

ENTERTAINMENT

## USC opens innovative new dance building

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USC president C.L. Max Nikias and Gloria Kaufman during the opening ceremonies for the new dance school at USC on Wednesday. (Photo by Steve Cohn)

By **PAUL  
HODGINS /  
STAFF WRITER**

With pomp, ceremony, balloons and, of course, the Trojan Marching Band, the University of Southern California welcomed the newest major addition to its campus last week: The USC Gloria Kaufman International Dance Center.

Many of Southern California’s dance world luminaries were on hand for the midday ribbon-cutting ceremony, including “American Idol” producer Nigel Lythgoe, also a judge on “So You Think You Can Dance”; renowned choreographer William Forsythe, the most famous member of the faculty; and Laguna Beach resident Jodie Gates, director of the USC Gloria Kaufman School of Dance. Gates, a former Joffrey Ballet principal, was lured away from a position with UC Irvine’s dance department to help found the institution – the first new school at USC in four decades.

The school’s namesake, dance philanthropist Gloria Kaufman, was the ceremony’s guest of honor. She gave a touching and occasionally teary address to the crowd in front of the red-brick structure, designed in USC’s traditional Collegiate Romanesque style.

“I know that my husband would have been a wonderful partner in this, had he lived,” she said, referring to developer Donald Kaufman, who died in a 1983 plane crash. “He was the person who really made this happen. ... I dedicate this day to him.”

“We couldn’t have done it without her,” said USC President C.L. Max Nikias of Kaufman’s contribution. “She gave us the largest gift in the history of American dance. She really had the vision from the beginning.”

Robert Cutietta, dean of the USC Thornton School of Music, was instrumental in bringing the new dance school to life. He, Gates and others persuaded Kaufman to donate an eight-figure sum (the exact amount has never been divulged). The university, in return, committed funds of its own and dedicated space in a coveted part of the main campus to build the 54,000-square-foot, \$46 million building – no small accomplishment for an institution straining at the boundaries of its compact urban footprint.

Nikias made sure the building was given a spot near the schools of music and film, which will figure prominently in its plans for interdisciplinary collaboration. “I picked (the site). It had to be here in the arts neighborhood,” he said. A student medical center was torn down to make room for the new structure. Ground was broken in April 2014.

Cutietta took an unorthodox approach when he talked to Kaufman about what kind of dance school was needed.

“I remember telling Gloria, ‘We don’t need just another dance school in this country. What we need is a dance school that fills a unique need.’ We asked people, ‘What is needed in the dance community?’ And then we built the school around what people told us.”

The result is a place that aims to train dance students to excel in the 21st-century job market, said Forsythe. That starts with learning about all genres of dance. “All the different disciplines have equal value here. We develop respect for every discipline, whether it’s hip-hop or ballet or modern or folk.”

The Kaufman School’s concern for its dancers continues after they graduate, Forsythe added. “We worry like parents about what they’ll do after graduation. That’s one of the things you can’t put in the syllabus.”

Other intangibles that are part of the school’s “New Movement” philosophy include a respect for professionalism, Forsythe said. “How you manifest excellence plays a crucial part in your future success. Professionals who are hiring notice things like good work habits (as much as) technique.”

Designed by William Murray of Pfeiffer Partners Architects, the building is designed to serve the New Movement approach. The 3,592-square-foot Performance Studio transforms from a rehearsal and teaching space into a black box theater or a film-screening venue, among other things. Studios are equipped with large, flat screen video monitors and high-quality sound systems. Students have access to a collaborative space as well as dedicated lecture classrooms.

“The building was built for the curriculum, and that doesn’t happen every day,” Gates said. “The concept of ‘hybridity’ is a really critical part of this program. We want our students to be prepared for any career possibility that involves dance, so that required some innovative thinking. And I think we’ve achieved it in this facility.”