

Meet the Faculty



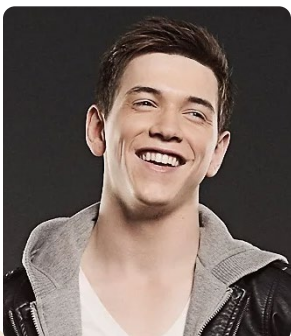
Melissa Anderson Hailing from Milwaukee, Melissa Anderson has performed soloist and principal roles with the Icelandic Ballet, Milwaukee Ballet, Ballet Teatro Municipal de San Juan, and Orlando Ballet, and spent over 15 years with Danceworks Performance Company. Transitioning from stage to studio, she has become a respected educator at institutions including the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Peck School of the Arts and Marquette University, and teaches throughout the Greater Milwaukee area. Melissa is a sought-after guest master teacher for national organizations such as Dance Masters of Wisconsin and Southern Dance Masters. ABT® Certified, she is passionate about teaching ballet in a supportive, body-conscious way that honors tradition while challenging outdated practices. A recipient of the 2024 Chicago National Association of Dance Masters Artistic Achievement Award, Melissa continues to inspire dancers through teaching and digital platforms, sharing her expertise and enthusiasm with a broad audience.



John "Comix" Barrella is a leading figure in street dance, specializing in Locking, Popping, B-boy, and Hip Hop. His work has been featured in music videos such as *Get Away* by Alissia, major events including TEDx: Chaos, and NBA halftime performances. A respected choreographer and educator, John teaches globally and serves as a Hip Hop adjunct professor at Rider University and master faculty for the Joffrey Ballet audition tour. He began training at 14 in modern and ballet before studying Hip Hop with pioneers like Tom McKie and Jazzy J. Since 2007, he has directed Redef Dance Company, known for its innovative street dance work and comedic productions like *Stupid Humans*. He is also the creator of "The Comix Method," a widely used certification program that supports Hip Hop educators worldwide.



Julie Cartier - artistic director, choreographer, performer, and lifelong dance enthusiast - has dedicated her career to the art form. After arriving in Chicago through the concert dance scene, she performed with companies including River North Dance Company, The Lynda Martha Company, and Chi-town Jazz Dance. She later became a founding member of Especially Tap Chicago, eventually leading the group as it evolved into The Cartier Collective, where she presents original works. Julie's diverse career spans concert dance, musical theater, cruise lines, and television appearances, including *The Today Show*. Her choreography has earned recognition from the Chicago Human Rhythm Project and CNADM. For over 30 years, she has been a respected faculty member at leading Chicago-area institutions and founded the Sole-2-Soles Youth Tap Company. Today, Julie focuses on mentoring the next generation while continuing to create and teach nationwide.



Patrick Cook is a professional dancer whose career spans commercial and concert dance. Trained from a young age, he has performed with major artists including Taylor Swift, Selena Gomez, Katy Perry, and Paula Abdul, and co-choreographed Justin Bieber's *Life is Worth Living*. He toured internationally with Ezralow Dance, performing in productions across the U.S. and China, and appeared on television shows such as *Glee*, *Superstore*, and *Two and a Half Men*. Patrick has toured with Taylor Swift's Red Tour and Paula Abdul's Total Package Tour, bringing his dynamic performance style to global audiences. Based in Los Angeles, he teaches at Ohana Dance Studio and works with many conventions including KAR, Dance Revolution, and Manhattan Dance Project. Passionate about education, Patrick continues to inspire dancers through teaching, choreography, and performance.

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Jessica Deahr Neville is a celebrated choreographer and former Artistic Director of Chicago Dance Crash, where she led an acclaimed 11-year tenure. Her work has been featured in national tours and recognized with honors including Dance Magazine's "Most Inventive New Work" and Chicago Tribune's "Best in Dance." Jessica's choreography has been presented at major venues such as the Auditorium Theatre, Millennium Park, and the Harris Theater, and commissioned by brands including Uniqlo and Cheerios. Her theater credits include work with Drury Lane Theatre and Northlight Theatre. A former performer and aerialist with C5 and Royal Caribbean, she now serves as rehearsal choreographer and coach for C5's Aqua shows. Jessica continues to create across concert, commercial, and theatrical spaces, blending innovation with storytelling.



Richard Elszy is a Los Angeles-based master educator and choreographer with over 23 years of teaching experience and two decades as a technical director for a nationally ranked studio. Trained at UC Irvine, the Ruth Page Center, and Lou Conte Dance Studio, he studied under renowned mentors including Donald McKayle. Richard is the founder of Building Blocks of Dance, an internationally recognized training program that equips teachers with strategies to develop strong, injury-resistant dancers through simplified, progressive technique. His approach emphasizes posture, placement, strength, and long-term wellness. A sought-after teacher and award-winning choreographer, Richard has taught and presented work nationally and internationally. He remains committed to shaping confident, technically sound dancers through thoughtful, developmentally aligned training.



