

Suzanne Lopez Interviewed by Molly Fulop

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Molly Fulop: Hi! Thank you for joining me today. Can you please describe your connection to the Joffrey Ballet?

Suzanne Lopez: I'm currently the Abbott Academy Director for the Grainger Academy of the Joffrey Ballet, but I've been very connected to the Joffrey Ballet my whole life. I trained at the Joffrey Ballet School when the company was in New York and then joined the second company, Joffrey II. I was a member there for a year and a half before I joined the Joffrey Ballet. I moved to Chicago with the Joffrey in '95 and was a dancer with the company for 19 years. After, I taught in the Academy when it opened here in Chicago and later joined as a rehearsal director for the company in 2016. I did that for seven years before becoming the Academy's Director. So, there's been a lot of Joffrey in my life.

M: Given your deep ties with the Joffrey Ballet, how would you describe your place in its history?

S: I think everyone who's been involved in the Joffrey Ballet is a part of its history. Although I've had some longevity that maybe others have not, I don't know that I get to claim a part of its history any more than anyone else does. It's been such a huge part of my life and still continues to be a huge part of my life. It's my home away from home.

I love looking at things like this exhibition or talking to some of my former teachers who were mentors to me growing up. It means a lot to hear their stories then and now, to look at retrospectives like this show, and to see these stories unfold for the public. It's so great that things that felt very personal to me are now available for everyone to see. It's interesting to see that what I thought was my history is really, all of our history to share, and I'm so proud to be a part of that history, whether it was on stage, behind the scenes, or now, directing the Academy. The Joffrey is important to me, so I'm glad that it's important to other people. I also love that I get to be a part of developing not just what the history is, but what the future will be, too.

M: Staying with the history of the Joffrey, what was it like to see the Grainger Academy grow from your time as a teacher to now as the Director?

S: In terms of schools, it's still a baby. We're only in our 17th year as a school, which, if you look at other major schools in the country, is very young. But it's gone through a lot of change in that

short time while we've been creating its identity. It was Gerald Arpino's goal when we moved the company to Chicago to start a school in Joffrey Tower on State and Randolph.

I think early on, it was about teaching dance to kids. That's sort of basic, but that was the goal: Get kids in and teach them how to dance. Now, in the past two years, I've really tried to connect the school to the company. I mean, we're geographically connected—we're in the same building—but it should be much more than that. It should not just be another school that trains dancers. It should be a school that has ties to the Joffrey. We should use the Joffrey Ballet as our inspiration, whether it's from the dancers dancing one floor above our students, from what Robert Joffrey believed in as a teacher, or from me now telling stories to these students like my teachers told me. We should be teaching what this company was, is, and will be to those students, whether they become dancers here or not. That connectivity to the company is something that I've really tried to work on.

M: I love that we're on the same brainwave. My next question is: As one of Joffrey's former students, how would you articulate his core values for the Joffrey?

S: He really felt that every dancer—no matter where they were in their career or training—was a student, and that there were always things to learn and to improve. There's always room for growth. He sort of geeked out, for lack of a better term, about technique. And I loved that he also evolved. He didn't stick to the idea of “this is the way I was taught, so this is the only way to do it.” He studied all the different forms of training and techniques. He took—I think a lot of schools do this now, but he did this a long time ago—the best of what he thought was the best from each technique and created his own style. I think if he were alive today, that style would still be very different than what it was when he passed, because he would have kept evolving with it. We definitely have a curriculum in the Academy that we work on endlessly to create and improve because dance evolves, and students evolve, so we have to evolve with them. But I think that motivation to evolve comes from him.

Joffrey's teaching was also very based on anatomy. It's a very logical way of teaching. For example, if you're not standing up straight, you're going to fall over. That's obvious, but that can be hard to teach an eight-year-old. This way, we can say, “Stop and stand up. We need to first stand up, and then we can do these things.” It really trickles down from his philosophy of dance. I'm happy to help pass that philosophy on so that it seeps into the whole training, no matter what level. We have people in their 70s who take adult classes, and I think it should be the same curriculum and the same philosophy.

M: That's incredible. I do some intergenerational work myself, and I totally agree! I'm curious. Given that you have experience as a performer and a teacher, what are the similarities and differences between teaching and performing?

S: I always say that it's not necessarily true that the best dancers are the best teachers. In fact, I would argue that dancers who face challenges might even be better teachers, because they had to figure it out when it didn't come naturally to them. Some people's legs just go up really high, and they can do lots of turns, but when you've had to struggle through a certain problem and figure it out for yourself, it's sometimes easier to approach another student and help them.

While I do think the best teachers have gone through some sort of professional career, I don't think it's a must. I think there are plenty of teachers that we have around the world who decided, "I don't need to be on stage. I actually want to pass this on to the next generation." That's great. I think it's about knowing what you want, figuring it out, and finding ways to communicate that knowledge clearly; that's what we need.

