

It was a Sunday evening and I was tired from rehearsing with New Works/World Traditions, the West African Dance Company. However, I walked back into Ashamu Dance Studio nervous, but satisfied with my decision to audition for FUSION Dance Company. FUSION Dance Company is a student run dance company that I had watched from the audience for my first three years at Brown. FUSION performs a mixture of dance styles including hip hop, lyrical, jazz, modern, African and tap. FUSION was the most popular and well-known dance group on campus, making itself visible throughout campus by performing in numerous venues such as departmental sponsored dance concerts, cultural events (such as the Ebony Soiree and the Brown Sistas United annual show), larger Brown community events (such as A Day on College Hill and Convocation) and most importantly at its annual 5 day show in Ashamu Dance Studio in March.

I received notice that I was accepted into FUSION Dance Company the day after my audition. I was very excited by this new group- the energy that the group had on stage and its' past enthralled me. Before every FUSION performance, the group's historian would recite FUSION's history or simply the "Fusion Tradition":

FUSION Dance Company was founded in 1983 by a group of 5 African American women who desired an outlet to express themselves through dance in a means by which they had not already found on campus. These women did not want to have to conform to the university imposed, modern day constraints on body shape, size, dance style, and choreography, so they founded FUSION Dance Company which today exists as a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic dance group of men and women who perform a variety of dance styles (including hip hop, lyrical, jazz, modern, African and tap).

The opportunity for me to do an oral history report on any aspect of Brown's history for UC110: The Presidential Seminar course, entitled *The University: Its History and Responsibility* coincided with my new membership and enthusiasm for FUSION Dance Company. FUSION's history, the story of five African American women

founding a dance company in 1983 was very powerful to me. I wanted to learn more about these five women as their names were missing from our history. Looking through the University Archives, in documents from 1983-1987, I came upon the name Paula Franklin '87. She was referred to as the founder of FUSION. Dr. Paula Dawn Franklin '87 was prepared for our oral interview on December 8th, she had found a file from her college years labeled "memories from college," which included old programs from FUSION shows and other dance memorabilia. These are the results from the interview.

In response to the question, Why and when was FUSION Dance Company started? Paula first read to me the original mission statement that she submitted to get funding from the Committee of the Arts at Brown. This can be considered FUSION's first Mission Statement.

"I, Paula Dawn Franklin, am a sophomore at Brown University. Last year, I felt a strong need for students to express and reveal their artistic talents. I felt an urge to do something to stop the waste of creativity and talent on this campus. This was my motivation for initiating a dance company. It is my attempt to provide an outlet for dancers to use their creative talents in choreographing and performing. I hope to give students a chance to stimulate their imagination and creativity in various types of dance such as ethnic, ballet, modern, tap and jazz. Of all, I hope the group of 23 (actually I put 23, but it ended up being 20) dancers will help to enhance the cultural insight on this campus and enlighten students to ethnic, traditional and contemporary forms of dance."

Dr. Franklin then read to me an excerpt from the FUSION show's program in 1986, Paula's senior year. It is a more solidified Mission Statement.

“The FUSION Dance Company was started in 1983 to provide dancers with the opportunity to express themselves creatively through choreography. The organization is completely student run and each member brings his own strength to the group. Dance styles represented have included gospel, jazz, ballet, tap, and modern dance. Hence the name FUSION.

Paula Franklin, the founder of FUSION will graduate this spring. She hopes that FUSION will continue to prosper and provide a dance outlet for the diverse dance talents within the Brown community.”

On clarifying FUSION's foundation.

Paula: Those were the Mission Statements, they really didn't have much about the 5 black women.

Leta: So was there ever 5 black women who...

“Well let me explain to you how, and I actually looked all this up, to see how many people were in the actual group at the beginning. Well this was the precursor to FUSION. In the fall of 1983, I decided to get a group of about 8 African American Brown students to choreograph a piece, entitled *portrait of a studio*. And we did it in the, it must have been in the fall concert, the fall brown concert. And the dancers included, me-Paula Franklin, Ann Haley, Peggy Bird, Len Nodage,(cause I have this written down) Ann Moss, Allison Tucker, Anna Armstrong and Lincoln Carter.

And we all had some dance training but some had more than others. Lincoln had very little, but you know most guys don't have that much, but anyway. And the purpose of the dance was to display different forms of dance. So At the beginning it started with everyone warming up at the barre and then Lynn and Peggy broke out into a calypso dance, then the ballerinas showcased a piece, next we had Ann and Lincoln engage in a kind of a steamy, romantic duet, a *hey girl*, I don't know if you know that, you are a lot younger than I am, you might not know *hey girl*. And it consisted of some modern and jazz and ballet moves. And the finale consisted mingled a little bit of Charleston, tap with jumps and barrel turns. But everyone, really the purpose, was everyone was trying to showoff their talents, and then the dance teacher walks in and everybody then scrambles back to their barre. It didn't have a lot of plot, but it was just basically to demonstrate different forms of dance.

