

Never a dull moment for Jackie Davis

Former Lied Center director hits ground running as head of New York library

JACKIE DAVIS, THE ORIGINAL DIRECTOR OF THE LIED CENTER, has been director of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts in New York City for the past two and a half years. Davis has many Lawrence ties and visits the city three or four times a year.



Bill Sneed/ Journal-World Photo

By Bill Sneed

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NEW YORK — From its beginnings in 1993, Jackie Davis was the guiding hand of the Lied Center, Kansas University's fountain of theatrics, music and dance. She left Lawrence in 2000.

For the past 2½ years, she has been the executive director of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center.

"I had an extraordinary job at the Lied Center," Davis said in her office just off 63rd and Broadway. "I learned something every day, and when I came here, I hit the ground running."

Hitting the ground running was an easy sell. Sitting outside Davis' office, I waiting for her work day to end, I would catch glimpses of her as she'd

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Former Lied Center director a 'dazzling asset'

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trot down the hallway saying, "I just have to run upstairs," and "be right back." All the while, her assistant Bill Eddy, was fielding phone calls and e-mails which he'd hand off as she flashed past his desk.

For a library, the pace was killer.

"When people think library, they think books," Davis said, "but our inventory is only about 30 percent books."

New York's Public Library for the Performing Arts is one of the world's important depositories for music, dance, recorded sound and theater. 20,000 people visit it monthly.

It houses more than 4 million items related to performance: posters, film, videotape, sheet music, programs and photographs. Many are connected with names like Billy Rose, Jerome Robbins and Toscanini. A sampling includes the Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound; the Rudolf Nureyev collection, including more than 1,000 films, video and audio tapes documenting his life and career; the Gypsy Rose Lee archive; tapes of every Metropolitan Opera radio broadcast; 34 years worth of tapes of on- and off-Broadway theater; and the Merce Cunningham collection.

Important resource

This mother lode of material makes the library an important research facility for professional actors, musicians, historians, producers and arts students.

"Mike Nichols and his staff have been here looking at past performances of 'Angels in America' for an HBO project," Davis said. "You remember, it was at the Lied Center."

Molly Ringwald used the library to review archived videos of "Cabaret" before she took over the lead role.

There are two exhibition facilities — Davis has added exhibition to her repertoire — that recently showed personal papers and memorabilia of Charles Dickens and caricatures by Sam Norkin. Currently on exhibit is a commemora-

tive to dance legend Vaslav Nijinsky and a collection of "Original Cast Recordings."

"Last week, in the Bruno Walter Auditorium, we hosted the Perlman/Bailey/Schmidt Trio," Davis said. Perlman is Navah Perlman, daughter of Itzhak and Toby.

The three played "Trio No. 2", a work commissioned by the Lied Center.

"Naturally, I mentioned the Lied Center and KU in my greeting to the attendees. ... It was a great evening," she said.

Admission is free for performances in the auditorium, and the artists charge no fees. The original dancers in the Martha Graham Company appeared there recently.

"The 212 seats went fast," Davis said, "and you really got a sense of Martha Graham."

Nanette Fabray and Audra McDonald, the Tony Award-winner currently starring in "Mr. Sterling," have performed at recent events.

"I try to see something four nights a week," Davis said, checking the time. That night, she was headed for Brooklyn to see the London production of "Twelfth Night" with Simon Russell Beale. Our half-hour interview was nearly over.

An inspiration

As we took a quick tour of the building, Davis spoke of the responsibilities administering 115 employees and her life of meetings with eight curators, exhibition designers, printers producing a never-ending stream of invitations, and cabinet meetings.

"Jackie has brought to us a very aggressive determination to get the job done right. ... She has added more than just a touch of humanity. I am always certain that no matter what decision she makes, the human factor has been taken into consideration," said Bob Taylor, the library's curator of the Billy Rose theater collection.

Added Bill Walker, senior vice president of the library: "Jackie is a dazzling asset for us. She's brought a whole new audience of supporters and library users ... and I don't know anyone who has a larger Rolodex of the arts community."

Heading back to her office, Davis exchanged hellos by name with employees and waved to those in the far reaches of the building.

Do her children, Ashley, 27 and Adam, 29, both Lawrence High School graduates, visit New York?

"Both do," she said proudly. "Ashley graduated from Belmont University in Nashville, got her masters in Limerick, Ireland, and is the singer in 'Lord of the Dance,' the Michael Flatley show in Las Vegas," she said.

Adam graduated from North Carolina University and is a sports writer for the Greenville News in South Carolina. His mother says he covers Clemson basketball and football.

"Sometimes I see them in Lawrence, where I'll be this weekend," she said. "I'll be staying with my best girlfriend, Margie Coggins."

As she headed for her theater date, I asked if there was a best male friend.

"His name is Lane Czaplinski, and he's the artistic director of 'On The Boards,' a cutting-edge theater in Seattle, Washington," she said.

Seattle? "We are thankful for JetBlue (Airways)."

And she was gone. We'd take her photograph early the next morning.


A slow look at Davis' office walls and display shelves showed lots of pieces of Kansas enclosed in wood and metal frames. There she was in the Lied Center, looking at the camera with Willie Nelson. Here was a Governor's

Award from the late Joan Finney next to a certificate announcing Davis as the Lawrence Public School's outstanding citizen in 2000. Nearby was a picture of old Hoch Auditorium with flames shooting through its roof. It was well known among artists and patrons as the house of bad acoustics.

A photograph of the Lied Center kiosk announced, "Jacqueline Z. Davis Outdoor Concert August 24, 2001" in lights. Under the photo were lots of signatures by Lied Center staff who formerly worked for Davis. One said, "Even at 1,200 miles, you're an inspiration."

— Senior editor Bill Snead can be reached at 832-7196

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