

# Class Acts

BEST PRACTICES IN ARTS EDUCATION





JAMES ALLBRITTEN



JOSEPH LOPINA

BRENDA DANIELS





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**R**ight from the start, the University of North Carolina School of the Arts has engaged professional artists as faculty members and encouraged them to continue pursuing their careers as artists. This time-honored tradition of artist-to-artist education provides many benefits to the young artist, not the least of which is an intimate connection to the expectations of the professional world.

Through generous support from the Kenan Institute for the Arts in partnership with the Office of Academic Affairs, the three outstanding artist-teachers showcased here, nominated by their peers and students, were awarded for their excellence in teaching. Though their teaching styles are as individual as they are, their understanding of their role and relationship to their students is representative of the teaching and learning that goes on every day at the school. What these “class acts” share is patient and persistent caring, close attention to individual development, and determination to find and nurture the best in each student.

# James Allbritten

ARTIST-TEACHER, SCHOOL OF MUSIC  
INSPIRING EXCELLENCE



James Allbritten remembers wishing he could take piano or violin lessons when he was a young boy but having to accept economic reality. “I grew up poor in Kentucky. There wasn’t a lot of music in the house.”

It wasn’t until he went to high school and sang in the chorus that Allbritten got the chance to flex a little artistic muscle. “There was nothing special about my ability,” he laughs. “But I was at least learning to sing and to harmonize with others. And I loved it. I had been waiting for this opportunity.”

Allbritten knew that his late start meant he had catching up to do. “I couldn’t read a single note of music, so one day I just decided to teach myself. At home we had a little plug-in organ, and I mashed on it while studying notation. Gradually, I figured out what all those lines and spaces and dots meant.”

Indeed, he did. Today, Allbritten is the celebrated Artistic Director and Principal Conductor for the Piedmont Opera, Artistic Director of the A.J. Fletcher Opera Institute, and Interim Conductor for the UNCSCA orchestra. But Allbritten is utterly without pretention as he both accepts and deflects praise. “I started without fanfare, but I’m so grateful for this wonderful life filled with music,” he says.

After joyful participation in various choirs, music camps, and then what he still calls a “surprising” scholarship to Indiana University, Allbritten assumed his destiny would be to study music theory and become a high school music director. But then Allbritten joined the chorus of the Kentucky Opera Association and earned the chance to perform in a huge, over-the-top production of Puccini’s *Turnadot*. “This opened my eyes to something new,” Allbritten says. “I felt honored and terrified and ecstatic to be part of such grandness. I was barely twenty and a professional singer on stage at the Kentucky Center for the Arts! It was a transformational moment.”

This early thrilling conception of the grand potential of music still motivates Allbritten and lays the foundation for how he teaches. “I ask my students to aim for big ideas,” he says. “Even in the smallest steps of developing their skills, I want them to see that what we’re doing here is bigger than life. They need a vision to sustain that. To get on stage and express emotional truth requires tremendous amounts of physical and emotional energy. And courage.”

Allbritten believes he can impart the most knowledge by asking his students provocative questions and then challenging their answers. He admits this Socratic style has earned him a reputation for sometimes talking too much, but he insists that spiraling around and then delving into ideas from every direction is the best way to own one’s education. “You can’t simply lecture. Students won’t make the essential personal connections. I try to pique their curiosity and then feed them information according to their questions. The ultimate goal is to become an artist, after all, which demands sincerely reflecting on life, the nature of humanity—all that.”

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Allbritten acknowledges that students today face more and more distractions and that there is undeniable tension between serious music study and the hyper-fast information age. “I’m asking them to concentrate for hours — to become immersed in ideas — in a world that demands condensing all information into tiny units. Deepening how you think is hard work!” Allbritten suggests that if someone can imagine being happy pursuing anything else, they probably should. “What we do at UNCSA requires a singular focus that you either have or you don’t. But if you have it, you know it, so you don’t really need my advice.” Currently in Colorado for a summer session of directing opera scenes and teaching voice at the Vocal Arts Festival, Allbritten has as much energy, passion, and sincere love for his work as ever. “To this day I think that people being able to make beautiful sounds with only their voice is the most amazing thing in the world,” he says.

# Joseph Lopina

ASSISTANT DEAN, SCHOOL OF FILMMAKING  
CREATING CURIOSITY



Joseph Lopina, a broadly talented illustrator, craftsman, and deep thinker who is as comfortable rendering 3D computer animation as he is discussing the complex influences of media on modern education, still credits a big bucket of crayons as his first open door to the world of art.

“My dad would come home from work with reams of scrap paper, and my brother and I would sit and draw anything we could think of.” Lopina laughs as he remembers those early days and what they foreshadowed. “My brother always sketched buildings with perfectly straight lines, and he became an architect. I’d create all these different characters with wild curves, and now look at me.”

Anyone hoping to catch a glimpse of Lopina better be ready to track a moving subject. The gentle, mild-mannered man has a mind that races with curiosity and an ever-growing skillset to match. But he shrugs if you point this out. “Growing up as the middle child in a big family doesn’t afford you much ego,” he says.

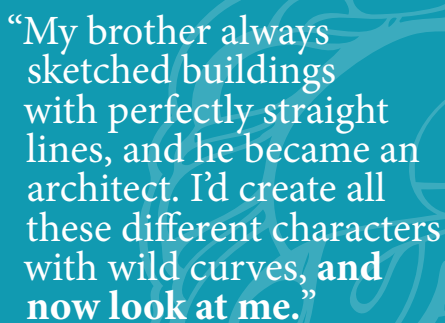
Raised in a small town in Wisconsin, Lopina sensed he was good at drawing, but he never thought too much about it. “I was your typical kid. Riding bikes, playing sports, hanging out with friends.” It wasn’t until his family moved to North Carolina



and a high school art teacher challenged him that Lopina began to think more seriously about his raw talent. “Mr. Brown broke me of my confidence, which I hadn’t earned. I was simply young and a bit skilled with a pen. Suddenly I was focusing and pushing myself in a way I never had before. I started taking art more seriously.”