Deborah Engerman is a highly respected ballet educator and former director of Maryland Classical Dance Academy. After touring Europe as Ballet Mistress with *Rock The Ballet*, she returned to the U.S. to focus on teaching and mentorship. Trained with the Baltimore Ballet in the RAD tradition and further influenced by Vaganova and French methodologies, she has staged major classical works including *The Nutcracker*, *Cinderella*, and *Swan Lake*. Her students have gone on to professional careers with companies such as ABT, Boston Ballet, Complexions, and Hubbard Street. Deborah has coached dancers to success in prestigious international competitions, including Prix de Lausanne and Youth America Grand Prix. In 2023, she published *Let's Talk About Fifth: Teaching Ballet in the Twenty-First Century*. She continues to train dancers throughout Pennsylvania and Maryland.



Asha Gangolli, a native of Evanston, Illinois, trained with Kerry Hubata and Bea Rashid before continuing her studies with Houston Ballet, Boston Ballet, and as a trainee with The Joffrey Ballet. She performed in productions including *The Nutcracker*, *La Bayadère*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. In 2014, Asha joined Alabama Ballet and was promoted to company dancer in 2017. She has since performed numerous principal roles, including Sugar Plum Fairy and Coffee in *The Nutcracker*, Lilac Fairy in *The Sleeping Beauty*, Fairy Godmother in *Cinderella*, and Myrtha in *Giselle*. Her repertoire also includes works by Balanchine, De Mille, Twyla Tharp, and others. In addition to performing, Asha serves on faculty at the Alabama Ballet School and teaches classical Pilates, sharing her passion for technique, artistry, and dancer wellness.

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Nan Giordano has led Giordano Dance Chicago for over four decades, continuing the legacy of her father, jazz dance pioneer Gus Giordano. An internationally respected teacher and leader, Nan has taught master classes and toured worldwide, sharing her expertise across Europe, Central America, and beyond. Her impact on the dance community has been widely recognized, including honors such as the Dance for Life Impact Award, the Grace Wakefield Lifetime Achievement Award, and designation as a Chicago Tribune “Chicagoan of the Year” in Dance. She has also been recognized by the City of Chicago with an official day in her honor. Most recently, she received the prestigious “Take Your Seat” recognition at the Harris Theater and served as a judge for the A.C.E. Awards. Nan continues to shape the future of jazz dance through education, mentorship, and performance.



Maray Gutierrez is a native of Havana, Cuba, where she trained at the prestigious Escuela Nacional de Arte. For 10 years, she was a principal dancer with the internationally acclaimed Danza Contemporánea de Cuba, working with renowned contemporary and classical choreographers. As an international artist, Maray has performed professionally throughout Europe, the U.S., and the Caribbean, presenting work at festivals including the American Dance Festival, the International Dance Festival in Berlin, the Holland Dance Festival, and the International Ballet Festival in Genoa, Italy. Since relocating to Chicago, Maray has shared her unique energy and movement vocabulary on stage and in film with Luna Negra Dance Theater, CDI/Concert Dance Inc., the Lyric Opera of Chicago, and Hedwig Dances, where she served as Artistic Associate for 14 years. She received an Emmy nomination in 2008 for *Billy Sunday* and was honored with the 2021 3Arts *Make a Wave* grant and a 2022 Dance Leadership Award from Hedwig Dances.



Tiffany Henderson is an industry leader, studio owner, and dance business expert. She owns and operates multiple locations of Tiffany’s Dance Academy in Northern California, serving thousands of dancers annually. Tiffany produces large-scale performances, including multiple *Nutcracker* productions, and oversees dozens of recitals each year. She is the creator of Twinkle Star Dance, a widely adopted curriculum and teacher training system used in over 300 studios worldwide, as well as Twinkle Star Dance Academy, a dance studio franchise. Tiffany also consults with studio owners through her Diamond Circle program and produces *Dance the Dream*, performance events held at major destinations such as Disney Parks and Royal Caribbean Cruises. A frequent speaker and contributor to industry conferences and publications, Tiffany is dedicated to supporting dance educators and strengthening studio communities.



Gunner James began dancing at age seven and quickly gained recognition, earning Senior Male Dancer of the Year at Tremaine Dance Convention in 2011. After moving to Los Angeles, he built a professional career performing on *Glee*, in Disney campaigns, and in projects for major entertainment releases. He has worked as both performer and assistant to leading choreographers and contributed to educational platforms such as DancePlug. In 2019, Gunner expanded his career internationally in Shanghai, where he performed, choreographed, and collaborated with global brands including Google and Perrier-Jouët. Upon returning to the U.S., he directed an award-winning competitive dance company and continues to teach nationwide. Known for his dynamic energy and commitment to mentorship, Gunner is passionate about inspiring dancers through performance, education, and leadership.

