

“Joy”

By Zoë Lewis

I have been at UNCOSA since the 8th grade, and I have been dancing at this school for more than 6 years. I remember when the high school connector building was not a building at all but a pile of dirt situated between two old perpendicular dormitories. One summer it was a dusty construction site, a labyrinth of plywood and red clay, and in the fall it was a shiny new edifice. Before the connector building, there were no elevators in the dorms. We climbed the stairs and didn't think twice about it. This new facility ushered in a new era for UNCOSA's high school students, and with those elevators, many would agree that these changes were good.

I have experienced tremendous change in my time here. Each year at UNCOSA is unique in my memory, like five distinct chapters. At the beginning of each year, new students outnumber returning students. This factor alone is enough to bring forth incredible change. Each year presents a new group of artists with a different artistic energy. Any returning student will tell you that every year begins not with a sense of predictability, but with a question: *how will this year be different?* This constant change is echoed in the seasons. Anyone who has lived through winter and spring in North Carolina can tell you about that torturous transition period around March and April. In my junior year, I recall one week in which it snowed. The very next week the entire student body was sprawled out on the hill in bathing suits. The weather here is as temperamental as we are.

I cannot deny the change within myself. I have stared in the mirror of a dance studio every day for five years. I have changed- the length of my hair, the shape of my body, the size of my hands, the color in my cheek. And as I grow taller, my idea of the future changes. *Where do you see yourself in 5 years? 10 years? 20?* And I may be young, but I know just

how ridiculous those questions are. The time I spent at this school was not a journey from A to B. I did not begin in one place and finish in another, because, as the adage says, change is constant. In fact, I am changing at this very moment. I will be something new in 20 minutes. Thus, I do not write as someone who has completed something, fulfilled requirements, or sealed the envelope. I write to you as someone who is constantly in motion. To ask me where I see myself in 10 years is absurd, because I cannot even tell you where I'll be tomorrow.

I can tell you what doesn't change. The walls of that old dance studio haven't changed for decades. The barre is still the same bland shade of blue. The academic hall in Gray Building is as infinite in length as it was 50 years ago. The skylights in the drawing studio filter in the same yellow sunlight. The windowless walls of the practice rooms are static, and that violin you hold is the same instrument from the day before; the bow is the same bow. Drama students wear the same black from day to day, week to week, month to month. And we curse it: the blackness, the blueness, the graphite, the smell of rosin. We curse it all and we wish it would change. We complain about the repetitiveness, the monotony of technique class at 10:20 every single day, and the endless hours of secluded practicing. We all came here for a reason: Joy. But from day one, Joy begins to bury itself beneath obligation, habit, and skill. It moves into a dark corner and goes dormant. Accessing Joy becomes very difficult, and sometimes impossible. The daily rigor of technique can feel like imprisonment, or like a blank slate, rigid and dull.

It is our duty as artists to look at that blank slate and see color. It is our job to embrace that repetitiveness, realizing that it holds infinite possibilities. The schedule is repetitive so we don't have to be; the foundation is rigid so that we are free to grow. But it is absolutely necessary that we wake up each morning, go to our arts classes, and *change*. We must discover new ways of seeing. An incredible dance teacher once told me to do "today's

fourth position” and not “yesterday’s fourth position”. Fourth position is the same every day, but the artist inside is not.

I recently visited a prestigious liberal arts college in New York. As one of many in an audience of prospective students, I watched a performance by the art department that included some of the college’s music, dance, and drama students. With the utmost respect for that institution, I am here to tell you that it was a bad show. Nonetheless, I am thankful to have sat through that performance, as uninspiring as it was, for I had a moment of clarity. I realized that I missed watching really good dance, both physically and emotionally powerful. I realized that I missed the sound of really good music, such as *Mahler’s Symphony No. 2* played by over 100 talented musicians. I realized that I missed the presence of really good actors, both entertaining and life-affirming. I realized that I missed the art of incredibly talented people, such as the students of UNCSCA, and I realized that I have a gift. I have the gift of technical ability, which UNCSCA has so graciously given me, and I have the gift of Joy, which comes from within. I was born with Joy and I will carry it through the rest of my life, and during that bad performance, Joy was at my side telling me that it was not my time for college, and that this kind of change would be hurtful. At this pivotal point in my life, to say *no* to a career as a performing artist would be a mistake. I would be wasting my gift. So I kindly sent in a letter of decline, and here I am- ready for the next step, ready to dance, and ready to embrace a life of infinite change.