M: Absolutely. I'm going to shift to talk a bit more about the exhibition, and about how it might be folks' first experience with the Joffrey Ballet. As you were going through the exhibit, was there anything that surprised you, or something new you learned?

S: It's funny you asked. I went to the opening in New York and then went to this opening. I still need to go again to have a moment to myself. I kind of went into it thinking, "I know everything that's going to be in this," but I didn't live through everything. I wasn't alive in 1956 when the company started, but I feel like I've heard so many stories. Certainly, I know all the people who are currently still with us and are attached to the Joffrey. I worked with so many of them that I thought that if someone was going to know what's going on, it was going to be me, but there were definitely things I learned. This may be a silly example, but I remember seeing a picture of *Astarte* in *Playboy* magazine and thought, "What! How did that happen? What's going on?" But it was such an avant-garde moment, and Joffrey was always cutting edge. So, while that was unsurprising, I was more surprised that I didn't know it had happened.

There are so many treasures in that collection. I'm just so, so happy somebody took the time to go through all of those things. I look forward to diving into it even more, and that's coming from someone whose whole life has been at the Joffrey. So, I hope that someone going in who doesn't know about the Joffrey will also find it fascinating, even if they get one-tenth of what's there. It's so great.

M: I did want to ask, because I noticed this in the exhibition the other day, did you stay to see your name in the scroll of all the company members?

S: Yes, I happened to be there at the time my name came up. A good friend of mine, Nicole Duffy, helped curate this collection in New York and did most of that list from memory. She did a fantastic job.

The list of names is such a beautiful moment to me, because, like I said, it's everyone's history. I think that's such a beautiful thing about the Joffrey Ballet. It is such an important time in everyone's life, and not just to the dancers; it's important to the people who are on admin and the people on the crew. There's something about the Joffrey. It is such a family that, even if someone only spent a year there, it was like that year was the best year in the history of the Joffrey Ballet. It's like that because people are so passionate about it, and it's still thriving 70 years later.

M: I love how excited and passionate you are about this. The last few questions I'll ask here are about that passion. What keeps you excited about ballet? How do you foster that excitement in your students?

S: I think there's obviously a big discussion in the world about whether ballet is still relevant. And I think that's up to us. I don't think there's a right answer or wrong answer. If someone finds it irrelevant, that's their choice. But I think there are ways to make art relevant, even if it's historic like *Giselle* or *Swan Lake*, there's still relevance to it beyond its history. You can make the story relevant, and it can still teach something. Part of the beauty of *Giselle* is that so many people have done that role in their careers, but people still get up there and do it; it's a part of their journey.

I think the Joffrey Ballet has always been at the forefront of making ballet relevant. There's a very famous quote from Robert Joffrey: "Ballet is the center, not the circumference, of what we do." We have that quote up in our building because it has always been the way of the Joffrey. Now lots of companies are doing that. Very few just do ballet anymore, because ballet has evolved. Ballet is not just ballet anymore. You have to be able to do other styles. It's like every other art. Art always evolves. That idea is definitely something I carry over into the Academy. From the youngest ages, we encourage other styles of dance in addition to ballet. People sign up for ballet, and we say, "Okay, now at age seven, you can take jazz class, and then at age eight or nine, you can take modern." Our trainees have about 10 to 15 different styles of classes a week because that's what you need. It's also more fun, but that's what you need to be a dancer. Those versatile dancers are also what we want to create. Not only is versatility much more fun as an audience member to watch and see, but it's also expected now in other places. Overall, it creates better artists, better dancers, and a better experience in someone's career.

M: I've really appreciated how these questions have dovetailed. My final question is: When people come to see a performance at the Joffrey, what do you hope they take away from it?

S: Tying back into the last question, I often say that I challenge someone to come to a performance of the Joffrey and not enjoy it. There might be something you see that doesn't speak to you, but it is exciting. It is, and it always has been. Joffrey has always been about youth, about energy, about now; it's very current. It's in the exhibition, but Gerald Arpino would

choreograph ballets about what was happening in the times, like the Vietnam War. While the Joffrey might not be so pointed to current events right now, it is still very current.

I want people to come and sit down and feel something. I want them to be transported and not to think about what they had for dinner or when the babysitter needs to go home. I want them to escape to whatever kind of space we're creating and hear the beautiful Lyric Opera Orchestra, whether it's *Carmen* or the historic works we have coming up in our American Icons program. I want them to experience something that they maybe can't even describe. While there's no question that our dancers are at the top of their game—that they are incredible technicians and beautiful artists—I don't necessarily want people to watch for the technique. I want them to be transported.

M: It's been such a pleasure to talk to you and to feel your excitement. As part of the Educator team, I hope we can share just how passionate folks who are with the Joffrey are about it and how connected you feel to what you're seeing. Please let me know if you come back to visit the show. I'd love to chat more!

S: Oh, thanks, Molly. I do. I want to bring my whole Academy admin team to have a little field trip to the exhibit, because I think it's important. It's all of our history, so we should really collectively experience that. I'll let you know. Thank you.