

Chapter 3: Mid America Dance Company (MADCO)

Alcine recalls that in 1976, St Louis Young Audiences approached him to help them add dance to their programming.

“It was late winter and I promised to think about it. He had already started a concert dance company in 1969: Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville Concert Dance Company. The students and I performed in churches, especially Christ Episcopal Church, as well as area community colleges. These short tours allowed the students to go out into the community for short day trips and experience differing performance venues and audiences.”

Also Ross Winter, an architect/choreographer, was approached by Young Audiences. Alcine respected Ross’s work. These two married couples, Alcine, Nancy, Ross and Gregg, were introduced through the St. Louis Dance Council. They consistently saw each other’s work.

Ross approached Alcine about a partnership so that the two of them could address adding dance to the request of Young Audiences. Ross was trained in Architecture Design, not dance. He was skilled in the business side of arts development while Alcine brought the skills of performer, choreographer and teacher. Ross respected equally Nancy as a performing artist and wanted her to be in this partnership. The three of them decided to incorporate the effort and they became the three founding officers of the Mid America Dance Company.

The original dancers for Mid_America Dance Company (MADCO) came from the Southern Illinois at Edwardsville (SIUE) senior dance majors and upper level students. In the spring of 1976, six

dancers formed the company: Piper Dandridge, Teresa Kehrer, Michael Means, Nancy Wiltz, Alcine Wiltz, and Ruth Burnberg (from Washington University) by Ross's invitation. By fall 1976, Alcine molded excerpts of his dances to create lecture demonstrations for presentation in the schools under the Young Audience umbrella. MADCO decided to build a slow reputation through the Young Audience partnership and also build a professional regional company. Alcine looked for dancers who had no desire to go to East or West coast. Many dancers he found wanted to stay in the St. Louis area.

The company debuted in 1977 in Florissant, Missouri with five works. After the company was established Ross pursued more grants for touring. Regional tours were funded in the late 1970's. The company changed and developed as the funding increased. Between 1976 and 1977 the young new company worked for Young Audiences. At the end of season 1977-1978, four dancers left: Piper Dandridge (moved to Colorado), Ruth Burnberg (moved to Boston), Teresa Keher, and Michael Richardson (left for New York City). The company expanded in the second year with open auditions. Through university connections, dancers auditioned and brought with them very different artistic and training backgrounds. Alcine supplied a consistency to the aesthetics of the company by teaching company class before every rehearsal. This practice allowed an integration of movement style and language for a diverse group.

Lindsey Hawkins

“Alcine has influenced my work tremendously. His teaching philosophies and spirit have inspired me to be a better dancer, teacher, choreographer, and person. As a dancer,

Alcine was one of my biggest influences during my early days with MADCO. His concepts and ways of teaching were so foreign to me that it was a huge awakening when I started to understand the anatomical connections that would allow me to move more efficiently. I remember lying on the floor a lot, asking him a million questions about various joints, realizing that I had no idea how to walk or plié after dancing all my life, and just being generally amazed at his ability to make me move differently in the span of one exercise. “

“As a teacher, I generally make reference to at least one Alcine-inspired concept in every class without even thinking about it. Regardless of the technique, his methods and ideas have stayed with me and have had a huge effect on my priorities as a teacher. Some of these concepts include: his use of the arms from the “wing bones” as he calls them, the power of the pelvic girdle and how crucial it is to all movement, his thoughts on what he calls the “backspace” or the space behind us when we’re dancing or travelling, his talks about landing from jumps and how the ankle joint opens and closes like a “gate”, his discussions about the continuous looping energy of the spine like a “seahorse”, the importance of the over-curve and under-curve in movement...the list could go on. Anytime Alcine paid a visit to the company, I was re-inspired to learn more and share more with my students. Although my students (from a local studio in St. Louis where I taught before moving to Arizona) didn’t know Alcine, they knew of him and benefited greatly from his teaching, which passed from him-to me-to them. The studio is in fact owned and staffed by former MADCO dancers who have all worked with Alcine, in that way, he’s had a great impact on students that he doesn’t even know!”

