

In good company

Karen Grundy took a leap of faith by leaving Las Vegas. Her reward is directing her own local company.

By NISA KORTE

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Backstage at the Missouri Theatre, Artistic Director Karen Grundy rushes up the stairs to the dressing room to offer her dancers yellow roses, something she plans to make a tradition. Grundy masks her nervousness with enthusiastic encouragement. It's not stage fright that Grundy fears; she's not performing. She's the director and co-founder of the Missouri Contemporary Ballet, and this is the company's first show.

Most directors are nervous when making their debut, but the lack of contemporary dance in Columbia also fueled Grundy's apprehension. This absence also made it difficult for Grundy to anticipate how the city's ballet patrons would respond to the first show, *Twisted*, on Nov. 19. Grundy expected an audience between 200 and 250 people, but to her surprise and delight, about 500 people came, causing a shortage in programs.

With such a large turnout, clearly a lot of Columbians had heard about the company. Dancer Laura Jones says, "I hope we become well-known in this city and in Missouri and throughout the country."

Grundy's roots lie in Las Vegas and New York, where she danced professionally. "I like everything about dance," says Grundy. "That's the only thing that I ever wanted to do and ever would do. I love the athleticism of it, I love the creation, I love the different movements, I love the expression, I love the blood, sweat and tears. Everything."

In 2000, Columbia Performing Arts Center offered her a job teaching contemporary jazz. Grundy decided to leave Las Vegas, where the type of shows she enjoyed performing in had grown scarce. With a self-imposed deadline of one year, Grundy moved to Columbia to choose between performing and teaching. At CPAC, she fell in love with teaching and saw potential in the local dancers, leading her to co-found the Missouri Contemporary Ballet last July. "This is a ballet company where we take classical ballet movements, and we add a twist to them and create more interesting movements and ideas," Grundy says.

The company, consisting of two men and four women, will put these twisted movements back on stage this April in its next show, *Boundless*. Grundy says Columbians should come see Missouri Contemporary Ballet because sports are valued so highly in this city. "And these dancers are just as athletic as any football player or basketball player, and then we also add that little appeal of edginess and sexiness and sensuality," Grundy says. "There's emotion throughout our entire show. They go up and down, and I think that's important for people to experience the different styles and the different music that we use. There's something for everyone."



Karen Grundy leads the warm-up for a weekly jazz class at Columbia Performing Arts Center, in which her students range from middle school to college age. Other courses at CPAC include classical ballet, modern dance, jazz, hip-hop, lyrical and tap.

Grundy, right, counts as her students, including Elise Presser, front left, do push-ups during their warm-up at a CPAC jazz class. “They call it jazz, but it’s more contemporary movement as far as I’m concerned,” says Grundy. She teaches all the upper-level jazz classes at CPAC.



A couple of minutes before *Twisted* begins, Grundy encourages her dancers (from left: Asuka Takei, Megan Pulfer and Meredith Miles) on stage before the curtains are drawn. Grundy has the dancers form a huddle so she can tell them how proud they make her. “[I tell them] how much I support just what they do and that the performance is for them and no one else,” Grundy says.



Laura Jones, Matt Carney and Dan Harris perform in the Missouri Contemporary Ballet's first show, Twisted, at the Missouri Theatre on Sunday, Nov. 19. "We named the show Twisted because of the piece that we were using and also because we are twisted," Grundy says. Because this was the debut performance, "it was make us or break us, and this was the mentality that everyone had."

At the end of the show, Grundy thanks the public for its support. "The reaction was spectacular," Grundy says. "People really responded to it and were very excited about what we're bringing to Columbia." Dancer Dan Harris says: "Getting where we've got so far with such crazy schedules and jobs is something that takes a lot of courage. We're at a point where everything we do defines our existence as a company."



After her dancers put on a successful performance at the Missouri Theatre, director Karen Grundy receives a hug from Jackie Nechanicky (with sunglasses). Twisted, was the first performance for the Missouri Contemporary Ballet.