

# ANN KILKELLY

doesn't hesitate to take her show on the road. A vital link to community arts both locally and far beyond the Virginia Tech campus, there is always something on tap for Kilkelly. Literally.

Kilkelly, professor of theatre arts and women's studies at Virginia Tech, is a multitasking person: a jazz-tap dancer, poet and short-story writer, choreographer, script writer, director, composer, award-winning teacher, recipient of a \$130,000 research grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and a twice-named Smithsonian Fellow.

Kilkelly serves her community in a collegial manner. She is just as willing to interact with the talented feet of the famous as she is to help give job preparation tips to Virginia Tech graduate students. This spring, she held a seminar that included dramatizations and discussions of actual job interview situations to help students successfully make that transition into the real world.

Sporting a hands-on approach to exploring various issues, Kilkelly doesn't shy away from controversial topics. Last fall, she was part of the brain trust behind a thought-provoking original performance piece entitled "Life on the Pharm." Held in conjunction with Tech's Choices and Challenges Forum, the musical-theatrical piece explored the complexity of issues surrounding antidepressants in a country where usage has tripled since 1990. Kilkelly and a cast of students, graduate students, and staff wrote and conceptualized a piece that featured a unique blend of interactive theatre and story-telling. For a 2006 Women's Month event, Kilkelly expanded on the theme to create "Prozac Blues," which focused on mental health issues.

In February, Kilkelly produced a community event at the Lyric Theatre entitled "Open the Window," a wonderful evening of music, dance, and spoken-word artists. The diverse audience lauded the performance with a standing ovation. "That event represents the way I think music and dance can reflect and create community," says Kilkelly.

Last year, Kilkelly engineered "Jazzing Women," an evening of jazz music, dance, and song at Mill Mountain's Waldron Theatre, a featured event of Virginia Tech's Mid-Atlantic Conference on the Scholarship of Diversity. Senior artists included vocalist and jazz keyboard player Sarah McLawler and tap dancer Tina Pratt, both of whom have toured worldwide with jazz masters in music and dance. Kilkelly spearheaded the residency of McLawler and Pratt to make their voices heard and seen in Southwest Virginia and more broadly through national archives. She also recorded them for her oral history project, "Citing Her Feet."

"Oral histories, focused and undertaken by scholars and jazz artists aware of the context and practice of jazz, assure that specific voices make their way into the public record," says Kilkelly, who recorded and documented the "Jazzing Women" presentations for placement in national music and dance collections.

The NEH grant will result in *Tapping the Margins*, a scholarly book about women in jazz-tap dancing based on research in the Ernie Smith Jazz Dance film collection in the archives of the National Museum of American History. The book's analysis considers constructions of gender, race, class, and sexuality in historical performances of jazz-tap dancing.

"It's important to me that this research serves the field, the dancers, the art of tap dancing," Kilkelly says, "because the art form is not sufficiently credited or appreciated. The historical and ongoing presence of race, class, and gender distinctions has kept tap a second-class art form. It's important to me that I write a scholarly book that helps people see and value the dance. I'm an activist scholar. I want people to see and love tap dancing because it's important and reveals our culture so clearly. That's why I dance, too."

In the New York City Tap Festival in 2003, Kilkelly performed in a program that included the likes of Gregory Hines, Savion Glover, Van Porter, Brenda Bufalino, Jimmy Slyde, Sara Petronio, and Tony Waag.

"It was a moment of moments," Kilkelly muses, "dancing there, in the same space with my most cherished teachers and inspirers, in New York, in a theatre on 42nd Street. The best thing was that the tap community was alive and kicking."

Kilkelly conducts numerous workshops in interactive performance, including the Image Theatre Techniques of Augusto Boal. She has teamed with Jan Cohen-Cruz for a pair of workshops, "The University as Community: An Interactive Discussion and Performance Workshop" and "Building Community through Forum Theater."

The result of a Diversity Initiatives Grant, those "labs" provided training in interactive performance techniques that facilitated analytical and complex discussions of multicultural issues.

"The emphasis is on the interactive," Kilkelly says. "These theatre-derived techniques require participants to move around, to speak freely with one another, and to analyze ideas with nonverbal images."

At Virginia Tech, Kilkelly is just one of many drama, music, and fine arts professionals who are constantly doing outreach in the form of public performances and exhibits, making substantial contributions to quality of life on campus, in the local community, and on the regional and national stage.



Rick Griffiths



# TAPPING THE MARGINS

WITH ANN KILKELLY

by Jean Elliott

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