turn the tables, as I had with Gower on our first meeting. Or to spice it up with humor" (Rivera 128).

Due to her life and vast experiences, Rivera advocated for diversity, especially within casting. She describes, "I have played all different nationalities, and I deeply believe that the play's the thing," she says. "The person who does that role better than anyone else is the person who should get that role, regardless of their background or heritage. It's the person who does the part the way that the librettist wants it done" (Cristi 3).

The objective of my thesis, although not to strip those that are paid tribute to within dance history books, is to pay homage and make room for Chita Rivera, who also deserves to be placed alongside the great emblems of jazz dance. Rivera seems to catalyze this ongoing equation of connecting the numerous generations, genres, and teachings of jazz technique by serving as the neutral party of significant talent and respect while also being a woman of color.

FUTURE- Rivera's Influence on the Future of Jazz and Contemporary Dance

While continuing to guide and mentor future generations to obtain strength and face adversity within educational settings, Rivera's continuous efforts and contributions to the field have been recognized. In a recent collaborative article written by faculty members of USC Glorya Kaufman School of Dance, scholar Saleemah E. Knight shared her experience with Rivera while filming *Uprooted: The Journey of Jazz Dance*, "a documentary about the 'invisibilization' of Black dance practices within jazz dance history." (Uprooted: The Journey of Jazz Dance | Jazz Dance Workshops | Intensive.) Knight states, "Ms. Rivera was able to break through many stereotypes and preconceived notions for roles for women of color in entertainment relative to her time" (De La Pena). Her career pushed through the lack of acceptance and change. She demanded respect, and her talent gained appreciation, opening spaces for broader representation of women minorities forever. Rivera became the first Latina to be awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Barack Obama in 2009.

Like most individuals of ethnicities within the world of entertainment, stereotypes had been placed before them as a constant obstacle to either overcome or to deal with. Rivera in fact was no different. What made her unique was the way she handled them. Within my research survey Professor Richard Keitel of the Theater Department of Point Park University commented and recognized the efforts of Rivera and how she "opened the casting world in dance for other groups" (Lucas). On January 30, 2024, after her passing, a CBS New York news reporter Ali Bauman spoke with one of Rivera's fans by the name of Geia Asperas as she concluded "Paving the way for women of color, I think that is such a testament to who she was as a person and the giant she was, not only in the industry but also pop culture in general." Within my own personal journey, I am certain that the first time that I found confidence within myself as a biracial young

person, who never seemed to fit in, was when I played the role of *Rosie* as a senior in my highschool musical. It changed my life and my confidence forever.

As part of my research linking Rivera's effects on Latin culture, I interviewed Dario Petruzio from Buenos Aires, Argentina whose career spans decades from New York to Argentina. He was the 10-year owner, dance educator and actor at his former studio *Act N Art* in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Petruzio said,

Chita Rivera's life and career have had a significant impact on the Hispanic community. Her accomplishments in the world of musical theater serve as an inspiration for aspiring performers of Hispanic heritage. Chita Rivera's success has broken down barriers and demonstrated that talent knows no bounds. Her presence on Broadway and portrayal of iconic characters have helped showcase the depth and diversity of Hispanic talent in the performing arts. Chita Rivera's contributions have enriched the cultural landscape of American theater and paved the way for future generations of Hispanic artists to thrive in the industry. (Petruzio)

Rivera's influence on artists and women, specifically women of color and even more pinpointed women of Hispanic descent, pioneered opportunities for so many like her. Leading Latino entertainers today, such as Jennifer Lopez, Rita Moreno, Karen Olivo, and other Latinas, praise the importance of *West Side Story* as "an important outlet for Hispanic talent" (Berson 211). Although *West Side Story* in its original conception brought forth the realities of discrimination and challenged conventional thoughts on ethnicity, it paved the way for so many Broadway shows to come and most importantly we can now experience the influence from Rivera's career and advocacy on Broadway in shows such as, *In The Heights* and *Hamilton* where we are seeing more freedom in casting with the addition of a variety of skin tones,

ethnicities and the representation of cultural authenticity on stages worldwide. Rivera bolstered the careers of other Latino creatives who followed in her footsteps. For example, Rivera spoke proudly of such artists as Lin Manuel Miranda, music and concept creator of *In The Heights*, when she said, “I think Lin-Manuel deserves absolutely everything that he’s getting. He is an extremely gifted guy, a very fine human being, and he loves the theater” (Cristi). Even into her brilliant years of 90 plus, “A crew member at the current Broadway production of “Chicago” told CBS New York that Rivera would still sometimes pop in to watch a show and support the next generation of artists” (Bauman 1).

Chita Rivera’s contributions to the world, not just dance, have left a lasting impact on history, inspiring future generations of artists to thrive and uphold her legacy. However, her legacy extends far beyond the dance floor. “She has supported various charitable organizations, including but not limited to, the *Actor’s Fund of America*, *Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS*, *Planned Parenthood*, and *Sierra Club*” (Chita Rivera: Charity Work and Causes). Her dedication to philanthropy further underscores her commitment to making a positive difference in the world beyond her artistic accomplishments. In the *Broadway Cares* tribute, “Remembering Chita Rivera, Dear Friend and Broadway Cares Trustee” executive director Tom Viola mentions her efforts as he states, “Chita was one of Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS’ most loyal friends and staunchest of advocates...She stood up for her family of friends and colleagues across Broadway and beyond when to do so was to risk the wrath of those willing to ignore the heartbreak of those considered less-than for how they expressed their love and affections. From our earliest days she set the example for what it means to show up in solidarity and determination for each other in times of crisis” (Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS). She spent her life bringing awareness to HIV and AIDS, children’s and animal hospitals, disaster

response, and human rights advocacy. She used her talent to make a better world. “She establishes events where her fellow entertainers can come together with theatre enthusiasts to do performances for the benefit of others through music and storytelling” (Chita Rivera: Charity Work and Causes).

