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The National Center for Choreography at The University of Akron Receives \$750,000 from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for Creative Administration Research: Exploring More Creative Practices in the Business of Dance



Photo credit: Artist Raja Feather Kelly | the feath3r theory and NCCAakron Executive/Artistic Director Christy Bolingbroke during the artist's *Inside the Dancer's Studio* interview. Photo by Dale Dong.

AKRON, Ohio (November 12, 2020)—**The National Center for Choreography at The University of Akron (NCCAakron)** announces a \$750,000 multi-year award from **The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation** to build out a new program, **Creative Administration Research (CAR)**. Over the next three years, NCCAakron will foster a national think tank of up to 20 dance Artist Teams to investigate alternative administrative practices in support of their discrete artistic

visions. Every six months, cohorts of up to six dance artists will be onboarded to engage in the CAR program.

NCCAkron's **Executive/Artistic Director Christy Bolingbroke** explained, "Creative Administration Research work developed out of a series of realizations and early prototypes dating back to 2018. We have been exploring the fact that NCCAkron helps new dances get made, but in many ways we were also being complicit in a system where artists lack administrative infrastructure or a consistent operating environment. According to NEFA's 2016 Moving Dance Forward report, at least 80% of today's dance field work is created on a project or independent basis, but artists are asked to keep pace as if they are full-time or an incorporated nonprofit. The so-called best practices developed across our sector over the past 70 years are not necessarily *best* for everyone. Through our Creative Administration Research program we aim to disrupt this dynamic."

Challenging the dance ecosystem to think beyond the boundaries of known, traditional models, NCCAkron's CAR program will add cohorts of five or six Artist Teams every six months for an accumulated 18-20 teams by the end of the grant period. Artist Teams will comprise choreographers and select administrative leaders (if the artist has a company or ensemble); a curated Thought Partner; and NCCAkron staff members. Each Artist Team will engage in an artist-dedicated Investigative Retreat, with time and space to reflect on their body of work, examine critical pain points across operations, and imagine multiple ways forward. The paired Thought Partner will provide additional accountability in between Investigative Retreats. In 2022 and 2023, all active Artist Teams will gather in Akron, Ohio, for a Summit Convening to exchange experiences and working knowledge accumulated to date.

From 2018-20, NCCAkron prototyped Creative Administration Research with choreographers **Raja Feather Kelly | the feath3r theory**, **Jaamil Olawale Kosoko**, and **Brian Brooks/Moving Company**.

"Creative Administrative Research invites artists like me to develop and research administration practices that support my own artistic point of view, rather than accept or reinforce the one size fits all approach," says Nigerian-American choreographer and visiting artist (2018, 2020-23) Jaamil Olawale Kosoko. "In this way by highlighting the unique perspectives of Black artists, our work together dismantles practices and behaviors upheld within white supremacy culture."

The three prototype artists will continue their investigations and be joined by **Rashaun Mitchell + Silas Riener** and **Ronald K. Brown, EVIDENCE** as the first cohort. All have already begun this work remotely in Fall 2020.

NCCAkron recently wrapped up the CAR Work-In-Process (WiP) Series as a first step in identifying potential Thought Partners as well as collecting program feedback from 41 thinkers and leaders across the performing arts sector. The CAR WiP Series scheduled small group

discussions with arts administrators, artists, funders, and presenters to discuss current dance business models and the potential around the CAR program.

By early 2021, NCCAkron will identify and match Thought Partners with the next curated cohort. This group includes **Abby Zbikowski of Abby Z and the New Utility** (Champaign-Urbana, IL); **Bebe Miller, Bebe Miller Company** (Columbus, OH); **7NMSJ Marjani Forté-Saunders & Everett Saunders** (Pasadena, CA); **Kate Wallich, The YC** (Seattle, WA); and **Banning Bouldin, New Dialect** (Nashville, TN).

Bolingbroke continues, “I am so grateful not only to the Mellon Foundation for their visionary funding support, but also for the trust shared by the artists and administrators joining us on this grand experiment. From the early prototype visits that allowed us to illustrate proof of concept to our Mellon colleagues to digging into the relative unknown as we establish next steps, this is unlike any other residency invitation. As we continue to explore and understand how this research takes shape, our hope is to expand this opportunity by open application before Year Three of the program.”

Over the course of three years, NCCAkron will document and share discoveries from this work through a publishing partnership with The University of Akron Press. Named a series editor by the UA Press in 2020, NCCAkron plans to develop and publish two books per year, highlighting the labor and leadership of choreographers producing work today to thrive as dance and arts administration textbooks of tomorrow.

