

The logo for UNC School of the Creative Arts (UNCSA) features the letters "UNCSA" in a white, serif font, centered within a dark rectangular background.

THE ASSOCIATES

NextNow: They're Ready

On the evening of the championship game of the ACC Basketball Tournament, arts lovers filled Salem Ballroom of the Benton Convention center for *NextNow* – UNCSCA's annual Drama Showcase and Cocktail Soirée.

Upon arrival we were assisted by university staff, with information about seating arrangements and complementary passes for the adjacent parking deck, then warmly greeted by UNCSCA students who thanked us for attending and showed us to our tables. The ballroom was set up with tiered dining at each end and tables seating eight to twelve arranged on the floor. Just inside the main entrance a five-piece jazz combo performed standards, with the discrete oversight of UNCSCA faculty member Ron Rudkin. At the opposite end of the space a larger stage was set up for the Drama seniors' after dinner showcase.

Food and drink areas adjacent to each end of the ballroom were replete with gourmet-quality “heavy hors d'ouvres.” Suggested cocktail dress interspersed some splashes of bright spring color and a few dapper bow ties with more subdued evening wear. Chancellor Lindsay Bierman and the deans of each of the school's programs were there to mix and mingle – generous, as always, in discussing their projects and plans. A few standing-height tables were available, for those who tired of holding their food and drink while mingling. Benton Convention center's twenty million dollar “reinvention,” completed in 2017, includes a north-facing observatory area where the heliotropic among us enjoyed the early evening spring sunshine pouring in.

Mingling accomplished, we were all welcomed to the evening's agenda in the ballroom by UNCSEA Chancellor Lindsay Bierman, who introduced Elizabeth Lail (UNCSEA Drama '14) via video link, to emphasize the importance of scholarships. Upon graduation Lail moved to New York to pursue stage work, but was soon cast in the television series *Once Upon a Time*. Bierman mentioned that her current series, *You*, immediately drew an audience of over forty-four million viewers.

Lail related that, like many students, her shot at the big time was made possible by financial support, funds for which are the *raison d'être* for this event. All proceeds from *NextNow* are earmarked for scholarships

Drama Dean Scott Zigler then took the stage to tell us about about the Drama graduates' Professional Showcase, which is taking them to Chicago, Atlanta, New York, and Los Angeles to introduce them to the entertainment industry. Zigler explained that several members of the class could not be here this evening because of a variety of very good reasons, including an MFA audition at Juilliard, work with *Cirque de Soleil*, and directing rehearsals for Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*. (Fourth Year thesis productions are now included in UNCSEA's Main Stage theatre season.)

Before turning the proceedings over to the students for their performance showcase Zigler cautioned the audience about sexual content and language, suggesting that we could expect the sort of material we would be likely to encounter on programming from HBO or Netflix.

When asked who selects scenes and songs for *NextNow* Quin Gordon says “We like them to find their own stuff. At this point, they need to know how they want to market themselves to the industry, to show their strengths.” The scenes are excerpted and adapted from plays, as well as from films and television. The students often have an idea who they'd like to do a scene with, but the faculty may also have a hand in casting effectively.

In addition to teaching acting and directing at UNCSA. Gordon is the program's Director of Recruitment. Communication with each prospective drama student culminates in an audition, which includes a monologue and a song. Gordon reports that the school has had another major increase in applications this year – now up to about nine hundred aspiring actors, competing to be part of the next first year class of thirty students. (yes: that's an acceptance rate of about *three per cent*)

While students select their own material for *NextNow*, Gordon says “occasionally, we may decide that something isn't a good choice, or perhaps doesn't embody the conflict that an effective scene needs to have.” Unlike a short story, which may effectively cast light upon an incident or situation without entailing much of a plot, conflict is the engine that moves a dramatic scene forward, even if it isn't necessarily resolved.

There was conflict aplenty in the rapid-fire sequence of scenes presented at *NextNow*, as pairs of characters confronted the challenges of communicating effectively and authentically in a variety of situations, including:

- an STD that may or may not have been transmitted by a friend
- a God-centered worldview confronting that of a technophile
- an argument held - in an IKEA store - over whether or not to have a baby
- a character whose aberrant behavior may be caused by testosterone poisoning
- an unemployed boyfriend who may need to be weaned from handouts
- a client too bent on “getting even” to communicate constructively with her therapist
- a woman who discovers that the guy she arranged online to date is

terminally ill, was her classmate in school for twelve years, and she does not remember him at all

- two histrionic women with a shared death wish

- a couple bound back-to-back in chairs, and quite possibly facing execution, can't stop quarreling long enough to formulate an escape plan

According to Gordon, songs for this showcase are limited to those students “who show real potential for professional musical theatre work.” Three solo songs were interspersed with this evening's scenes, plus a finale in which a pair of singers with guitars were joined by the full ensemble, even including a pair of violins.

Our next chance to attend a *NextNow* will be when the senior drama class of 2020 holds their showcase next spring. For similar money to what one might spend for dinner and an evening of theatre in New York, *NextNow* offers a fine social occasion, good food and drink, professional-quality entertainment, and a (partially tax-deductible) opportunity to support the training of some of the country's finest young actors. Plus, in years to come, when members of that class appear with stars like Elizabeth Lail and Lucas Hedges on the screen, you'll be able to say *Hey – I saw them perform onstage as students, here in Winston-Salem, at UNCSEA!*

UNCSEA Dance Prep

On a dreadful February afternoon, cold with blowing rain, nine children arrive at a UNCSA dance studio for their ballet class. Barres line each wall at three levels, the lowest of which is just right for these eight-to-eleven year olds. Their demeanor seems focused, even before their teacher, a statuesque lady with a British accent, directs them to “take a breath, to turn from normal students to very special dancers.”