“The *Chita: A Legendary Celebration* raised \$413,660 for Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS. BC/EFA executive director Tom Viola said, "Chita has been a true and loyal friend to Broadway Cares since our beginnings more than 25 years ago. The energy and enthusiasm she shared on stage tonight were just another example of her impassioned dedication to making a difference in the lives of so many others who need our help the most" (Chita Rivera: Charity Work and Causes). Another profound way that the future of artists will remain inspired and connected to Chita Rivera’s dance career is through the Chita Rivera Awards. The Chita Rivera Awards are,

produced by Joe Lanteri, founder and executive director of the New York City Dance Alliance Foundation Inc.... With a mission to preserve dance history and recognize great talents past, present, and future, the stage at NYU Skirball Center for the Performing Arts... Joe Lanteri proves vital in bridging the gap between the younger generation of dancers by continuously linking the dance competition world to education, scholarships and preserving icons and their history. (Brunner)

She walks into generations not only past and present but forward into the future by the recognition of her name as an unforgettable moment in so many talented artists' lives as they receive the very prestigious Chita Rivera Award year after year. In an article from *Forbes Magazine*, Point Park University peer and Tony-nominated Alumni Tony Yazbeck says,

The Chita Rivera Awards, which recognizes great talents past, present, and future, are

vital to give dancers a voice which they don't often get like actors or singers do. "People don't always recognize dance as language. But what we do is language," says Yazbeck, who did some riveting hoofing playing Cary Grant in *Flying Over Sunset*. "We tell a story in another dimension. In another way. We want to affect the audience and have them feel great things. And this night is to celebrate us as storytellers For Gelan Lambert, associate choreographer at *Paradise Square*, the musical which won Best Choreography in a Broadway show, having the awards be named after this first lady of dance is particularly meaningful. 'It's special because of what she has contributed to entertainment as an actress and as a dancer. To give dance a pedestal just like an Oscar, Tony, an Emmy and call it after her continues her legacy in terms of excellence,' said Lambert. 'We get to honor people in the dance field. A lot of times we are overlooked. So, this gives us a platform saying this is ours. This is for dance.' Rivera herself had a message for all the dancers who are starting their careers. 'I hope that they can be themselves, work hard, and never give up,' she advised. And how does she feel when she's dancing? Without any hesitation, Rivera replied, 'like I'm flying.' (Brunner)

I recently interviewed Megan Sikora, the very first Chita Rivera award recipient and asked her, "How do you feel Chita Rivera's life and career have impacted the current world of dance?" She answered, "I saw a woman who was not just a sex symbol. She was a person, equal to everyone else in the room, and demanded respect through her dedication to her art. She also inspired and paved the way for young dancers of color in musical theater for decades."

I asked, "How did being selected as the first Chita Rivera Award recipient impact your life?"

Megan Sikora answered, "What was special about my winning the first Chita Rivera Award was

that I received it on the same stage that I had met her years before. It was after a performance of *Curtain's* at the Al Hirschfeld Theater and she said to me, 'They don't make 'em like us anymore,' she said *US*'" (Sikora). Megan Sikora's acknowledgment of the humble power of Rivera and the impact of her sincere connection to the artists of all generations speak deeply as she reflects upon this immense memory.

In exploring the life and impact of Chita Rivera, the central focus lies on the significance of jazz content and its implications for the genre's future. Despite my extensive experience in this field, I have observed a concerning lack of appreciation for the intricate nuance of music and the necessity of guiding students to immerse themselves in character-driven roles that fall under the jazz dance umbrella. This decline underscores the importance of delving deeper into the connection between music and acting to truly honor the field of jazz technique. Rivera dedicated her life to mastering the subtle nuances and characteristics of jazz, honing a collection of iconic roles and movements. Her past achievements have established a standard for the emerging talents of tomorrow. The promotion of her artistry is an integral part of her enduring legacy, ensuring that her name will serve as a beacon guiding the evolution of jazz dance and technique in the future.

Methodology

Background of the Choreography

My intentions with the performative component of this research project was to not only enlighten the audience on lesser-known aspects of Chita Rivera's life, but to highlight the diverse talents of my student performers, specifically those skills that they often do not have the

opportunity to showcase within their realm of dance. My extensive research into Rivera's life greatly influenced the choreographic work I developed. It has been a personal passion to harmonize the various artistic disciplines that strongly correlate to the success of well rounded, successful jazz dancers such as acting, singing, reading music, and dancing on or with film, all of which Rivera spent a lifetime achieving. Connecting decades of personal research from my first leading role portraying the character of Rosie as the lead in Canon McMillan High School's version of *Bye Bye Birdie*, to booking Civic Light Opera's rendition of *West Side Story* directed and choreographed by Barry Ivan as my first professional opportunity ignited the exigent tasks of defining the significance of my work and carving these outcomes into a thesis that would embody the essence of my years of experience. The connections with Rivera are situated around my identification as the "other" and educating others on more of these historical and talented beings that have defined the world of dance. The importance of representing the underrepresented has come to the forefront while grappling with how best to approach the significance of my role as a dance educator and choreographer. My connection to Chita Rivera and the overall mission of this thesis project is to identify the importance of her body of work and focus on how she continuously served as a driving force for women of color while making landmark contributions to the evolution of jazz technique.