Incorporated in 2015, NCCAkron will celebrate its 5th anniversary in December 2020. Part of the Mellon award also allows for the Center to hire its second full-time employee, **Program Manager Kat Wentz**. With the support of founding partners DANCECleveland, the Knight Foundation, and The University of Akron, NCCAkron strives to operate from a place of abundance and possibility, seeking out opportunities to be a hyperagent for dance: identifying new creative solutions that benefit the organization and the field at large. This has manifested in a re-imagining of what a choreographic center can do, instead offering adaptive, scaleable options for artists to “meet them where they are”; disrupting the lottery system of support by creating proximity and pluralist opportunities; and advocating for dance as a more central part of U.S. culture. Most of 2020 programming has transformed to remote or virtual operations due to COVID. In addition to the CAR program, NCCAkron is hosting a year-long Dancing Lab for Black, male-identified choreographers; Satellite Residencies aggregating resources with dance artists and institutions all over the country; and will be publishing its first book written by Hope Mohr (San Francisco, CA) about shifting cultural power in July 2021.

About NCCAkron

The National Center for Choreography at The University of Akron supports the research and development of new work in dance by exploring the full potential of the creative process. In addition to offering studio and technical residencies to make new work, activities focus on

catalyzing dialogue and experimentation; creating proximity among artists and dance thinkers; and aggregating resources around dance making. For more information, visit nccakron.org.

The establishment and general operation of NCCAkron is made possible by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

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Creative Administration Research Artist Biographies (2018-2021)

Abby Zbikowski, Abby Z and the New Utility (Champaign-Urbana, IL)

Abby Zbikowski founded her company Abby Z and the New Utility in 2012, which has performed nationally at Jacob's Pillow and the Fuse Box Festival, among others. Zbikowski is a 2020 United States Artists Fellow, a 2017 Juried Bessie Award recipient, and was awarded a "Choreographer of the Future" commission from Dance Umbrella UK in 2018. She is an inaugural Caroline Hearst Choreographer-In-Residence at the Lewis Center of the Arts at Princeton University (2017-19) and is currently artist in residence at New York Live Arts (2018-20). She is an assistant professor of Dance at the University of Illinois and on faculty at American Dance Festival. Zbikowski holds a BFA in dance from Temple University and an MFA from The Ohio State University. abbyznewutility.org

Banning Bouldin, New Dialect (Nashville, TN)

Banning Bouldin is an educator, choreographer, and the founding artistic director of New Dialect contemporary dance collective, based in Nashville, Tennessee. She received her BFA from The Juilliard School in 2002, and spent the first decade of her career performing internationally with renowned companies and choreographers, such as The Cullberg Ballet of Sweden and Aszure Barton and Artists. An awarded choreographer, Banning's works have been commissioned by companies, universities, and presenters across the US, including Jacob's Pillow, Gibney Company, the Juilliard School, and OZ Arts Nashville. Her company New Dialect, now in its 7th season, acts as a hub for contemporary dancers, teaching artists, and choreographers to connect and explore the wide variety of movement languages that exist in 21st Century dance. newdialect.org

Bebe Miller, Bebe Miller Company (Columbus, OH)

Bebe Miller, an American choreographer, dancer and director, first performed her work at NYC's Dance Theater Workshop in 1978. Interested in "finding a physical language for the human condition," she formed Bebe Miller Company in 1985. The Company has performed extensively in the UK, Europe, Africa and throughout the US. Miller's choreography, noted for its mix of virtuosic, athletic speed and fragile humanity, has been commissioned by Oregon Ballet Theatre, Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, Boston Ballet, Philadanco, the UK's Phoenix Dance Company and PACT Dance Company of Johannesburg, South Africa. She was named a Master of African American Choreography by the Kennedy Center, has received four "Bessie" awards, United States Artists and Guggenheim Fellowships, honorary doctorates from Ursinus College and Franklin & Marshall College, and is one of the inaugural class of Doris Duke Artist Award recipients. bebemillercompany.org

Brian Brooks/Moving Company (New York, NY)

Choreographer Brian Brooks, a Guggenheim Fellow, recently completed a Mellon Foundation Creative Artist Fellowship at the University of Washington, researching the intersection of performance and augmented reality technologies. From 2016-2019 he was the appointed Choreographer in Residence at Chicago's Harris Theater for Music and Dance, creating dances for Hubbard Street, Miami City Ballet, and others. Based in New York City, his dance group, the Moving Company, has toured internationally since 2002 with presentations by BAM's Next Wave Festival, the Joyce Theater, Jacob's Pillow, the American Dance Festival, NY City Center Fall for Dance Festival, among others. Brooks has collaborated with NYC Ballet Associate Artistic Director and former Principal Dancer Wendy Whelan since 2012, as well as choreographing multiple off-Broadway Theater productions with Theatre for a New Audience. He has served as part-time faculty at both Rutgers University and Princeton University, and was a Teaching Artist at the Lincoln Center Institute from 1999 to 2012.

brianbrooksmovingcompany.com

Jaamil Olawale Kosoko (New York, NY)

