

Monday, Nov 02, 2015

Working in the Arts: Alumni Dancing in California and Singing in Texas

Matt Wagner, who graduated from our **dance program** with a BFA in spring 2015, knew just what he wanted and where he was headed. In July he moved out to Los Angeles where he is “working, taking class and auditioning.” Yes, he’s making it as a dancer!

He works primarily with Diavolo as a member of their Institute program. “This means I’m an apprentice as well as an instructor,” said Matt. “We teach workshops and master classes around LA and perform a one hour show that’s a condensed version of what the touring company does.” He performed in his first show in September.

Matt first saw Diavolo at the Detroit Opera House in December 2013. He loved the show and felt the company would be a good fit for him. In 2014 he took their summer intensive. He auditioned in March 2015, just before he graduated, and was offered his current position. “Being in a professional company is great!” said Matt. “I get paid to do what I love.” The Diavolo style is very distinctive; their “Architecture in Motion” demands a high level of technique and athleticism, which suits Matt, who has an extensive background in gymnastics. He came to dance relatively late.

In high school he was thinking about auditioning for Cirque du Soleil, and took his first dance class only after a friend suggested it might make him more marketable to that company. “I enjoyed it a lot,” said Matt, “so I talked with the instructor about the process of pursuing dance as a major. I auditioned at OU and got in.”

Matt also works with Sean Greene in his company Shield Wall, which is a modern pick-up company, scheduled to perform at the end of January. Currently he has two four-hour classes/rehearsals with them each week. In addition to performing, Matt teaches gymnastics at Broadway Gymnastics School, acrobatics at 8 Count Dance Academy and he gives private lessons and workshops

That keeps him pretty busy, but not too busy to stay in shape using the free options available in the California sunshine. Prepare to be jealous! “One of my favorites is Muscle Beach in Santa Monica. There’s a lot of gymnastics-like equipment to play on, a nice grass area for yoga or whatever else you want, and you can go running along the beach to work on your endurance!”

Matt believes networking is easy in LA because there are so many artists around and he said, “You never know what opportunities come your way just by striking up a conversation with someone.” Being open to those opportunities is the key, and Matt feels the dance program made sure he was well prepared to thrive.

“I’m a unique case starting as a gymnast and not growing up in a dance studio,” he said, “but I give full credit to all my professors for turning me into the artist I am, and I was given every opportunity to study and experience every facet of the performing arts industry. With their guidance, I was able to get a position with one of the largest companies in LA. And they continue to support and guide me even now that I’ve graduated.”

And he feels strongly about the friends he made along the way. “The students were no small part of my journey either. Over the years the dancers I met at OU have become my family. And I have gained valuable friends and connections with people from other departments too. Now I have a support system from all over the world. It’s great knowing that no matter where I go, I will have someone there to help me, whether it’s in person or via phone or email.”

You can see Diavolo dance on their **YouTube page** and learn more about them on their **website**.

Samantha Wood, who graduated from



Matt Wagner

University of North Texas, where she began working on a DMA in voice performance, with a concentration in operatic studies. It's a three year program.

Sam says she will spend two years studying in a classroom setting and performing with the opera department, from which she received a scholarship. In her third year she will work on her dissertation recital. "I will split my time into half research and half performing," she said. "I have always considered myself to be equal parts performer and academic. The thrill I experience in performing has always been matched by the delight I find when learning something new, especially when I am given the opportunity to share that knowledge with others. I believe a DMA degree will help me maintain these two important parts of my greater whole as a musician, by preparing me for work in a university position one day."



Samantha Wood

During her hiatus from academic work Sam returned to her small hometown in Pennsylvania. She knew she would be able to keep herself busy but was worried about finding fulfilling musical experiences. She was delighted to find that her skills and experience were very much in demand!

"In eight months . . . I performed three recitals, one classical, one jazz and one musical theatre; I vocal coached a high school production of Les Mis; I music directed a community theatre production of RENT; and I ran a seven-person vocal studio out of my home."

Like many Music, Theatre and Dance alums she stays in touch with her former teachers, and before leaving for Texas she wrote them about her "in-between" months. "I want you to know that without my education from Oakland, none of this would have even been possible in a year's time, let alone a little over a semester. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't feel deep gratitude towards you for taking a chance on me and for giving me all that you did.

"The teaching experiences, lessons, lectures, discussions, and coachings you have given me have all shaped me into the performer and educator I am today. And I am very proud of who I am because of the work we did together. I asked to study from each of you various ways and in return you all opened your hearts and minds to me in ways completely unexpected. You have taught me the power of believing in one's self and how to inspire others to do the same and that has made all the difference in my life. I look back at the girl who walked into that audition almost three years ago and I hardly recognize her, and that has so much to do with each and every one of you in Varner."

Those words say everything about **Music, Theatre and Dance** that we could ever wish to convey. Thank you Samantha!

We are so proud of each and every one of our alumni working the arts. We always love hearing from you. Send us your news!