The concept of readiness and preparation resonated with me as I watched a YouTube interview titled, "Artists in Conversation" in 2020 (Stars In The House, "Artists in Conversation: Chita Rivera - Students Celebrate the Legend"). Rivera attributed her success to listening to her teacher Ms. Doris, emphasizing the importance of being prepared. The phrase "Ya Gotta Be Ready" echoed throughout the interview, almost speaking directly to my soul. It was at that moment that I knew it would be the perfect title for my choreographic work. To begin this

project, two evenings of auditions were conducted on January 16th and 17th, 2024. During these auditions, my colleague Robert McKee and I utilized the audition space to present short phrases that aimed to identify specific qualities we were seeking from our pool of Point Park University dance students. We focused on casting aspiring young artists based on their musicality, character development ability, as well as a 16 bar vocal component of their most appreciated songs that Rivera may have performed during her career. The students ranged from freshmen to seniors, and included both dance majors and dance minors. At the beginning of the audition, I conveyed the complexity and depth of the project which included an explanation of my use of multimedia, props, live music as well as the historical moments in which the scenes would be portrayed in a less than traditional fashion. I wanted the performers to understand my interest in creating a more contemporary take on this traditional material. Rehearsal commenced on Tuesday, January 23rd, with a strong cast of twenty-one performers, two understudies, and an open canvas of creativity.

Production Elements and Collaborators

The process began by constructing a sound score and selecting images aligned with distinct ideas and visuals to showcase aspects of Rivera's career that not only influenced her life but the movement that gave her recognition within the realms of jazz dance technique. When meeting with the costume designer Aimee Coleman, it was abundantly clear that designing a “base” costume would be beneficial for all of the quick changes required throughout the piece. The multitude of sections held separate emotional and visual expectations. The simplicity of the black pants with a high neck white leotard served as the perfect clean lined, neutral look that was necessary for the artists to make quick changes from one scene to the next, from fishnets to pants or vice versa. Dancer Myah Segura’s costume represented Rivera’s Catholic faith with the white

purity of her long, crisp and clean dress. The most important 'look' necessary to achieve was the iconic purple dress that Rivera wore in the original *West Side Story* that remains a staple of her identity in the world of dance and on the stages of Broadway. The classic top hat and tails became a look that was gender fluid and sensual. Adhering to the base white leotard and adding a classic long tailed mock tuxedo jacket gave the perfect flair of classic Broadway while also allowing space for the artists to feel comfortable representing their chosen gender. It was also vital to my storytelling that the Chita Rivera character, played by senior BFA jazz concentration and Musical Theater minor Hailey Kasky, begin the work not as a focus but as a neutral figure, living her simple life to enhance the development of significance of her pathway to stardom, eventually landing herself in that iconic purple dress.

Working with lighting designer Sam Crowe was the final task at hand. During the studio designer runs, we described the desired emotions and the looks that would be achieved. Due to the added element of multimedia, the learning curve of how much lighting was necessary in that space to balance what was being viewed on the projected screen in comparison to what was being viewed by the audience and the dancers' hard work was more difficult than anticipated. Many times during the creation of this work the images in my own mind were very clear and if they were not achieved, we needed to redesign these images to arrive as closely as possible to my vision.

Master sound designer Dr. Ryan McMasters brought such a sense of peace and calm to the process. Although doing all initial leg work myself, his professional ear and guidance while obtaining levels for the multitude of sounds to remain cohesive was greatly appreciated. His expertise was particularly in demand within the final section of the work when the task at hand was to balance the artists live singing of "There's Gotta Be Something Better Than This" from

Sweet Charity, that replicated the sound of what it would be, if at the moment we had live musicians. After numerous failed attempts on my own exploration it was the expertise of McMaster that inevitably saved the day by minimal enhancement audio to a karaoke track of the song.

I am thankful for the collaborative efforts of multimedia expert William “Buzz” Miller. Through a combination of his expertise and my own meticulous planning, I was able to integrate these multimedia elements into the performance. This process taught me valuable lessons in letting go of initial ideas when necessary. Similarly to Rivera’s desire to illuminate and showcase talents, I also aimed to transcend any confinements or expectations within the parameters of the Conservatory Dance Concert. The students involved in this production exhibit a multifaceted array of skills beyond mere dance prowess, and this fact must be widely recognized and celebrated. My wonderful cast included: Hailey Kasky who played the role of Chita Rivera, Myah Segura who played the viola in the representation of Rivera’s strong faith, Reuben Brock, who played the role of Sammy Davis Jr. and my ensemble: Khandice Anselm, Cam Baker, Justin Barber, Abby Barberio, Kaben Benavides, Riley Belsterling, Jas Caldwell, Abigail Cowen, Ellie Drotts, Emily Hey, Julianne Horowitz, Cierra Krouse, Angelee RiAll, Kirsten Rossi, Alexandra Sergakis, Drew Shoemaker, Giovanna Taddeo, Jaiden Tisdale, Rachel Wise, Blaire Witte, Sky Wolff and understudies Morgan Ryder and Elizabeth Stefanick.