When reconstructing “Crimson Momentum” on MADCO dancers in 2011, Alcine describes the process of watching the work move from set steps to the necessary embodiment of condensing and expanding with weight shifts. The dancer must perform the work by allowing the four pockets (shoulders and hip sockets) to yield in order to secure the landings. “Like a flower blooming from the four sockets, the movement must be allowed to rebound and give into the weight of the fast changing momentum.” This method for helping the dancers deepen with release by entering a masterwork and allowing the technique to grow through the work was honed during his thirty years of work at the UMCP (1983 - 2013) and then shared with MADCO in 2011.

Lindsey Hawkins

“In my first few years in the company (2003-2005), I learned a piece of repertory- *Crimson Momentum*, which he came to clean and coach. We later brought back the piece sometime in my last few years in the company (2011) and he was able to come back and coach us on the piece again. It was an amazing experience to do this work early in my career and be mentored by him, and to have him come back and expand upon the knowledge he shared with us the first time. I feel this particular work of his really embodied his teaching methodologies and movement ideas as well as highlighting the Erick Hawkins technique. The piece was physically exhausting but when Alcine began to dissect and analyze the small details that he wanted us to find within the movement, the piece suddenly required an intense amount of intellectual and kinesthetic awareness.”

“Toward the end of my time in the company, Alcine came back to set a brand new piece in a MADCO concert with live music. This piece and process were again, completely different and incredibly informative to me artistically. We began the process by improvising to various recordings and after watching us, Alcine began to structure our improvisations creating duets, trios, and quartets. It was amazing to watch him do this because he made such interesting choices and something magical happened in every single situation that he created. Whether it was timing, or a particular movement matching up with the person near you, or just a general synthesis that none of us saw until he created it, it was incredibly eye-opening for me as a dancer and choreographer.”

As a memory piece for the 15th Anniversary of Mid-America Dance Company, The Riverfront Times writer Harry Weber offers a summary called “Dancin’ Fool”:

“MADCO – Mid-America Dance Company is celebrating its 15th anniversary with two blowout performances this weekend, Friday and Saturday at 8pm at Edison Theatre on the Washington University campus. MADCO’s Ross Winter Combines Low Comedy with High Art. But about the time Winter’s family was breaking up, one of the Young Audiences program’s national directors came to St Louis to rustle up a dance program for the schools. He talked to two or three people, among them Winter and a New Orleans native, Alcine Wiltz, head of the dance program at SIU-E, about starting such a program, and got turned down. Later, Wiltz and Winter each found out that the other had been approached, and both began plotting to form a dance company that would go

beyond the rather modest purposes of Young Audiences. In 1976, they formed the Mid-America Dance Company.

But they went about it differently. They decided that they wanted a real modern-dance ensemble, so they first organized the support team to make it happen – accountants and lawyers – before they hired dancers. Not until 1978, two years after it had been incorporated, did the Mid-American Dance Company first perform.”

Alcine commented:

“Later in the development of the company Ross looked for people with strong ballet lines. Alcine, however, wanted them to soften and focus on the movement. This aesthetic difference created some tension. Some dancers would give themselves a ballet barre even after a full movement class with Alcine. Ross would add arabesques and developes to the choreography.”

MADCO impressively hits Chicago March 28 and 29, 1981 at the Columbia College Dance Center with an enthusiastic report from Dorothy Samachson from the Reader Chicago:

“Why was it, I kept wondering during a recent performance by the Mid America Dance Company, that this seven-member group from Saint Louis looked so much better and more professional than many of Chicago’s modern dance groups?

It was, frankly, a surprise to me that in five short years, this company could have acquired so integrated a performing style, such physical fluidity, and such technical excellence working in a city that is presumably less sophisticated than Chicago and

certainly doesn't have as much exposure to dance. Was my big city provincialism at fault? Was this company the beneficiary of an unusual amount of support and encouragement from Illinois and Missouri communities around Saint Louis – support that Chicago dance troupes are still struggling to find? Whatever, the Mid American Dance Company provided what was, on the whole, a most entertaining, satisfying evening, one that aroused a proprietary envy on behalf of Chicago dance.

