



**WASHINGTON
PERFORMING ARTS**
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**Washington Performing Arts announces
2019 Pola Nirenska Award recipients**

Annual awards honor those who have made outstanding contributions to dance, with special consideration given to the community of dance in Washington, D.C.

Washington, D.C. – [Washington Performing Arts](#), in association with the Pola Nirenska Award Committee, today announced the recipients of its 2019 Pola Nirenska Awards to **Robert Priore** (Outstanding Achievements in Dance), **Michelle Ava**, and **Alexandra Tomalonis** (Lifetime Achievement Awards). Named after the noted D.C.-area teacher and choreographer, the awards honor those who have greatly impacted dance. According to the *New York Times*, “Ms. Nirenska was a major force in dance in Washington, as a teacher, as director of a company, ...and as a creator of impressively fashioned dances filled with often raw emotion.”

With the support of donations by Dr. Jan Karski, the celebrated WWII courier and late husband of Ms. Nirenska, the awards are granted under the umbrella of Washington Performing Arts, which hosts a committee that annually decides on the award recipients.

“Each year, we are honored to present these important awards recognizing exemplary leadership in dance and education,” said Kathy Brewington, Manager of Choir Operations at Washington Performing Arts. “Ms. Nirenska’s life was dedicated to expanding the presence of dance performance and education in the D.C. area and, this year, we’re thrilled to honor three individuals who share that commitment and passion.”

Critical components of Washington Performing Arts’ mission are to provide lifelong learning opportunities through arts education, youth involvement, and community partnerships, and to support and nurture performing artists and their art forms. The Pola Nirenska Awards shine a spotlight on outstanding practitioners who lead the way within the D.C. dance community and beyond.

About the 2019 Pola Nirenska Award Recipients

For Outstanding Contributions in Dance: Robert Priore (Artistic Director, PrioreDance)

Robert Priore is a choreographer who is becoming recognized as a rising star in the Washington, D.C. area and beyond. He founded his company, PrioreDance, in the fall of 2016 and is also very proud to be

a founding member of Company | E, with whom he has had the honor of dancing works by numerous prominent internationally recognized choreographers. Robert, who received a BFA in Dance from Point Park University, continues to hone his craft as an Ignite Artist while being the Choreographer-In-Residence for the City Dance Conservatory program. He was a 2015 recipient of the John F. Kennedy Center Local Dance Commissioning Project and created a special work for the artists of Company | E, *Speak Easy*, which has been on the road in collaboration with dance groups in Russia, Azerbaijan, Cuba, and most recently in Ukraine. In 2016, 2017, and 2018, Robert also was named an outstanding fellow in the arts in the District of Columbia. Last November, he presented a new work at the Dance Gallery Festival in New York City, being named one of the three Level-Up commissioned choreographers.

Since 2017 Robert has choreographed and performed internationally at La Fábrica in Buenos Aires, Argentina and Holguin, Cuba, where his piece won the audience choice award. In July of 2018, PrioreDance was chosen to perform at the InsideOut Stage at the prestigious Jacob's Pillow. Most recently Robert was commissioned to create a work for the Mark Twain Prize Award Ceremony which was nationally televised on PBS mid-November 2018. In March of 2019, Robert set a work at his alma mater, Point Park University. Later in the year he will go on to present work in the City Dance Festival in Taiyuna, China, as well as guest teaching at Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Company in Denver, Colorado.

For Lifetime Achievement: Michelle Ava (Founder, Joy of Motion Dance Center)

Michelle was the inspiration, founder, and initial director of the Joy of Motion Dance Center in 1976. Her vision was a dance center with a mission of "Dance is for Everyone" to invite creativity, collaboration, and connectivity through dance. Joy of Motion has become a centerpiece in the D.C. area for all genres of dance and encompasses a great many styles, including ballet, flamenco, hip hop, modern, jazz, street jazz, and tap; Ava currently teaches a weekly improvisation class for all levels.

Joy of Motion reflects Ava's own eclectic training. She was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, where she started training at age five in several popular dance forms. She was introduced to modern and experimental dance when invited into a performing company during her undergraduate studies at SUNY Buffalo. This inspired her to pursue a master's degree in dance at George Washington University with Maida Withers, also dancing with Carol Fonda, Kei Takei, James Cunningham, and Alwin Nikolais, among others. Her graduate thesis, titled "The Effects of Transcendental Meditation on the Learning of Dance," paved the way for Michelle to become a creative force in D.C. as an innovative dance educator, performer, choreographer, bodywork therapist, and spiritual teacher for over four decades.

During graduate school at GWU, Michelle became a founding member of Free Association, an improvisational dance ensemble that was influenced by the work of NYC's Grand Union. It was here that she met and teamed up with the late Jack Guidone, who became a long-term artistic partner and friend. He tragically passed away in the height of the AIDS epidemic, but is remembered in Joy of Motion's Jack Guidone Theater in Friendship Heights.

With a vision of "Dance is for Everyone," and a hub where students as well as experienced artists can learn, collaborate, and convene, Joy of Motion gave birth to a number of prominent D.C. dance artists including Paul Emerson, Doug Yeuell, Miya Hisaka, and offered homes to others such as Dana Tai Soon Burgess.