As he began to apply to different colleges, Lopina had a variety of personal interests but no clear idea of where he wanted his life to go or what sort of career he desired. “I wasn’t thinking specifically about art as a life pursuit,” he says. “Actually, I excelled at math and science, so my first concentration in college was accounting, believe it or not.” Even with his long brown hair banded into a pony-tail and his friendly, laid-back persona, it’s not difficult to imagine Lopina crunching numbers as naturally as he might draw a crouching tiger. His brain obviously works at multiple levels, which he recognizes as a key factor in how he learns as well as how he teaches. From his study of music, photography, electrical engineering, film art, and now his pursuit of a PhD in Educational Leadership, Lopina has developed an approach to learning that stands solidly on the spongy ground of curiosity.

“The first thing I aim for is getting students excited about learning,” he says, his hands almost dancing above the table. “They have their own great ideas. I’m there to help those ideas get energized, and then guide the process of figuring how to creatively transform them into animated stories. I’m always asking a student what he or she wants to know or accomplish. This is the beginning of simple curiosity, which is what leads the way to personal passion. Sure, I’ve gained a lot of knowledge and skills over the years, but I teach from uncertainty. I’m not the answer man. I want my students to explore their own learning journeys, with me there to support and challenge them.”



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Lopina recognizes that most of his students dream of working for one of the celebrated animation shops, but for now he encourages them to focus on process and let career winds blow where they may. “I can’t encourage someone to be an animation major because they like cartoons or they want to have a great job at Pixar. But if they’re sincere in wanting to tell stories and they’re willing to put in the work—hard and often tedious work—then UNCSCA offers a wonderful, almost family-like environment to develop your craft. I feel incredibly privileged to be here.”



# Brenda Daniels

ASSOCIATE DEAN, SCHOOL OF DANCE  
ENHANCING IMAGINATION

**I**f Brenda Daniels had been able to sit still on her piano stool as a young girl, the world might have been denied a uniquely talented and ambitious modern dancer. “I was somewhat of a child prodigy at age three,” she smiles. “But I was restless. I wanted to move.”

With parents who supported her desire to experiment artistically, Daniels enjoyed an active girlhood playing the drums, ice-skating, diving, and doing gymnastics. “I loved them all,” she says. “But eventually I’d get bored. I was always searching for... something.” When Daniels enrolled in the New Jersey School of Ballet at age 13, she suddenly found what she’d been looking for: the perfect artistic form to suit her desire for intense physical movement, creative interpretation, and personal ambition.

Despite this powerful new love for dance, Daniels didn’t feel immediately successful in the studio. She had no naïve illusions about her ability. “I started too late compared to most serious dancers, and I was too tall,” she says matter-of-factly. “But I went to class every day, loving each and every minute — even the painful ones. I just tried to get better and better.” Her eyes twinkle. “I fell down a lot,” she laughs.

But she always got back up, perfecting her technique and strengthening her conviction that dance would be her road to a life of joy, meaning, and comforting structure. Her discipline and deep passion led Daniels to a respected conservatory at a small private college in New York. There, inspired by artists of every kind and the energy of so much raw talent, Daniels examined her own aesthetic inclinations. “I knew I loved ballet,” she says. “But modern dance freed me in a way that felt too right to ignore. So I began to focus there. I got an apartment in New York and started my own dance company, doing little gigs all over. My rule was never to decline work if the job had any connection to dance.”

It’s understandable to hear all this as a romantic ideal—the young artist rising in the big city—but Daniels is quick to acknowledge the reality of it, too. “I was waitressing to support myself. Life was often exhausting. But to me nothing mattered more than being a dancer, so I gave everything to it.”

After teaching and performing all over the country, as well as in Europe, Daniels came to UNCSA in 1995 to become part of its distinguished faculty. Now an associate dean as well as a renowned instructor, Daniels says her experience waitressing was as valuable training as anything else. “You learn to keep everybody happy in chaos,” she laughs. “I tell my students all experience informs your art and life.”

To be sure, Daniels believes that studying dance can transform one’s life. She insists that going to class is as satisfying as performing, if not more so, because this is where the true energy of the art form works out its daily demands for physical attunement, mental focus, and formalized etiquette. “No matter what level you reach, you always go back to class. That’s why dancers are often the most humble artists. We start over every day. For the right person, this is as comforting as it is challenging.”

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Daniels wants her students to understand that while blind optimism is not warranted when it comes to finding a career in dance, there are lifelong benefits that make the rigorous pursuit of it immensely satisfying. “And relevant to any profession,” she is quick to add. This is why she is trusted as an honest voice in the classroom, where she creates an environment that is nurturing but also formal. She treasures the opportunity to guide young dancers as they find an almost mystical balance between mind, body, and spirit. “To learn the discipline of dance, the physical awareness of space, the problem-solving skills, the patience — all this makes you a stronger and more perceptive person, whatever you end up doing later in life.”

## **THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA SCHOOL OF THE ARTS**

As America's first state-supported arts school, the University of North Carolina School of the Arts is a unique stand-alone public university of arts conservatories. With a high school component, UNCSA is a degree-granting institution that trains young people of talent in music, dance, drama, filmmaking, and design and production. Established by the N.C. General Assembly in 1963, the School of the Arts opened in Winston-Salem, "The City of Arts and Innovation," in 1965 and became part of the University of North Carolina system in 1972.

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