And that was a lot of fun and after that success I thought it possible to start a new dance group. And I asked the people in the group "oh do you think that is a good idea" and everyone seemed really excited about it. This was the precursor to FUSION. Then in the winter of 1983, my roommate, Donna Williams and I, we, put up fliers for a student company featuring student choreography. And I must say, I was surprised with the response. There were about 30 or 40 students that came for the audition and the judges were those who performed in the *portrait of a studio*. The audition included a barre, and learning a routine that I had choreographed and it included a fusion of different dance techniques and lets see, a group of 5 or 6 dancers would perform the routine. And the judges were those who were part of the *portrait of a studio*.

And after that there were about 20. We all got together and we decided what kind of name or what the name would be. And we kind of brainstormed and we thought well a good name would be FUSION because the concept of the group being a fusion of different dance techniques and also a fusion of ethnicities or ethnic groups. The results of the audition were 20 dancers consisting of 5 Caucasian dancers(all women), 12 African American female dancers, and 3 African American male dancers.”

Where and when did FUSION perform?

“We performed in of course our annual concert, which was in the spring each year. And then we did either the spring or the fall, and/or Fall Brown Dance Concert. We did a presentation for a Saturday enrichment program in Providence or high school or junior high students. Our goal was originally to be more of a service oriented group and perform more for the community. However, I don’t think we managed that as well as we could have. But we did a few things. We also danced for various events on campus, different groups asked us to dance. I know that some of the fraternities did and at different events like a fashion show, they had some kind of ethnic event.”

Leta: Where was the annual concert held?

“It was in Ashamu and always March, first or second week. We also had workshops. One in particular I remember was the African dance workshop on campus. And a lot of people showed up and had a really, really fun time. I don’t know if you do that kind of thing anymore.”

Leta: When did you hold auditions?

“We usually had auditions in the beginning of the year in the fall of the school year.”

In response to the various forms of dance that FUSION now does which includes hip hop, lyrical, jazz, modern, African and tap.

“I don’t even think they really did a lot of hip hop back then. I think maybe back then it might have been a little bit more technical, cause we had quite a few people who were trained in ballet. And so things might have been a little bit different for the dancers.”

What was the logo then? (In response to Dr. Franklin’s question “what logo do you all use now?”)

“It was a male, well we had males in the group then, oh you have males now. There was a male and a female, and the female was in an arabesque and the male was in second position grande plie.” (This logo was made by Edissa Weeks, who was also an artist.)

Conclusion:

My original purpose of this oral history project was to find out who the original 5 African American women were. In actuality I found out that the history that FUSION Dance Company had believed as true was inaccurate. Paula Franklin founded FUSION Dance Company. She choreographed the group’s first piece, acquired their funds and ran their audition. She also solidified FUSION’s Mission Statement her senior year. The 8 African American dancers- Paula Franklin, Ann Haley, Peggy Bird, Len Nodage, Ann

Moss, Allison Tucker, Anna Armstrong and Lincoln Carter, were the precursor to FUSION. These dancers and the ability to choreograph and run a group as a student inspired Paula Franklin to start a new dance company. Thus FUSION began in the fall of 1983 when it solidified its name, held auditions and accepted 20 members- Carol Abizaid, Joyce Bishop, Christina Fortenbaugh, Anne Haley, Allison Tucker, Anna Armstrong, Margaret Elsner, Angela Mitchell, Gladys Wesley(of Providence, not a Brown student), Diane Moss, Lynne Nodage, Pete Washburn, Serenthia Parker, Joe Bowie, Tina Moochie, Lincoln Carter, Adrian Johnson, Edissa Weeks, Ava Rorer and Paula Franklin. The group consisted of 12 African American women, 3 African American men and 5 white women.

The first FUSION concert held in spring of 1984, included the following student choreographed pieces, Electracisms, Vortex, On to Dance, Leopard Tree Dream, Tapper's Delight, Come by Here, Return of the Warriors, Boardwalk, Nightmare, He's that kind of Piece and Splash.

The second year of FUSION there was 21 dancers. There were, 14 African American women, 6 white women and 1 African American man. At the annual concert in March of 1985, the following pieces were performed, Images, Oh lord, Can Can, a gospel piece that was accompanied by Voices of Inspiration, a singing group at Brown, Reflections of Love and The Marketplace.