Ya Gotta Be Ready

The thesis choreographic work entitled “Ya Gotta Be Ready” is a dance that depicts Chita Rivera’s personal struggles and challenges. It explores her resilience and impact on the jazz dance genre. It honors Rivera’s iconic career and highlights lesser-known aspects of her life.

Innovative concepts such as projection and symbolic imagery contribute to the performance's overall impact and outcome by connecting audiences of all generations to the brilliance and power of Chita Rivera through visual remembrances of her experiences, songs, and career while delving into the elements of their overall impact. This tribute aimed to honor Rivera also serving as a new found and welcome space for the students' artistic endeavors within a conservatory setting of jazz technique and genre to encompass her personal journey as a more profound and recognized common denominator in jazz and theater dance techniques while enhancing their own.

Section One

Developing the first movement that represented her core, made up of her family, the strong women in her life such as her mother, grandmother, and dance teacher, as well as her undeniable commitment to her religious faith was the chosen preface. The entrance of the work, accompanied by live music, reflected the memory of her late father and his musical talents, as well as introducing the setting and the connection of her life's work and motivation. Dancers commenced seated in a tight circle center stage as if reflecting on a childhood moment around the dinner table all surrounding Myah Segura, a senior jazz dance major at Point Park University. The piece continued with an introduction of Rivera on the projected screen with familiar faces of the popular ABC television show *The View*. Obtaining balance of what the audience already knew of Rivera while introducing new information, was important to keep the audience engaged, through both an entertaining and educational experience. The music I chose for this section was a piece I discovered many years ago in New Orleans listening to a street band play. The emotional sounds from string instrumental duet became the perfect companion to the improvisations of the live violist.

Reaching deeply into the family history of Rivera, dancer Jaiden Tisdale hinted at the extreme importance of the relationship between Rivera and her first dance teacher Doris Jones as well as the relationships with her mother and grandmother.

Section Two

The second movement focused on Rivera's start in New York City, replicating the excitement and fast-paced life she encountered and the new style of movement that had now devoured her existence and moved her focus from the world of ballet to jazz technique and the Broadway stage. Behind the dancers were projected images of a moving and brightly lit New York City scenes as well as moments that captivated her career accomplishments such as winning the Tony Award for Best Actress in a Musical for Kander and Ebb's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* as well a clip from her performance on the Judy Garland show in the 1960's, *The Most Beautiful Dance (1910th)*. The music chosen for this section set the tone for what was to come, with "Ain't I" by Sammy Davis Jr. from the album *That's All*, serving as the perfect backdrop for a moment of pure joy and entertainment. The movement was a direct correlation of intricate footwork and rhythms that pertain to jazz technique emphasizing moments of rhythm patterns, accents and dynamics that were all becoming more specific to the era as well as within the career of Rivera and what she was quickly becoming known to deliver to her audiences. Promoting the experience of being a part of a creative team and together developing vibrant staging became key to our successful outcome.

Section Three

Transitioning into a new scene, incorporating a slightly distorted version of "New York, New York" created a nightclub atmosphere that harkened back to the 1960's Rat Pack while highlighting the uncomfortable realities of racism during that time. The segment culminated in a standing ovation for Sammy Davis Jr., with Chita Rivera observing from a club table as Ruben Brock delivered a heart-wrenching solo that mirrored the challenges faced in the relationship between Rivera and Davis. Hinting at the love affair that was extremely "taboo" at the time, the clip of Sammy Davis Jr. singing "As Long as She Needs Me" plays on the screen and determines the melancholy mood from his *On The Hollywood Palace* performance on March 2, 1968. Revisiting the phrase created from auditioning the dancers as well as introducing audible whispers of discomfort set the nightclub scene that Sammy Davis Jr. so often endured. This particular section was vital to the story because of Rivera and Davis's relationship and the importance during those intolerant times, to ensure secrecy. In her memoir, Rivera recalls the last visit she was honored to have with Sammy Davis Jr. reminiscing on the painful past he had endured and she said, "A Franciscan priest once told me, 'We become who we are through other people.' How did that twenty-three year old become Chita Rivera through Sammy Davis Jr.? I saw how bravely he fought throughout his life, always redeeming it when he took the stage" (Rivera 116). This relationship was impactful on her future movement qualities, business choices and endeavors.

Section Four

As Sammy Davis Jr. faded away, the character of Chita Rivera returned, singing a ghostly acapella rendition of "Wherever He Ain't" paralleling the passing of Sammy Davis Jr., as the mood shifts to introduce the tremendous car accident she experienced that almost ruined her life

and career. This segment marked the inception of the innovative concept of using projection, allowing the audience to immerse themselves in the fear and turmoil Rivera endured on a more aesthetic level. A car swiftly drives and is portrayed behind the Rivera character on the giant screen, while using the symbolic carpet as a prop; evoking a sense of anticipation and chaos while representing her pathway of lessons. The scene culminates with Rivera being flung from the accident, as dancers roll away, leaving her alone at center stage. In a moment of vulnerability, she gathers the courage to persevere, serenading the audience with a poignant acapella rendition of "Time Heals Everything" from the production of *Jerry's Girl's* in which she was starring during the time of her real-life accident. This particular moment of vulnerability and perseverance played a very important role in the strength that Rivera proved as she overcame and fueled her next role and portrayal of *Aurora* in *Kiss of The Spider Woman*.