Michelle continues to teach and presents her work both locally and nationally. Her company was featured with a full length, 90-minute production as part of inaugural Capital Fringe Festival (2006) and

International Improvisation Festival (2005-2007). She has produced numerous projects with her AVAdance coLAB at the Jack Guidone Theater. In 2012, Michelle was honored for her four decades of contribution to the art of dance, dance education, and service to the community with the Alan M. Kriegsman Award, named for the Pulitzer Prize–winning former *Washington Post* columnist Alan “Mike” Kriegsman.

For Lifetime Achievement: Alexandra Tomalonis (dance writer, critic, and educator)

Alexandra Tomalonis has brought expert service to the dance community for decades to help develop awareness of dance for D.C. audiences and heighten the level of dance produced professionally. In addition to her critiques for *The Washington Post* and other publications, she founded and still edits a homegrown publication called *DanceView*, a highly-respected magazine/newsletter which reviews recent performances as well as feature articles (including one about Nirenka) and articles explaining an historical background of dance. *DanceView* has become an internationally distributed quarterly magazine, which now also has an online reviews supplement (www.danceviewtimes.com).

Tomalonis was born in Baltimore, Maryland, and came to Washington, D.C. after graduating with a B.A. in American Studies from the University of Virginia in 1970. She began attending dance performances about four years later, and soon became fascinated by the art form, reading and watching as much as she could. There was a dance boom in D.C. during those years with about 75 companies in the metropolitan area. Tomalonis enrolled in George Washington University intending to earn a Master’s Degree in dance history, but took a criticism course with Alan M. Kriegsman, dance critic for *The Washington Post*, who asked her to write as a stringer for the *Post*.

Tomalonis later earned a Master’s Degree from Georgetown University's Liberal Studies program. She taught professional literature, dance history, and aesthetics at George Washington University and George Mason University. Her reviews appeared regularly in the *Washington Post* from 1979 through 2006, and she has written about ballet and modern/contemporary dance for *Ballet Review*, *Dance International*, *Dance Magazine*, and other publications as well as *DanceView*.

Tomalonis has lectured frequently about dance in the Washington area in her efforts to educate audiences and professionals. She founded the message board Ballet Alert! to encourage serious conversations about classical ballet, and directed the site from 1998 to 2005. Tomalonis is the author of *Henning Kronstam: Portrait of a Danish Dancer* (University Press of Florida, 2002). She has been part of the Kennedy Center’s Ballet: 360 Program since 2007, giving several lectures each season on a variety of ballet topics.

In 2002, Tomalonis was invited to teach ballet history at the Kirov Academy of Ballet of Washington, D.C. With Ralph Hoffmann, then the General Manager of KAB, she developed the artistic-academic curriculum that is unique to this school. In addition to ballet history, aesthetics, art history, and a course called great ballets, she introduced a variety of ballet styles, as well as modern dance and the dance of non-European cultures.



About Pola Nirenka

Pola Nirenka was a matriarch of modern dance in Washington, D.C. She helped elevate the art form as a dancer, choreographer, and teacher at a time when it was scarcely known by the general public. Born in Warsaw,

Poland, in 1910, Pola Nirenska trained at the Mary Wigman School in Dresden and toured the United States in 1932 with the Mary Wigman Dance Company. Nirenska moved to Vienna for further study with Rosalia Chladek, and then taught and performed in Italy. With fascism dominating continental Europe, she fled to Britain, where she danced for the troops while enduring the Blitz in London. Nirenska lost siblings and dozens of other family members in the Holocaust.

Nirenska moved to the United States in 1949 and was “discovered” by the pioneering American modern dancer/choreographer Ted Shawn. On the advice of choreographer Doris Humphrey, Nirenska moved from New York to Washington, D.C. The annual Pola Nirenska Awards were established in 1993 after her death by her husband, Dr. Jan Karski. The annual awards are presented by the Pola Nirenska Award Committee and Washington Performing Arts, which hosts the selection committee of dance professionals in the District.

Pola Nirenska Memorial Awards Committee members this year included Dr. Rima Faber (Committee Chair), Douglas H. Wheeler, (Washington Performing Arts President Emeritus), Stephen Clapp, Vincent Thomas, and Jane Rabinovitz. Honorary Members are George Jackson, Sali Ann Kriegsman, and Carla Perlo.

About Washington Performing Arts

One of the most established and honored performing arts institutions in America, Washington Performing Arts has more than a half-century history of engaging with artists, audiences, students, and civic life. The city is truly our stage: in venues ranging from concert halls and clubs to public parks, we present a tremendous range of artists and art forms, from the most distinguished symphony orchestras to both renowned and emerging artists in classical music, jazz, international genres, and more.

Washington Performing Arts deeply values its partnerships with local organizations and other arts institutions. Through events in myriad performance venues and neighborhoods, Washington Performing Arts engages international visiting artists in community programs and introduces local artists to wider audiences. We place a premium on establishing artists as a continuing presence in the lives of both young people and adults through residencies and educational programs.

Our achievements have been recognized with a National Medal of Arts and with three Mayor’s Arts Awards from the D.C. Government. We have now embarked upon our second half-century, ever-inspired by the motto of our founder, Patrick Hayes: “Everybody in, nobody out.”

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