It wasn't the program's choreographic creativity that inspired that envy as much as the finer points of performance: the small group's technically accomplished style, its attractive yet modest costuming, and its intelligently programmed balance of works by Ross Winter and Alcine Wiltz, the company's co-directors.

'Viatic', a pas de quatre by Alcine Wiltz, was danced by him and Michael Richardson, Lorilee Saucier, and Nancy Wright Wiltz. This piece...opened on a tableau of seated dancers and closed with the same pose. Presumably the four, dressed in tie-dyed unitards, were expressing emotional responses to our social mores....The dancers moved beautifully, with both freedom and control.

'Uptown Scherzo', also by Wiltz, and danced by him and his wife to taped Duke Ellington piano pieces, was a throwaway sort of piece in which the two, dressed in evening clothes, did what I imagined to be a spoof on social dance. The final blackout, with Nancy held high in Wiltz's arms, was a surprise, but it didn't make the dance any more important or exciting.

'Nocturne', on the other hand, was a fascinating dramatic trio, with Alcine Wiltz in a black and silver robe – a satanic sci-fi figure – manipulating Michael Richardson and Nancy Wiltz, refugees from some sort of Eden. It was good theatre, heightened by Lois Ladd's geometric set design and George Crumb's taped score.

'Paralleling Phrases', a solo by Wiltz for himself, was another abstraction, offering movement to parallel Yehuda Yannay's taped piano and violin score. Wiltz is a striking dancer, with good looks, a most responsive body, and a virtuosic technique that permits him to extend his choreographic ideas into strong, demanding ways of moving."

From 1977-1983, Ross did well finding funding through grants and the company toured broader into Illinois and Missouri. More performances took them into Coffeerville Kansas, Iowa, Arkansas, Indiana, Columbia College Chicago, and West Virginia. They traveled to 10 states and were showcased in a mix of theatre venues and centers of higher education.

Initially the rehearsal process occurred at Nancy's studio, from 9pm-11:30pm, one evening during the week and then also on Sunday afternoons.

In 1977, Alcine and Nancy had two children, Stefan age six and Michelle age nine. They used professional sitters most of the time. Both Alcine and Nancy say that in MADCO, they "paid to dance" referring to the cost of sitters for their children. For five years (1977 – 1982) this was

their life: juggling higher education, studio ownership and recitals, company rehearsals, choreography, touring and raising two beloved children.

Ross took this opportunity to increase bookings and MADCO toured twice as much as usual.

Alcine's Dean at SIU-E understood the need for Alcine to be on tour, 3-4 times, for three day residencies per quarter. When other faculty noticed; the Dean went to the University administration and requested that Alcine be granted the position of professor and artist-in-residence. Alcine could then come and go from his university obligations and he was also given a graduate student to teach his classes when he toured.

Beginning January 1982, the start of a sabbatical, Alcine toured extensively with MAD/CO.

Then in June, he went to study in New York City. Alcine finally took his sabbatical. The family joined him and Alcine had an awakening. He spent much time with his two wonderful children and realized he wanted to spend more time with them. Michelle was 14 and Stefan was 11. He had been giving his many hours to the dancers, but he wanted his time to go more toward his children.

After the summer experience in New York City, Nancy and the children voiced their desires to move to the East coast. Alcine returned to Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville and was faced with pressure from the University fall 1982. He was assigned to direct a musical that fall and the company was excited to have him back full force. He then went to the dean and said he needed to do fewer productions on campus. The dean said to talk to Ross about how the company could reduce his load and Ross said to talk to the dean about a lighter university workload. No one wanted to support Alcine's need for a more balanced life.