Section Five

The work's finale appropriately captures Rivera's will to survive, fight, and persevere as the footage of *Sweet Charity* projects on the screen behind the dancers, and the words to "There's Gotta Be Something Better Than This" fill the space. Small moments that parallel the brilliant choreography of Bob Fosse are presented alongside my own vision. Encompassing the excitement of the song while concluding the piece is a final acknowledgment of Rivera's life work and one final blackout and bow as her name and life dates – Chita Rivera 1933-2024 – are shown on the screen, concluding the performance.

Reflection and Feedback

As part of my research I conducted a survey for the audience. I received 63 responses from people who ranged in age from 18-77, from across the United States including the states of Pennsylvania, New York, Delaware, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Colorado, Georgia, Maryland, Tennessee, California, Washington D.C., Illinois, Arizona, Indiana, Florida, Connecticut and Ohio. Asking a series of questions about Rivera, I found it fascinating that most people who represented the male gender knew little to nothing of the success of Chita Rivera. Sixteen of the sixty three responses were male identifying and nine of the sixteen of them knew nothing of Chita Rivera until seeing my work. This was in comparison to the forty seven female identifying individuals in which only one of them had never heard of Rivera's success. She clearly spoke to women through her actions. Although numerous questions were presented within the survey, I am choosing to focus on two specifically that showed particular impact on the project and its outcomes. The first chosen question focused on the influence Rivera had on the world. Sixteen individuals noted Chita Rivera's influence on choreography and performance pertaining to jazz dance and Broadway performance. Eight individuals noted her influence on Hispanic culture. Eight audience participants stated her influence on current revivals both seen on stage and within revivals or adaptations of roles that Rivera had originated and were recently revisited. Eight clearly stated her importance to the representation of women and performers of color and how groundbreaking her efforts truly were.

The next question asked what people believed Rivera brought to jazz style and technique. At least six individuals commended her ability to bring elements of her Hispanic culture to her movement, and twelve individuals took pride in her connection of versatility within both jazz and ballet technique. Seventeen individuals were uncertain of how her style and technique made her unique. Twenty-eight audience attendees commended Rivera's performance qualities by

expressing adjectives such as, dynamic, strength, joy, spicy, edgy, sparkling, vivacious, magnetizing, subtle, captivating, passionate, determined, explorative, raw, pazzazz, thoughtful, meaningful, and fearless all to describe her movement qualities within her roles.

Within the final moments of wrapping up the performance of the choreographic part of my thesis *Ya Gotta Be Ready*, the dancers were honored to participate in an interview by Jessica Walz for *Inside Dance Magazine*. This moment of appreciation was the perfect conclusion while also the contrasting reminder of the future development of this project.

Amongst the efforts to continue the conversation and knowledge of Rivera's legacy and gifts to the art of jazz technique, I was overwhelmed with gratitude to listen to the answers that my dancers gave about our process together. This interview served as a poignant reminder of the intrinsic connection between this entire project and the legendary Chita Rivera. It underscored the importance of embodying the music, emotion and acting elements essential to movement as I strive to enhance the teaching of jazz technique in higher education. My focus remains on the evolving art form and ensuring its relevance in the future. The expressions of gratitude from participants and their reflections on the experience and growth they achieved align perfectly with my objectives for this endeavor.

Dancer Giovanna Taddeo described, "The process drew me in. I had never been able to embody the musical theater aspect to truly portray a story before this." Dancer and violist Myah Segura stated, "We as dancers don't always get to participate/experience that musical theater side," as she was a conservatory dance student. It is imperative to emphasize the significance of the moment for my dancers and for the future of jazz technique. (Interview With Jessica and Inside Dance Magazine.mov). Jessica Walz's poignant reminder of the connection to past Professor of jazz, Mr. Ron Tassone, who initiated the jazz unit at Point Park University,

resonated deeply. This moment represented a full circle that surpassed mere closure, enveloping it in a celestial embrace of reassurance. The expression of gratitude from their reflections serve as a testament to the alignment of my efforts and vision of the future of jazz technique with the distinguished legacy and inspirational endeavors of Chita Rivera. “A mentor who influenced generations, Rivera was, famously, a giver. She inspired up-and-comers in the theater world, and those who starred with her spoke affectionately of her work ethic, her kindness, and her peerless artistry” (Hocker 2). Educating both the dancers in furthering jazz technique, as well as the audience was accomplished. It also was the spark to continue this research in the future.

Conclusion

Chita Rivera's influence serves as a catalyst for this creative endeavor, inspiring a reimagining of the traditional boundaries and possibilities within the realm of performance art. I took it upon myself to acknowledge that even a brief 20-minute tribute would barely scratch the surface of Chita Rivera's remarkable life. While paying homage to her well-documented successes, I also sought to shed light on her challenges, intimate moments, and less publicized anecdotes that contributed to the tapestry of her narrative. I spent time exploring movements and moments resonating with my own artistry as I followed my curiosity. This has led me to a focal point encapsulating my artistic being. Navigating the dual roles of educator and choreographer, particularly in the realms of jazz and contemporary technique, has always posed a unique set of challenges. As a dancer myself, I have never personally struggled with this issue of attaching style or subtlety to movement, but understand the difficulty of conveying relevant information to a diverse group of students or performers who may not easily connect with the material. Emphasizing Rivera's profound grasp of music, acting and singing greatly influenced the subtle

nuances to aid students in embodying her movements. This project aimed to not only proceed in exploring options to allow students to portray a deeper understanding of the history of Rivera, but also allow them to develop and adopt her unique technical prowess with better understanding of elements that would support their own performance. Dance as we know it is often overlooked and deserves credit within musical theater as an essential element in the storytelling process.

