

# MATTHEW SHAFFER

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## TEACHING STATEMENT

Without a doubt, my career as an artist was made possible by the educators and mentors who believed in me. What I may have lacked in natural ability or facility was nurtured through a deliberate and thoughtful education. Those teachers not only recognized my determination and passion but had the experience, knowledge, and dedication to cultivate my growth through pragmatic lessons and innovative studio projects. This guiding mentorship is central to my own teaching philosophy. As an educator, it's essential to recognize the individuality of each student and discern the most effective methods of communication for their unique learning style. Just as my teachers took the time to understand my path, I strive to do the same with my students.

As a product of an interdisciplinary MFA program, I deeply advocate for higher education and the power that diversity in knowledge can bring. My interdisciplinary training fostered an appreciation for multiple perspectives, which I integrate into my own teaching to reflect the varied cultural and artistic voices of the students I work with. This diversity of thought and experience has shaped my belief that education should not only develop technique but foster critical thinking, collaboration, and empathy.

My education extends beyond formal schooling; an apprenticeship with Giordano Dance Chicago at the age of nineteen was a pivotal moment. I studied directly under Gus Giordano, observing how his syllabus materialized in the studio and through community-based performances. This was where I first understood the irreplaceable value of experiential learning--learning that goes beyond the classroom and engages students with real-world application. I've carried this understanding into every aspect of my career, including the eighteen years I've spent facilitating afterschool enrichment programs in underserved communities, leading workshops in regional dance studios and professional schools like Broadway Dance Center in NYC and Giordano Dance Center in Chicago, and teaching in academic settings across the U.S., England, and Germany.

At the heart of my teaching practice is the belief that all students are works in progress, much like artists in their creative journey. Each lesson, each interaction, is an opportunity for growth, and I approach every classroom as a collaborative space. As an educator, I am always learning alongside my students, and I often find that the most powerful lessons emerge from those collaborations. My teaching evolves because I draw upon my mentors' wisdom while staying attuned to contemporary cultural contexts. My classroom becomes a space where historical practices and current innovation intersect, where the rigor of the past is fused with the vibrancy of the present.

I view myself as a facilitator rather than an authority figure, calling on twenty-five years of experience as a performer, choreographer, and educator to guide my teaching. My

methodology is grounded in the idea that learning is an exchange—each student brings their own story and experiences, which enhances our collective understanding. By fostering an environment where students feel empowered to contribute, question, and explore, I not only challenge their technical abilities but also their capacity to articulate complex ideas through movement and storytelling.

This belief in the power of storytelling informs much of my approach to both theater and dance. Dance, for me, is a language—a means of communication that transcends words—and teaching students to articulate their stories through movement is one of the most rewarding aspects of my career. In every class, I emphasize the importance of narrative, of understanding the context behind the work, and of how dance and theater can be used as vehicles for change. My lessons are deeply rooted in the significance of history and tradition but are forward-looking, considering the intersections of identity, culture, and politics that shape the contemporary landscape.

In line with this, I am committed to creating inclusive spaces that allow for exploration of identity. Having personally navigated the complexities of identity and self-expression within conservative environments, I prioritize creating a safe, equitable, and creative atmosphere for students of all backgrounds. Whether in professional training programs, community outreach, or higher education, I seek to empower students to bring their full selves into the learning environment. By blending technical proficiency with opportunities for critical self-reflection, I aim to help students uncover not just who they are as artists, but who they are as individuals.