In the 1986 show, Paula's senior year, there were 19 dancers in FUSION, which included 11 African American women, 6 white women, 1 Asian woman, and 1 African American man. The dance numbers presented at the 1986 show were Dance Manifesto #1, Freedom, which was a "dedicated to all people around the world, still struggling to be

freed”, Oh Lord, and Aura. Aura was a “dance tale and four movements that depicts a mythical interpretation of African American reality, the dance shows how black people in a predominantly white society have lost touch with their cultural identity, a cultural identity that traces its way back through slavery to find its roots in Africa. Black people have lost a unified way of defining themselves and as a result adopted fake identities.”

Paula was happy to hear that each year FUSION takes old dance pieces from its video archives, and recreates and performs them. Paula would like to see *Reflections of Love* and *Oh Lord* brought back.

Paula Franklin and many of the original FUSION members continue to dance and have other careers. She stated, “I think that dance is contagious and I think that it is important, not only for the sake of dancing, but for discipline, and it permeates through the rest of your life.” Paula Franklin went to Alvin Ailey Dance Center in New York City after Brown and was in their third company. She did a little professional work in New York, after Ailey as well. Paula then went to the University of Michigan for medical school. In Detroit, she started a dance ministry. Dr. Franklin currently is a pediatrician. She still dances and in the long run hopes to start a youth center and “incorporate dance in the youth center, as well as other things, other forms of art.”

Carol Abizaid danced for several years in New York City. She currently is the manager at Steps, a very popular dance studio in Manhattan. Joyce Bishop is currently working as a broker. Ann Haley went to Stanford law after Brown. Ann is currently a lawyer in Los Angeles where she also performs with a dance ministry. Joe Bowie is currently dancing in the Mark Morris Company. He used to dance with the Paul Taylor Dance Company. Allison Tucker danced on Broadway in *Ragtime* and *Ain't Misbehavin*.

She is now focusing on singing. After Brown, Edissa Weeks trained at Alvin Ailey American Dance Center. She then founded and currently co-directs and performs with the Avila/Weeks Dance Company. Serentia Parker is currently an orthopedic surgeon at Howard. Meri Morisada is a pediatrician in Hawaii and has her own dance ministry. Pam Cobb is an Obgyn.

Dance has evolved at Brown since FUSION's foundation in 1983. There are now two Theatre, Speech and Dance department sponsored dance companies- The Dance Extension and New Works/World Traditions. The Dance Extension, which is the oldest dance company at Brown and was around when FUSION began, was founded and currently still directed by Julie Strandberg. The Dance Extension is a modern dance company that performs the works of modern dance legacies. New Works/World Traditions performs West African and modern works and is directed by Michelle Bach-Coulibaly. Seydou Coulibaly, Issa Coulibaly and Moussa Traore, all renowned Malian musicians of the Komee Josse, accompany New Works/World Traditions.

What's On Tap, a student run tap company was founded by Leigh Fitzgerald'00 and Miriam Friedel'00 in 1996. They incorporate different styles of tap in their choreography. RCJ Dance, another student run dance group was founded in 1999 and is led by Ryan Smith'02, Courtney Rowe'02, and Jonathan Martin'02. RCJ combines a mixture of jazz and modern in their works.

Past members from FUSION as seen above have continued to dance after Brown, as Paula noted "I think everybody is still dancing even." Although the actual history of FUSION is different from what I and other current members originally knew, FUSION has remained connected to its past. FUSION is still a student run company that presents

a variety of dance styles. It is also still the most diverse dance group that works in Ashamu Dance Studio. FUSION Dance Company today is Allison Harris'02, Sean Thomas'03, Sarah Burns'04, Lindsay Dauphinee'03, Beth Earl'02, Lynnette Freeman'05, Jody Green'03, Yaya Johnson'04, Lauren Linder'04, Tisola Logan'03, Leta Malloy'02, Hosanna Marshall'03, Audrey McIntyre'05, Kani Romain'04, Clifford Voigt'05, Jesus Hernandez'03, Monica Herrera'02, Briana Masterson'03, and Robbie Joseph'02. The group is Co-Directed By Monica Herrera'02 and Sean Thomas'03. The group's racial breakdown is 8 African American women, 3 African American men, 3 white women, 2 Asian women, 1 white man, 1 Latino and 1 Latina.

The interview with Paula Franklin was very inspiring. Her words of advice for dancers about to leave Brown: "If you are going to do it, do it now, don't wait till you're older, cause first of all you won't have the strength, cause I know I was dancing 10 hours a day sometime and working part time. You just won't have the strength. And once you start doing something else you just won't go back, so if you are going to do it, do it now." And that is exactly what former members of FUSION have done and the path I will follow as well.

The History FUSION Dance Company

Leta Malloy
December 11, 2000
Professor Sacks
Peter Hocking