Alcine recalls:

“When I told Ross I was leaving to take a position at the University of Maryland in, March,1983, he was shocked and hurt. We began to prepare for the changes needed in MADCO. Luckily, when Nancy left performing in 1979, MADCO had already practiced shifting a foundational performer’s roles to other dancers. The blessing was that during her first year of performing retirement, Nancy was still around to fill in when a dancer was injured. Nancy came into rehearsals and still made the costumes. My exit would create a need for MADCO to replace a performer, but it was uncertain who would step in as a teacher and a choreographer? There was only one person who could keep the training style going for the company. Liz Webb was the key person to teach company class. Other dancers at the time were Joseph Mills, Michael Richardson, Tommy Sue Pollock, Laura Lee Saucier, John Manlove. Liz learned Nancy’s roles when Nancy left the company. Ross and I had warmed up to the idea and practice of company members choreographing. Two strong choreographers at the time were John Manlove and Rob Scoggins. SIU-E took one of Rob’s pieces that went to American College Dance Festival Association. Then John’s tango piece, “Lunch with Jan”, entered the company’s repertory. When I left the company, guest choreographers were asked to set works. Ross was uneasy with Liz becoming the teacher. Ross brought in Mary Jean Cowl (Wash U) as the company teacher. She was influenced by Merce Cunningham based work. After two months, MADCO dancers said no to this stylistic change and they convinced Ross to allow Liz and Joseph to teach company class.

One of the most difficult moments for Alcine was when he told the company he was leaving. It occurred at the end of a rehearsal. Immediate abandonment was sensed the moment he spoke the words. The next day, 2nd year dancer, John Manlove, was livid. Alcine could tell his anger by the way he walked into rehearsal. He is remembered to have said: “Why in Fuck don’t you just leave right now?” John apologized later. He declared that he had moved to St. Louis because he wanted to work with Alcine after they met in the summer theatre in Columbia Missouri 1978.

Alcine had two months to finish up the season and host the National Association of Regional Ballet – Mid West Festival (NARB). This time frame included taking MADCO to the NYC Riverside Festival. Erick Hawkins was in the audience and yelled Bravo.

Between the years of 1976-1983, Alcine partnered with Ross Winter in their collaborations of Mid America Dance Company (MADCO). As a trained architect and knowledgeable of theatrical structures, Ross created dances by organizing the space. Alcine then began the work as a rehearsal director for Ross’s choreography to make a dance. MADCO’s current performances usually consisted of three larger works and a duet and a solo in between: totally 5 works. Alcine often performed a solo, Nancy and Alcine offered a duet, and Ross supplied a trio that separated the three larger works. Alcine and Ross did a new work each year. In any given year there were eight works active in repertory. Depending on the performance spaces, the repertory rotated and shifted. This system allowed the dancers to remain interested and focused on the variety of repertory. When Alcine left for University of Maryland College Park,

company members Liz Web and Joseph Mills trained by Alcine took over the process of building the dance within the frames built by Ross.

With Alcine's departure, a distance to the friendship was needed. Ross was understandably hurt. Alcine waited three years before he went back to MADCO. Dancers reconstructed "Unfettered Pastimes." It was a nice visit. Only Liz and Joseph were left in the company. It was a bit awkward for Alcine. 5 years later, Ross visited Alcine and Nancy in their home, stayed for 3-4 days and enjoyed sightseeing. It was 1988 and Alcine was rehearsing a new work, "Crimson Momentum". Ross visited Alcine and saw rehearsal with the original dancers: Susan Haigler-Robles, Loni Rutter Hill, Sharon Butcher, and Annette Wassalic. They were rehearsing for the performance at the Publick Playhouse in Cheverly, MD. Ross asked Alcine to return to MADCO and set "Crimson Momentum" in spring 1989.

MADCO then was in a new rehearsal space. The company had grown to ten dancers and they had started an internship program. The style was not as pure and some of the men were not as strong.