Chita Rivera is a person who kept dance at her “nucleus” and brought attention to the importance of dance in storytelling. Her ability to portray a character while clearly demonstrating and executing jazz techniques should be studied in the development of future dance artists. Rivera’s fusion of jazz dance and music elements with numerous contemporary styles has captivated audiences and inspired countless dancers to explore new levels of their artistic expressions. Her legacy in jazz and contemporary dance is characterized by a dynamic and groundbreaking approach that continues to shape the art form's future.

Moving forward, my plan is to develop this work into a full evening show. I will contact the numerous Point Park University alumni with affiliations with Rivera and make it a charitable event that celebrates the organizations she endorsed as well as bring the alumni of Point Park University together. Chita Rivera’s mastery of rhythm and movement speaks enormously as did her ability to push boundaries which set her apart as a queen of entertainment. Introducing more of her history into the classroom would without question assist in the development of a jazz dance culture replete with solid movement, strong artistic values, and versatility.

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Appendix

A. Performance Program

PITTSBURGH PLAYHOUSE
POINT PARK UNIVERSITY

CONSERVATORY OF PERFORMING ARTS

**2023
2024
SEASON**



FACULTY
CHOREOLAB

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pittsburghplayhouse.com

PITTSBURGH PLAYHOUSE
POINT PARK UNIVERSITY

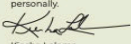
Dear Friends,

Welcome to our incredibly inspiring 2023-2024 Pittsburgh Playhouse season!

I pause to embrace this encouraging moment, as we are thrilled to celebrate and present our 99th season of cultivating artistic excellence. Thank you for continuing to champion our endeavors. Your support, loyalty, and interest in the future of this community are the cornerstones of our forthcoming evolution.

The Pittsburgh Playhouse remains steadfast in its mission: to transform lives through art that captivates, enriches, enlightens, and entertains. We are committed to nurturing creativity and innovation, ultimately reshaping the Pittsburgh Playhouse into an endless realm of imagination and artistic exploration. Together and with vested interest we can forge artistic innovation and transform the Pittsburgh Playhouse into the premiere downtown destination for arts entertainment and entertainment technology.

Please take a moment to say hello while enjoying the pre-show lobby displays and events. I eagerly anticipate the opportunity to engage and connect with each of you personally.



Kesha Lalama
Managing & Artistic Director
Pittsburgh Playhouse

POINT PARK UNIVERSITY
Conservatory of Performing Arts

"All of art is a search for ways of being, of living life more fully,"
— August Wilson


Dear Friends,

On behalf of the faculty, students, and staff, welcome to the 2023-2024 Conservatory performance season. We are thrilled you are back to join us for another exciting year of live performances as we present provocative, innovative, and uplifting works, featuring the talented students from our nationally recognized Conservatory of Performing Arts at Point Park University.

Seeing all your faces in the halls of this theater means that you value and support our commitment to present relevant and significant works where artistic excellence intersects with passion and creativity.

Please take a moment to review our performance calendar. We hope to see you again very soon. Thank you all for your continuous support of our students, the Conservatory, and Point Park University.

Enjoy!



Garfield Lemonius
Dean & Artistic Director
Conservatory of Performing Arts

pittsburghplayhouse.com

IN THE MOMENT WITH MCG JAZZ 2023/2024 SEASON

Pratigious

Diego Figueiredo Solo & Pasquale Grasso Trio
January 27, 2024

UNBOUND

Kaki King
February 3, 2024

Nostalgic

Blue Note Records 85th Anniversary Celebration
February 24, 2024

INDIE

Veronica Swift
March 9, 2024

Liberation

Jazzmeia Horn
March 23, 2024

Historical

Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra Celebrates Duke Ellington at 125
April 6, 2024

Successful

Take 6
April 27, 2024

Family

Kim and Kayla Waters
May 11, 2024

MCGJAZZ.ORG FOR INFORMATION OR SCAN THE QR CODE

Artists and dates subject to change

POINT PARK UNIVERSITY
CONSERVATORY DANCE COMPANY

GARFIELD LEMONIUS, Dean & Artistic Director, COPA
KIESHA JAMA, Artistic & Managing Director, Pittsburgh Playhouse
KIM MARTIN, General Manager/Producer, Pittsburgh Playhouse
SUSAN STOWE, Associate Artistic Director, Conservatory Dance Company

PITTSBURGH PLAYHOUSE

presents

FACULTY CHOREO LAB

FEATURING:

- JULIA ERICKSON
- JAE MAN JOO
- DANIEL KARASIK
- KIKI LUCAS
- JASON MCDOLE
- ROBERT MCKEE
- MARC SPAULDING

Costume Designer: AIMEE J. COLEMAN | Lighting Designer: SAM CROWE | Sound Designer: RYAN MCMASTERS | Stage Manager: ANGIE MONAHAN

February 14-18, 2024

There will be one 15-minute intermission

Conservatory Dance Company Season Sponsor



Production photography by Mark Simpson

Any video and/or audio recording of this production is strictly prohibited



YA GOTTA BE READY

Choreographer: Kiki Lucas

Music Credits:

- Y6: Waelviola by Wael and Anna (Myah Segura on viola)
- Ain't I by Sammy Davis Jr
- West Side Story arr. for two pianos and percussion by Irwin Kostal
- New York, New York by Daisy Dash
- As Long As She Needs Me by Sammy Davis Jr
- Wherever He Ain't from Mack & Mabel (sung by Hailey Kasky)
- Atmospheric Ignition by Ludwig Göransson
- Time Heals Everything from Jerry's Girls (sung by Hailey Kasky)
- There's Gotta Be Something Better Than This from Sweet Charity

Cast:

- Representation of Chita Rivera — Hailey Kasky
- Viola musician and dancer — Myah Segura
- Representation of Sammy Davis Junior — Rueben Brock

- | | | |
|----------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Khandice Anselm | Abigail Cowen | Alexandra Sergakis |
| Cam Baker | Ellie Drotts | Drew Shoemaker |
| Justin Barber | Emily Hey | Giovanna Taddeo |
| Abby Barberio | Julianne Horowitz | Jaiden Tisdale |
| Kaben Benavides | Cierra Krouse | Rachel Wise |
| Riley Belsterling | Angelee RiAll | Blaire Witte |
| Jax Caldwell (Swing) | Kirsten Rossi | Sky Wolff |

Understudies:

Morgan Ryder, Elizabeth Stefanick

ABOUT THE PIECE:

My multimedia work pays homage to the extraordinary life of Chita Rivera, a true icon in the world of jazz and contemporary dance. Through poignant storytelling, it delves into the significant moments that have shaped and inspired countless artists throughout her illustrious career. From the unwavering support of influential women in her life to her brief but impactful relationship with Sammy Davis Junior, the production sheds light on the challenges Rivera faced, including a near career-ending car accident. It also celebrates her legendary roles and indelible contributions to the entertainment world. By sharing Chita Rivera's remarkable journey, "Ya Gotta Be Ready" reminds us of her timeless presence and vital connection and influence to the history of these art forms."

WHO'S WHO


SUSAN STOWE (Associate Artistic Director, Conservatory Dance Company) Known for her vibrant performance quality, clean balletic lines, and ability to step into a role on a moment's notice, Ms. Stowe's 15-year professional career began with the Milwaukee Ballet Company under the direction of former American Ballet Theatre principal dancer, Ted Kivitt. Ms. Stowe's performance career also included Brooklyn Ballet Theatre, BalletMet, Ballet Austin, and Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre. Under the artistic direction of former New York City Ballet leading ballerina, Patricia Wilde, Ms. Stowe performed many of George Balanchine's masterworks, including: *Allegro Brillante*, *Ballet Imperial*, *Concerto Barocco*, *La Sonnambula*, *Raymonda Variations*, *Serenade*, *Square Dance*, *Theme and Variations*, *Western Symphony*, and *Who Cares?* Among her most notable performances in other ballets were leading roles in Choo San Goh's *Unknown Territory*, *The Nutcracker*, *Paquita*, *Sir Frederick Ashton's Les Patineux*, and *Sir Kenneth Macmillan's Elite Syncopations*. In August of 1995, Ms. Stowe joined the dance faculty of Point Park College (now University). She served as a master teacher for the West Virginia Governor's School for the Arts from 1995-1998 and was subsequently appointed artistic director of Point Park's International Summer Dance program in 1998. Ms. Stowe served as chair of the Department of Dance and associate artistic director of the Conservatory Dance Company from 2004-2014, leading the planning and construction of Point Park's renowned George Rowland White Performance Center and accreditation by the National Association of Schools of Dance. In September of 2012, Ms. Stowe was promoted to the rank of professor in the Department of Dance where she continues to teach ballet technique, pointe

and variations, dance composition, and ballet repertoire, in addition to staging and rehearsing repertoire for the Conservatory Dance Company. Ms. Stowe returned to the chair position in the fall of 2022.

AIMEE J COLEMAN (Costume Designer) has been designing costumes, running costume studios, and wardrobe for over 30 years. Her career has seen work with companies such as BalletMet, Charlotte Ballet, Dayton Ballet, Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, and Complexions: Contemporary Ballet along with a number of universities. She helped create costumes and wardrobe tracks for the national tours of *Dancing With the Stars* and *Derek Hough on Tour*. She is also proud to have designed costumes for a wide number of choreographers and repititeurs including Patricia McBride, Jean Pierre Bonnefoux, Lynne Taylor-Corbett, Dwight Rhoden, Robert Battle, Robyn Minkeo Williams, Sasha Janes, and Stephanie Martinez, among many others. This is Aimee's 10th season with the Point Park University Dance Department. She would like to thank all her fellow collaborators and artists as well as her spouse and 2 children for their continued support and inspiration.

SAM CROWE (Lighting Designer) (he/him/his) is a Lighting Designer, Associate Designer, Moving Light Programmer, and Production Electrician based in Pittsburgh, PA. His work spans theatre, dance and live events. Sam is currently a Theatre Production student with a concentration in Lighting. Sam's work has been seen throughout the region with companies and venues such as Pittsburgh CLO, Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, Kelly Strayhorn Theatre/Alloy Studios, City Theatre, Bridges Theatre Company, and the Pittsburgh