It is immediately clear that purposeful elegance in all things is the expectation here, including sitting down to await instruction. Class begins with a few minutes of “floor work” - next year the program will add an actual conditioning class – to get properly limbered up.



Each movement is to be intentional:
“Imagine your backs are sliding down a glass wall.”
“Your heels have to slice like scissors.”

“Ladies – leave spaces [with your hands] for your tutus.”

“Imagine that you have made footprints in wet sand. Each time you must land in those footprints.”

The students are to be mindful that dance is consummated when viewed:

“Eyes look out to your audience. You are always on stage.”

“Show me the *quality* of the music.”

“I can *suggest*, but when you are dancing, you must present yourselves.”

Since the days of France's terpsichorean monarch, Louis XIV, French has been the language of ballet. The young dancers betray no lack of recognition at instructions including *devant*, *changement*, and *dégagés en l'air*.

After taking an exercise to the next level the students are asked to think about the process of their development: “Why do you think we are staying on the same leg now?” They are gaining strength as they build technique.

A high level of concentration is required throughout this seventy-five minute class. In the last quarter hour occasional verbal outlet is permitted, but then things are quickly brought back to focus. While attending to their teacher's instruction, the students also observe each other. In a couple of instances they spontaneously applaud a classmate's noteworthy accomplishment.

The children are continually challenged to achieve something new *today*, because “tomorrow never comes.” Discipline is firm and consistent:

“I'm not going to let you get away with it.” But it is also tempered with affectionate approbation:

“I love you dearly.”

“Well done, young man.”

“Bravi.”

When about the same age as these children Susan Brooker's family was told “She will not be a dancer.” She was, in fact, on the way to becoming 5'10” tall, in an era when the ballet establishment was of the firm opinion that a ballerina should be about a half-foot shorter, like the iconic ballerina Margot Fonteyn. But the girl's heart was set upon dance: “My ballet teacher pointed



me in the right direction, which was to a teachers' training college” for an education in dance pedagogy. By age twenty Brooker had so distinguished herself as a ballet pedagogue that, with all of six classes in Italian under her belt, she found herself on her way to Ravenna, to begin what would turn out to be twenty years of teaching in Italy.

After seven years in Ravenna she moved next to a private school in Florence that is grounded in the eponymous method of Enrico Cecchetti, by which Brooker had herself been trained in London. Regarded as the preeminent ballet dancer of his age, Cecchetti formalized his method at the Imperial Ballet in Saint Petersburg, Russia, where he taught such legendary dancers as Pavlova, Massine, and Nijinsky. Cecchetti went on to serve as ballet master of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, which sought refuge in London at the end of World War I. There the great pedagogue's method was notated and turned into a syllabus for children's training.

Several decades later representatives of the school in Florence were asked to develop a national training program for American Ballet Theatre, for which Susan Brooker was brought in as Artistic Advisor. She later served as the academy director of Ballet Met, and was chair of the Dance Department in the Hartt School of the University of Hartford, before being invited, just last summer, to become the Director of the Preparatory Dance Program of UNCSA.

This program currently consists of Prep 1-5, totaling about eighty students, in school grades three through nine. As an immediate priority, Brooker wants to focus particular attention on Children's Ballet, beginning at age five:

“Children develop so much between age five and six. By the time you get to eight years old, you have managed to build up the sense of etiquette, you've got the physicality going, taking the coordination and musicality forward, which is what you're chiefly working on with those age groups – as well as the joy of dance.”

In her first year at UNCSA, Brooker has institutionalized her commitment to the Cecchetti Method. “Every ballet teacher at UNCSA is [now] certified in that methodology. All of the teachers have a shared foundation, yet each brings something individual to their teaching.”

Asked if potential can be discerned in the youngest Dance Prep participants, Brooker says that, “Yes, with little ones it's possible to recognize talent immediately. Yet, some kids who you would never suppose will work their socks off to get there. Never say never.” Is the dream of some day being a professional dancer suggested to such little ones? “We don't push students toward the profession, but are pushing the training so that we can leave that door open for them.”

For those who excel in the Dance Prep program there can be, of course, the dream of one day being accepted into the high school or even college level of UNCSA Dance. Brooker points out how rarefied that program is: “This wonderful school is one of the few college programs in the country that produces professional classical ballet dancers. There are probably three or four, at the most.”

From London, to Florence, to New York, to Hartford, to Winston-Salem: pearls on a string of unbroken commitment to the highest possible quality of dance pedagogy. How does Susan Brooker feel about coming to UNCSA? “Packing up and moving and coming here – it's been wonderful.”

General Information - Important Links



The Associates Website: <http://www.uncsa.edu/Associates>

For membership forms, a list of our Board members, and other general information.

Email Address: uncsaassociates@gmail.com

The Performance Calendar Website: <http://www.uncsa.edu/performances/>

Our Facebook page: <http://www.facebook.com/uncsaassociates>

Newsletter: uncsaassociates.news@gmail.com