Ross invited Alcine back and he set two other works:

"Yesterday Toward Tomorrow" (Duet). Stacy West danced it. It was originally created for Alvin Mayes and Karen Bernstein; and *"After the Beep"*. In 1991 Alcine was being Rolfed by Rebecca Carli. While staying in her apartment, I made a dance to that message machine tape. Her answering machine would go off during the session with all the beeps

and messages left. The rhythms were fun. I thought, can I have a copy, I asked Rebecca. It was created for five dancers in the Jewish Community Center Dance Ensemble.”

The new MADCO rehearsal director was Stacy West. She had her SIU-Edwardsville undergraduate degree and Calvin Jarrell had trained her. He was a former student of Alcine. Stacy met Alcine when he returned to MADCO to set *Crimson Momentum*. She directed MADCO from 1994-2017. Alcine explains:

“In 1994 Ross was killed in an automobile accident. Stacy was holding the company together while the board was deciding what they were going to do. She was serving as the acting-director while the Board talked about doing a national search. They decided not to do that and agreed to continue with Stacy as the the Artistic Director. She is the only director of MADCO who has been a woman and a strong dance interest. After she received a MBA in Administration, she brought to MADCO strong administrative skills similar to what Ross offered. She continued to perform and direct until the 25th anniversary in 2002. Now Stacy is the administrator and artistic director. She has done very well and keeps the company alive. Dancers are on contract with a weekly salary from mid- August to end of May.”

Having not taught dancers for three years between 2008 and 2011, Alcine was asked to go back to work with the trained dancers of MADCO in 2011. His detailing and subtle coaching for Opera students was then applied to trained dancers. Alcine recalls:

“MADCO dancers saw immediate reference points and experiences during the two weeks of coaching in very different ways. He began to identify use of the hip and shoulder joints. They began to “feel” sequence and find release. His second week with MADCO allowed him to offer more traditional exercises and made references to the more simplified approach. Specifically this resulted in the deepening of dancers who were learning “Crimson Momentum”. The dancers reportedly made sense of the anatomical/kinetic subtlety of the phrasing. They began to understand beyond movement patterns and use kinesthetic awareness to experience movement sequencing in phrasing.”

In addition to resetting “Crimson momentum”, Alcine created a new work. With MADCO in 2011, he challenged himself to make a work using a very simple process. He made several phrases and taught them.

“I told the dancers to break up these phrases and then reconstruct them into solo material. Alcine was the seamstress. I sewed it all together. I watched and began. The structure began by the dancers walking around the perimeter of the stage space. Out of that walking, dancers entered into the center with solos, duets and trios. Then they re-entered the perimeter line walking which continued through the entire piece.”

Lindsey Hawkins

“Alcine came back to teach (at MADCO) a handful of times and each time, with more experience and more knowledge in my mind and body, I was able to grasp more and

began to fully understand just how much of a genius he was. He could change movement patterns in your body just by putting his hands on you (we called his hands “magic hands”) and assisting your movement. Perhaps because of his experience with the Alexander Technique, he had a way of immediately diagnosing any problems or movement inefficiencies within your body and changing them on the spot. I’ve never been so excited and inspired to move in my life...yet at the same time, if Alcine was watching you, it was terrifying because you had so many things to think about that you could pretty much assume you were doing something wrong! He was however, so incredibly warm and supportive that each time we experienced his teaching, we were left with such an amazing sense of support, encouragement, and wonder at the human body. During my time in the company we talked about him constantly. The newer company members who had never experienced his teaching had to listen to us talk about this amazing person that they would hopefully get the chance to work with. Each time he came to visit, it was as if he was coming home. Alcine’s impact on the company is felt by all, whether they know him personally or not.

If you asked him a question during class you were basically inviting at least a 30- minute discussion based on your particular issue where the whole class would come over and learn from his genius. It’s one of the reasons that I love and respect him so much...his passion and generosity.”