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Shelby Kaufman is a versatile performer, choreographer, and tap artist whose work spans stage, screen, and theater. She has performed at prestigious venues including Lincoln Center and Jacob's Pillow and appeared on The Today Show and Sesame Street. Shelby has choreographed for projects including Tovah Feldshuh's one-woman show *Aging is Optional*, the feature film *A Bread Factory Part 2*, and was selected as a 2025 Dance Lab NY Connect choreographer. Her credits include assisting on an off-Broadway production with Emmy Award-winning choreographer Mandy Moore. A protégé of tap legend Dr. Harold "Stumpy" Cromer, she has performed with leading tap companies and continues to teach at Broadway Dance Center and Steps on Broadway. In 2025, she was honored as a "Champion of Tap Dance" by New York State. Her social media has garnered over 70 million views.



Brandon Koepsell, a Detroit native and graduate of Walnut Hill School, has built a diverse career as a performer, choreographer, and educator. He has danced with companies including *Companie Coline* in France, *Ron DeJesus Dance*, and *Take Root*, and has appeared with Michigan Opera Theater. His film credits include work on Disney's *Oz the Great and Powerful* and *A Very Harold & Kumar Christmas*. Brandon has created and presented choreography at festivals nationwide and has collaborated with numerous universities. He currently teaches at Wayne State University and works with Eisenhower Dance Detroit. In addition to his artistic work, he leads Dance for Parkinson's classes through Henry Ford Health Systems, using dance as a tool for wellness and community engagement.



Alexa Kruchten, a Chicago native, is a dancer, choreographer, and educator with a focus in jazz and hip hop. She graduated from Point Park University with a BA in Jazz and a minor in business, where she trained with renowned faculty and led the university's Hip Hop Club, *Impulse*. Alexa is currently a member and choreographer for BOOM CRACK! Dance Company under the direction of Trae Turner. She has assisted in teaching and choreography for institutions including Boston Conservatory, Visceral Dance Chicago, and Western Michigan University. Alexa teaches regularly throughout Chicago and its suburbs, working with teen and adult dancers. Passionate about growth and community, she is dedicated to helping students develop confidence, artistry, and a strong technical foundation.



Jackie "Miss Funk" Lopez is a pioneering Hip Hop and street dance artist, educator, and cultural leader with over 25 years of experience. A Los Angeles native and UCLA graduate, she made history as the first Latina to create and teach a Hip Hop/Street Dance curriculum at the university level at UCLA. She is the Co-Founder and Artistic Director of Versa-Style Street Dance Company, a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing Hip Hop culture through performance, education, and community engagement. Through her work, Jackie has represented the United States as a cultural ambassador, created internationally recognized productions, and served as a judge for major dance battles around the world. Her honors include the 2025 Western Arts Alliance Leadership Award and Dance Teacher Magazine's 2024 Honorary Award. Committed to both innovation and preservation, Jackie continues to uplift communities and honor the cultural roots of Hip Hop, ensuring its legacy is passed on with authenticity, knowledge, and purpose.

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Joshua Manculich (BA, Point Park University; MFA, Ohio State University; M.Ed, Ohio University) is a choreographer, performer, educator, and licensed psychotherapist. Originally from Windber, Pennsylvania, he began his dance training at 14 and went on to perform with companies including Thodos Dance Chicago, Chicago Repertory Ballet, and The Pillow Project. In 2021, he founded WhirlWind Dance, a contemporary company based in Columbus, Ohio. Joshua's choreography, known for its conceptual depth, has been presented nationally and internationally and commissioned by organizations such as Ballet Austin II and DanceWorks Chicago. He was nominated for a Princess Grace Choreography Fellowship and created work with support from the foundation. In addition to his artistic career, Joshua integrates mental health advocacy into his work, emphasizing the connection between artistry, identity, and well-being.



Erina Ueda is a multidisciplinary dancer and artist originally from Nagoya, Japan, and raised in Arizona. Now in her fifth season with Giordano Dance Chicago, she is the company's first Asian female dancer and was named one of Dance Magazine's "25 to Watch" in 2024. Her performance credits include principal roles in works such as *Luminescence* and *Gershwin in B*, as well as repertoire by renowned choreographers including Nacho Duato and Martha Graham. Erina graduated summa cum laude from the University of Arizona with a BFA in Dance and a minor in Psychology. She is also the first Japanese dancer to achieve Professional Level certification in the Giordano Technique. Beyond performing, she serves as Media Coordinator for the company, contributing to its digital and creative presence through storytelling and visual media.



Eduardo Zambrana is a Bolivian-born dancer, choreographer, and educator with an MFA in Choreography and Performance from the University of Arizona. He has performed with companies including Hawkinsdance, Convergence Ballet, and Dance Kaleidoscope, and is a current member of Giordano Dance Chicago. Eduardo is the only Bolivian artist certified at the professional level in the Giordano Technique. His training spans ballet, modern, and jazz, and he has performed works by Paul Taylor, Nacho Duato, and Martha Graham. As a choreographer, his work has been presented nationally and internationally, with commissions from organizations such as Simantikos Dance Chicago and Giordano II. His screen dance work earned Best Student Film at the Red Rock ScreenDance Festival. Eduardo continues to create and teach, bringing a global perspective to his artistry.

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