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Introduction to Dance Choreography

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Introduction to Dance-Choreography

This year Dordt College has available a professional dancer-choreographer, Valerie Hammer, a member of the Theatre of the Open Eye. Valerie comes to the campus as part of a program provided by Affiliate Artists, Inc., of New York. Last year the program provided a 56-day residency of an actor, James Lawless, and will provide a third artist next year, probably in music.

Miss Hammer spent a week at Dordt in November, 1975, and will return for another week in the spring of this year. The remaining time of the residency is being shared with other communities and colleges in the area. She will be featured in a concert with the Sioux City Dance Association in May.

Affiliate Artists, Inc., which is financed by foundations and the National Endowment for the Arts, provides resident artists for the purposes of exploration and audience development, and as catalyists among the arts in general. The artists chosen for these purposes must be communicative, that is, able to talk about his/her art form from a professional point of view. The key to their success lies in their doing "informances," a word coined to mean "inform," "information," "performance," and "form."

The host for Valerie, and the department responsible for giving the program a home, is the Physical Education Department. There is no formal dance program at Dordt College, but the P.E. Department does include units in its curriculum which use dance movement. While the department's emphasis is on the physical fitness aspect of dance, it is recognized that the dance as promoted by Valerie Hammer is first of all an art form.

Spending most of her early life in

Montana and Colorado, Miss Hammer knows the Midwest personally. In 1971 she went to New York to study dance and to receive her MFA from New York University School of the Arts. During the 1974-75 season she did a 5-day residency in the vicinity of Westerville, Ohio, and the Otterbein College campus. Her present arrangement is with five communities of Northwest Iowa: Cherokee, LeMars, Sioux Center, Sioux City, and Storm Lake.

Misconceptions, explains Valerie, about dance—what it is, and what it does—are common not only to Northwest Iowa. She notes that the general public views dance as a single category, putting into that category the social dance, show biz dance (as on television), ballet, modern dance, and that which is done in P.E. classes. Valerie's work is exclusively in the area of modern dance, which she says, is wholly unrelated to any of the other forms, except perhaps ballet which is also an art form. She finds it surprising that many people can not make a distinction between the social dance and what she does in her profession, and she is mildly disturbed when the modern dance art form is confused with that of show biz.

During informances Miss Hammer demonstrates up to twenty distinct body expressions, as it were an alphabet, and then shows how these may be combined for rather complex statements when elements of time, and space are also added. One of her most appreciated pieces is called "Flight," which treats the subject of Steinbeck's "The Pearl" and the mother's flight with the child. She has set this piece to a Spanish musical composition which focuses on the flight of Joseph and Mary with the Christ child.