



# Maria Caruso Returns to Her Roots as Director of Dance

BY VANESSA ORR | PHOTOS: JIM JUDKIS

**I**t's hard to believe that Maria Caruso's relationship with La Roche College came as the result of a fortune cookie's advice.

Ms. Caruso, founder of Bodiography and chair of La Roche's Performing Arts Department, was a gifted dance student who had been accepted into the Bolshoi Ballet's summer intensive at the age of 13. La Roche English Professor Dr. Linda Jordan invited Ms. Caruso, who was still in high school, to participate in the College's dual enrollment program under the direction of former President Monsignor William Kerr.

"I could take my high school classes in the morning, and attend college dance classes in the afternoon," Ms. Caruso said. "But I couldn't decide if that's what I wanted to do. I was at a Chinese restaurant and opened a fortune cookie that said, 'When you have the opportunity of a lifetime, take it.' So I did."

Ms. Caruso was able to complete her freshman year at La Roche by the time she graduated high school at age 16. She then decided to take a break from Pittsburgh and transferred to Florida State University (FSU), one of the top dance schools in the country.

"I loved dancing, but then my body started to develop, and I began to struggle because it did not fit the stereotypical aesthetic for ballet," she explained. "I was lucky enough to participate in a summer intensive at Dance Theatre of Harlem, where I felt good about my talent, my body and my reverence for technique. I realized that there was this big divide in the dance

community between the aesthetic of the body versus the aesthetic of technique."

Fast forward a few years, and Bodiography Contemporary Ballet, a performance outlet for professional dancers with non-stereotypical bodies, was born. Since it first opened 15 years ago, the Bodiography umbrella has grown to encompass Bodiography Contemporary Ballet, Bodiography Center for Movement (BCM), and Bodiography Fitness and Wellness.

"I started Bodiography Center for Movement as a way to provide quality dance education for talented students looking for a well-rounded program," she said. "I based my program around what I did at La Roche; high school juniors and seniors are able to take college credits and get ahead in dance academics so that they can get into elite programs at schools like New York University and Princeton."

## Returning to Her Roots

Six years ago Ms. Caruso received a call from the late Coach Scott Lang at La Roche, who asked if she would consider a position as director of the school's dance department. "It was kind of random," she said, "but I realized that a position at La Roche could allow me to interface what was happening in the community with what was happening in the arts. I also would be able to create a platform for dancers to get their undergraduate degrees that focused on the whole picture — not just ballet or contemporary, but everything in dance."

The La Roche position also enabled Ms. Caruso to scout for talent across the country, including in underserved areas where young performers might not be

able to attend college because of the cost; if accepted, eligible students may receive a merit scholarship of up to \$64,000 at La Roche.

Ms. Caruso sees roughly 1,000 students during auditions and accepts only 10 new students per year. "I keep the program auditions very rigid and only accept a small number of artists in order to foster the development of each individual," she explained.

One of the advantages of being in the La Roche dance program is that students have the opportunity to dance with professional artists through Ms. Caruso's work with Bodiography. "It is a very atypical college program. Every week our dance majors are able to take a class with a professional company. It's like going to New York and taking a class with Misty Copeland," Ms. Caruso said.

Students also dance with Bodiography professionals and BCM's student performance company at two performances each year.

Numerous guest artists work with La Roche dance majors, and the students also participate in outreach programs in the Pittsburgh Public Schools. "It's important for them to get outside the dance classroom and see what else they can do. Before they graduate I want to give them maximum opportunities to understand all of the possibilities of a career in the arts," Ms. Caruso said.

This approach is paying off; the La Roche program has seen a 117 percent increase in enrollment and boasts a 100 percent placement rate for students after they graduate. "In a field where only the top five percent of dance majors get jobs, 100



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— Maria Caruso  
Chair, La Roche College Performing Arts Department

percent of our students get a full-time job in dance or in the arts," Ms. Caruso said. "My students tell me their dreams and goals, and we figure out a way to make it happen."

### Dancing Toward Their Goals

La Roche dance students come from diverse backgrounds and have very different goals, but the one thing that they have in common is a love of dance.

Derrick Izumi, who is now in his second semester at La Roche, said, "I was dancing and teaching at my mom's studio in Hawaii when Maria found me while scouting for students. I didn't know anything about the College at the time, but it turned out to be an amazing program, though it was very different from what I'd been doing."

Working in a commercial studio, Mr. Izumi was more focused on contemporary dance, and it took some

time to adjust to the College's emphasis on ballet. "At first it didn't click with me, but I got into it more and more," he said. "I appreciate the hard work that it takes to perfect seemingly small movements. It doesn't matter what style you're doing; it's all about working your body and making yourself stronger internally."

Mr. Izumi, who is majoring in performing arts and considering a second major in writing, said he hopes to someday become a sought-after, cutting-edge dance teacher, as well as a published author.

"Maria really pushes us — not just our bodies, but our mental fortitude," he said. "It's hard, but it's a blessing when you realize that all of your goals have been accomplished, even after just one class."

Junior Valerie Szypulski initially came to La Roche for its biology program. But once she met Ms. Caruso, she decided

to double major in dance and biology before continuing on her path to become a doctor. Ms. Szypulski already has been accepted to the Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine.

"Maria really pushed me to get all of my courses in," Ms. Szypulski said. "She inspires me, pushes me and reminds me to make the most of every moment."

Those moments include performing onstage at the Byham Theater as an apprentice dancer with Bodiography and performing in "The Messiah" at La Roche.

"Here, I get the opportunity to fulfill my desire to perform and to make the most of my undergraduate studies," Ms. Szypulski said. "I don't see myself performing after medical school, so I love that I can spend this time learning, making mistakes and pushing myself to get better. Everything I learn as an undergraduate will help better prepare me for the real world."



## SAVE THE DATES

for the following performances

**NOV. 18, 2017**  
"The Messiah"  
at the Byham Theater

**DEC. 7, 2017**  
"The Nutcracker"  
at La Roche College in the  
Zappala College Center Square