MADCO's 2015 published History

MADCO was co-founded in 1976 by Alcine Wiltz and the Australian born Ross Winter under the name Mid America Dance Company. The mission was to provide a place for professional dancers to live and work in the Midwest while also providing entertaining dance performances by local artists and educational opportunities for the community. Touring throughout the Midwest in the 80's, the company primarily performed work by Wiltz, who explored and drew inspiration from his work with Erick Hawkins, as well as Winter, who was known for his witty and humorous style and his ability to create stunning architectural images. Winter also premiered one the country's first spoofs of the Nutcracker called "Madcracker" which gained national attention in an article in Newsweek Magazine.

Wiltz left the company in the mid 1980's to accept the position of Chair, of the Department of Dance at the University of Maryland. The company continued to thrive under the direction of Winter until he lost his life in a tragic car accident in 1994. Long-time company member Stacy West was appointed Artistic Director in his place and she began to pull from her business background to re-structure the organization, preparing it for the future. She hired a wealth of guest artists to create new works for the company and worked towards bringing the best dancers from throughout the country, resulting in a company that was artistically stronger than it had ever been.

In 2003 the company was chosen to perform at DanceNow NYC at the Joyce Soho in Manhattan. In 2005 the company traveled to Toronto, Canada to perform at the International

Fringe Festival for Independent Dance Artists where it was named “Best of the Best” at the two-week long festival. In 2005 West also modified the name of the company to Modern American Dance Company to reflect the scope of the company’s work and their new national and international focus. The company soon moved to the Center for Creative Arts (COCA), which put MADCO in an urban location with state of the art facilities. In 2007 MADCO was invited to become the Professional Dance Company in Residence at the prestigious Blanche M. Touhill Performing Arts Center on the campus of University of Missouri St. Louis. The Touhill is the home for the company’s daily activities including rehearsals, internship programs and its concert season.

About MADCO

MADCO’s mission is to create innovative and memorable dance performances combining passion and technical excellence to provide its audiences with a world-class arts experience. The company is known for its versatile and athletic style, presenting dance that is exciting for audiences to watch and demanding for dancers to perform. The repertory company is under the direction of Executive and Artistic Director, Stacy West and Associate Artistic Director, Todd Weeks.

MADCO is thrilled to have a home at the Touhill Performing Arts Center on the campus of University of Missouri St. Louis (UMSL) where it became the company in residence in 2007. With this move, the company was able to establish an internship program with UMSL students allowing them to take daily technique class, learn repertory and work with the company in an administrative capacity.

The company performs regular concerts at the Touhill Performing Arts Center and participates in a variety of local performances including the St. Louis Art Fair, Dancing in the Street at Grand Center as well as the prestigious Spring to Dance Festival presented by Dance St. Louis. MADCO has recently collaborated with companies such as Eisenhower Dance Ensemble of Detroit and Moving Current of Tampa as part of a shared concert experience. The company is also committed to working with guest artists with a range of styles in modern, jazz and ballet (see list of guest artists below).

Apart from performing, MADCO believes strongly in dance education for the community. It's popular residency program, Books In Motion, combines literature, dance, music and art into a multidisciplinary experience for upper elementary and middle school students.. This program culminates in a shared performance of the students and the MADCO company members using a chosen book as inspiration. The company has also participated for many summers in St. Louis Artworks, a program that gives high school aged kids the opportunity to work and earn a paycheck while learning an artistic discipline. The company regularly performs repertory at schools throughout the area and most of the MADCO company members are also teachers at dance studios throughout St. Louis.

Guest Artists

Frank Chaves 2007-2008

Robert Battle 2006

John Beasant III 2008-2009

Janice Garrett 2007-2008

Michael Foley 2006-2007

Micheal Mizerany 2003-2009

Mikey Thomas 2003-2010

Cecil Slaughter 2003-2010

Keith Williams 2009-2010

Rob Scoggins 1994-2009

Alcine Wiltz MADCO Co-Founder

Joseph Mills 2000, 2002

Helen Meyers 1999, 2002

Janet Datema 2008-2009

Michael Uhtoff 2010

Robert Small 1991

Ross Winter MADCO Co-Founder