Jaamil Olawale Kosoko is a Bessie Award–nominated, Nigerian American performance artist, poet, curator, community organizer, and educator. His performance work has been presented throughout the US and Europe, and his poems, interviews, and essays have appeared in American Poetry Review, Dunes Review, Dance Journal, and Critical Correspondence, among other publications. Kosoko has received a series of fellowships, grants, and awards—including a 2020 Pew Fellowship, 2019 NYSCA/NYFA Artist Fellowship in Choreography, 2019 NPN Development Fund Award, 2019 Movement Research Artist in Residence, 2018-20 Live Feed Artist at New York Live Arts, 2017-19 Princeton Arts Fellow, Red Bull Writing Fellow, 2017 MAP Fund recipient, and Cave Canem Poetry Fellow—and he continues to guest teach, speak, and lecture internationally. Currently, he is the Alma Hawkins Visiting Professor at UCLA (Los Angeles, CA). Please follow along at jaamil.com and [@chameleon_coalition](https://www.instagram.com/chameleon_coalition) on Instagram.

Kate Wallich, The YC (Seattle, WA)

Kate Wallich is a choreographer, director and educator – named one of Dance Magazine's "25 to Watch". She has left a significant mark in the Pacific Northwest with commissions and presentations from institutions including On the Boards, Velocity Dance Center, and Seattle Art Museum; nationally at Walker Art Center with Liquid Music, The Joyce Theater, Jacob's Pillow Inside/Out; internationally at Springboard Danse and SPOTLIGHT: USA in Bulgaria. In 2010 she co-founded her company The YC with Lavinia Vago and has gone on to create five evening-length works and three large scale site-specific works. In 2010 she founded Dance Church®, an all-abilities, community-focused class that is taught in cities worldwide.

Katewallich.com

Marjani Forté-Saunders|7NMS (Pasadena, CA)

Marjani Forté-Saunders is a choreographer, performer, and community organizer. Her practice is informed by years in anti-racist organizer training and as a lead facilitator with Urban Bush Women's (UBW) Builders, Organizers and Leaders through Dance. She is a 2020 recipient of

the Foundation of Contemporary Arts Grants for Artists Award and an inaugural fellow of the UBW Choreographic Center, the Jerome Artist Fellowship, and the DanceUSA Fellowship. Forté-Saunders collaborates with husband and composer Everett Asis Saunders as 7NMS|. They are founding directors of the platform ART & POWER, dedicated to Black Purpose and Innovation. Their latest work PROPHET is being incubated through Art & Power's #SatelliteResidencies (in response to COVID-19) and in partnership with co-commissioners Abrons Arts Center, Kelly Strayhorn Theatre, and the BAM Inaugural Artist Residency Series. 7nms.com

Raja Feather Kelly | the feath3r theory (Brooklyn, NY)

Choreographer/Director Raja Feather Kelly is the founder and artistic director of the dance-theatre-media company the feath3r theory. He was born in Fort Hood, Texas and holds a B.A. in Dance and English from Connecticut College. He is a three-time Princess Grace Award winner (2017, 2018, 2019). Over the past decade he has created fifteen evening-length works for the feath3r theory, choreographed extensively for Off-Broadway theatre, and performed with Reggie Wilson/Fist and Heel Performance Group, David Dorfman Dance, Kyle Abraham | A.I.M, and zoe | juniper. thefeath3rtheory.com

Rashaun Mitchell + Silas Riener (New York, NY)

Rashaun Mitchell + Silas Riener are New York-based dance artists. Their ongoing work involves the building of collaborative worlds through improvisational techniques, digital technologies, and material construction. Together they have been artists-in-residence at LMCC, Mt Tremper, pieter, Jacob's Pillow, New York City Center, The Watermill Center, MANCC, Headlands Center for the Arts, BOFFO, Center for Ballet and the Arts, and Baryshnikov Arts Center. Their work has been commissioned by Danspace Project, Madison Square Park, The Joyce Theater, BAM/Next Wave, The Barbican, EMPAC, The Walker Art Center, MCA Chicago, The Wexner, On The Boards, The LAB, Marfa Sounding, SFMOMA and MoMA PS1. rashaunsilasdance.com

Ronald K. Brown, EVIDENCE (New York, NY)

Ronald K. Brown founded Evidence, A Dance Company in 1985. He has worked with Mary Anthony Dance Theater, Jennifer Muller/The Works and other choreographers and artists. Brown has set works on Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Ailey II, Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, Jeune Ballet d'Afrique Noire, Philadanco, Ballet Hispanico, and Malpasos. He won an AUDELCO Award for his choreography in Regina Taylor's award-winning play Crowns, received two Black Theater Alliance Awards, and a Fred & Adele Astaire Award for Outstanding Choreography in the Tony Award winning Broadway and national touring production of The Gershwin's Porgy & Bess. Brown was named Def Dance Jam Workshop 2000 Mentor of the Year and has received Scripps/ADF Award, John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship, National Endowment for the Arts Choreographers Fellowship, United States Artists Fellowship, Jacob's Pillow Dance Award, and The Ailey Apex Award. Brown is a member of Stage Directors & Choreographers Society and Co-Director of Restoration ART /Youth Arts Academy Pre-Professional Training Program. evidencedance.com