B. Example of Chita Rivera Audience Survey




Tuesday, February 13, 2024

Chita Rivera Survey

Kiki Lucas MFA

Name	Kiki
How old are you	47
Where are you from?	Pittsburgh PA
When did you first learn of Chita Rivera?	Age 10
In what ways has Chita Rivera influenced or inspired your own perception of dance?	Everything that I do
What do you think are some of Chita Rivera's most significant roles or performances?	Kiss of Spider Woman, Anita, Velma Chicago
How have you seen Chita Rivera influence reflected in the work of other contemporary dancers or choreographers, past or present?	New West Side Story
Do you believe Chita Rivera's legacy will continue to shape the future of dance, and if so in what ways?	Representation of women of color
How do you think Chita Rivera's impact on dance compares to other influential figures in the industry past or present?	She's an icon
How would you describe the unique style and technique that Chita Rivera brought to her performances, and how has it influenced the dance world?	Classy, fiery jazz, performance quality
Has Chita Rivera's influence inspired you to pursue a career in dance or performance? If so, how has she motivated you?	Yes
Have you ever attended any performances, talk backs or productions featuring Chita Rivera? If so, how did her presence enhance yours?	PPC she came to speak

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Did my work Ya Gotta Be Ready teach you anything you did not know about Chita Rivera?

Please provide any additional feedback
I enjoyed creating this work

C. Cast and Performance Photos: Mark Simpson photographer



D. Press: The Globe Point Park University by Grant Clarke February 2024

The Globe- Point Park University by Grant Clarke February 2024

Spring Faculty Choreolab showcases passion and talent

Grant Clarke
A&E Beat Writer

Walking through the Tomayko Gallery into the GRW Performance Center, you are greeted by great bronze figures frozen in dance. A little later on, when the lights dim, you see them again. But this time on stage, living and breathing, dancers from the COPA dance program.

Faculty Choreolab, which ran February 14-18, is a showcase of choreography from seven of Point Park's world-class educators and partners within the dance program. Some are professors and faculty from Point Park, some are known nationally and internationally in the world of dance, but all seven had a story to tell this weekend through dance.

"Every Faculty Choreolab performance is different and

hosts different faculty members within the dance department," says Kiki Lucas, assistant professor of dance. "Every dancer auditioned and it is up to the choreographer to decide the cast for their particular work."

After watching the performance, it is easy to see why Point Park is so well known for dance. Every movement was sharp and precise, every step on beat, every turn tight. Each dancer was a small piece of the larger choreography, putting the carefully constructed themes and narratives of the choreographers to the forefront. You could feel with each movement the intent of the choreographer, creating a performance that was thoughtful and moving, placing the art on center stage.

"As a dance student, it is a huge honor to be chosen to

perform in the Faculty Choreolab," said Margaret Kingsbury, a sophomore dancer in the showcase. "The professors in the dance program at Point Park are so inspiring, to be able to work with them closer is an incredible opportunity and experience."

A couple of the pieces were classic ballet pieces. The show opened with "Moonlight," choreographed by Daniel Karasik, which was a positive and colorful performance. With warm side lighting, fog and pastel costumes, it felt as though the dancers were frolicking through a field. With raised arms and pointed toes, the dancers were in perfect unison. The piece both showcased the dancers' technical abilities and the style of the choreographer.

"Cry Me," a ballet choreographed by Jae Man Joo, was

the fourth piece just before intermission. With a single light cast upon the stage, the atmosphere was dark and dramatic. The figures on stage embodied and personified the emotional act of crying. With only five dancers in each performance, the audience hung onto each movement as though it were an epic drama unfolding before them.

Other pieces were more modern. "Impertinence," choreographed by Robert McKee, used unique techniques using flashlights that the dancers held to control the lighting, and played with dramatic shadow effects. Paired with unsettling music, contortionist movement and acrobatic techniques, the atmosphere was chilling.

"Inundated," choreographed by Marc Spaulding, was another modern piece. Starting off with the intro to "Power" by Kanye West, the music transitioned to a song with light synths. With strong movements and an almost march-like rhythm, this piece was powerful and inspiring.

"The Grand Cross," choreographed by Jason McDole, was another powerful performance. Gradually building in intensity, the dancers were on the ground for much of the piece. Using their limbs while laying on their backs, the dancers created a unique effect reminiscent of a crowd wave at sporting events.

"I sat in one of the 'Impertinence' rehearsals when they were just in the studio with no lighting effects," said Angie Monahan, student stage manager. "It was really cool to see how it translated into the space, and how our lighting

designer Sam Crowe combined the flashlights with other effects."

A few performances went outside the box. "Container," choreographed by Julia Erikson, incorporated contemporary ballet and pointe work to create a unique vision. Dreamy and flowy with dramatic kicks and spins, it was an almost spiritual experience.

"Ya Gotta Be Ready," choreographed by Kiki Lucas, was an unexpected but welcome twist at the end of an already exhilarating night. More of a musical number than dance, this performance was an homage to the life of Chita Rivera. By incorporating projected multimedia elements and the use of props within the show, Lucas created a unique experience for the audience.

"I tossed the idea around for a few years but couldn't resist my undeniable and lifelong adoration for Chita Rivera," said Lucas. "Her performance and life story have been a constant fuel within my own journey of dance and entertainment for as long as I can remember."

By the end of the night, it became increasingly clear why those bronze figures sit in the lobby, and why Point Park is known for dance. The COPA program is top of the line, reflected by the talent of its students. It was a heartwarming scene to see the support from the audience, family and friends alike.

Read the rest of the story at ppuglobe.com.

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Dancers strike a pose in the "Moonlight" performance of the Spring Faculty Choreolab during a dress rehearsal last week. "Moonlight" was a classic colorful ballet piece.