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Menu

🏠 Home » 2025 » March » 18 » Outside the Classroom: Dalton Arts Teachers in the Spotlight Far From 89th Street (Part 2)



NEWS

Outside the Classroom: Dalton Arts Teachers in the Spotlight Far From 89th Street (Part 2)

MARCH 18, 2025 BY MIKA HIGGINS-WOO

Dalton performing arts students are lucky to learn from many talented teachers who also currently have — or have had in the past — professional careers on the stage which inform their teaching. In 2026, the *Daltonian* is featuring articles about two such teachers every issue.

Last issue, *Daltonian* readers learned about Theater Arts & Design Teacher Meg Zeder and Costume Shop Manager & Wardrobe Supervisor Al Rosenberg. This issue, *The Daltonian* is spotlighting two of Dalton's dancers on the faculty. Read on to find out everything you ever wanted to know about Associate Director of College Counseling Sai Somboon and Dance Teacher Tiffany Mellard.

Sai Somboon

Many know Sai Somboon as the friendly and helpful college counsellor who is usually found in his office in the Annex or singing with the faculty barbershop quartet (with Rory Boyd, Matthew Lillo, and Blake Pearson) at high school assemblies. But many Dalton students do not know that Somboon has had a thriving career as a performance artist outside of Dalton.

Originally from Bangkok, Thailand, Somboon received his BA in Anthropology from Franklin & Marshall College, an MFA in Dance from the Ohio State University, and a Master of Education from Harvard University. In addition to Dalton, he has worked in admissions at several institutions of higher education, including NYU Tisch, the University of Pennsylvania and the Ohio State University.

Somboon danced for over 15 years in New York City with several different choreographers and performed in a variety of shows with modern dance companies and musical theater companies. He is very involved with the Thai Theatre Association, and over the course of his

career, he has performed at FringeNYC, Astoria Performing Arts Center, Fulton Theatre, Maltz Jupiter, Dallas Musicals, North Shore Music Theatre and Daegu Opera House in Daegu, Korea.

His biggest New York credit was the immersive *Sleep No More* at the McKittrick Hotel. According to its website, *Sleep No More* was an award-winning theatrical experience that retold Shakespeare's *Macbeth* "through a darkly cinematic lens," and included "acrobatic choreography, film noir soundtrack, and countless rooms of densely detailed atmosphere" through which visitors could walk, customizing their own experience of the show. *Sleep No More* ran in New York City from 2011 to 2025, and Somboon was in it for three years. He explains that it was "all dance — no speaking — it was a very intense show; it was a lot of fun...a really incredible dance show."

In the summer of 2023, Somboon premiered a solo show called *Extraordinary Alien* at Theatre Row near Times Square as part of NuWorks 2023, "an annual experimental series of self-created work from innovative and diverse artists exploring an eclectic range of genres and techniques using poetry, text, dance, and music." He wrote the show himself, and it was directed by his very good friend Nana Dakin, who he explains is also a queer Thai American artist. Somboon says that *Extraordinary Alien* "was a lot of fun because it was my own work. It was very nerve-wracking. I kind of just submitted a script to this theater company that was producing it [Pan Asian Repertory Theatre], thinking 'oh, you know, we'll see what happens.' And they liked it, and they were like, 'We want to develop it and put it up.' And I was like 'oh my gosh, OK!' And luckily it was towards the end of the academic year, so I had a little bit more time."

Another highlight of Somboon's career occurred in the summer of 2024 when he directed and choreographed a large-scale dance theater performance at Chulalongkorn University in Thailand. The show was called *IBM 1401*, and it was based on music by Icelandic composer Jóhann Jóhannsson. At the time of its performance, Somboon explained that the show "invites audiences to reflect on how technology shapes our lives and relationships. Ultimately, the performance serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring bonds that unite us as we navigate the complexities of a rapidly evolving world."

While he was working on *IBM 1401*, Somboon already had a more-than-full-time job in the college office at Dalton. About his decision to take on this enormous project at the same time

he had a demanding day job, he explains: "Someone had just reached out to me. I don't search for these opportunities because I have a full schedule, as you can imagine. But it was over the summer, and I was like, "You know what? I can spend some time with my family in Thailand, work with some incredible Thai dancers and performers.' So that was like a month and a half of a lot of work. A *lot* of work. Putting a show together from the ground up, [but it] was really cool."

Like Ms. Mellard, Mr. Somboon brings a lot of what he has learned as a performing artist to his work at Dalton. He explains: "Overall, I think what I bring to my work as a college counsellor having been a performing artist — actually, I would still consider myself a performing artist — is a level of compassion, and knowing how to see a different experience from someone else's perspective and putting yourself in someone else's shoes whether it's a student or a parent. And of course I love reviewing arts portfolios — theater portfolios, music portfolios, visual art portfolios. I work with lots of different types of students, but I always say to rising seniors that if anyone is looking at submitting an arts portfolio, I'm happy to take a look at it. I...worked in the BFA admissions process [at Ohio State's Department of Dance and as a reader for NYU] so I know what colleges are looking for." Somboon explains that "sometimes I have students who are not on my caseload who ask me if it's OK if they talk to me for a little bit or show me their arts portfolios, and I say 'I'm all in; let's go!'"

It is that can-do, "let's go" energy that allows Somboon to be a performing artist and an excellent college counselor, and still find time to substitute teach the occasional dance class at Dalton.

Tiffany Mellard

Dance Teacher Tiffany Mellard joined Dalton this fall as a substitute teacher. She taught Jazz Dance in the high school for most of the fall semester while Jinah Parker was out on maternity leave, and is currently choreographing the 6th Grade Greek Festival.

A native of the Bronx, Mellard began her professional dance training at the Harlem School of the Arts and Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School. Mellard received her BFA in Dance from

Florida State University and an Ed.M. in Arts in Education from Harvard School of Education (where she knew Somboon!).

She has had an impressive career dancing with a variety of dance troupes and musical theater companies, on television, and in commercial settings. Most recently, she performed as “The Bullet” with the third national tour of *Hamilton*, which went to Puerto Rico, San Francisco, and other cities on the West Coast and in Canada. Other musical theater credits include the national tour of *Chicago*, where she played the character Annie, *Memphis* at the Gateway Playhouse in Long Island, and the international tour of *West Side Story* in which she played the character Francisca (and understudied Consuela).

Mellard is a former member of Victory Dance Project, Nathan Trice/RITUALS, and “La Medea” by Yara Travieso (a made-for-camera live musical which re-imagined the ancient Greek tragedy by Euripides into a “Latin-disco-pop-Womanist variety show”). Mellard made her choreographic debut in the workshop reading of *Woo Woo Child* at Soho Rep in September 2023. She was also a dancer on Season 3 of HBO’s *The Gilded Age*, and has done commercial work for various companies, including Spectrum, Kate Spade, American Express, SONY, and Under Armour.

In addition to her work as a performer, Mellard has also been a teaching artist at various institutions across the United States and abroad. Mellard also serves as a Board Member of Dancewave, a Brooklyn-based dance education nonprofit.

Of all the work on her impressive resumé, Mellard’s favorite thing she has done is her turn as “The Bullet.” Speaking about this role, Mellard remarks: “*Hamilton* was one of the most extraordinary experiences I’ve had, being that I was a part of the cast that went to Puerto Rico with Lin Manuel Miranda. We got to perform and raise funds for Hurricane Maria relief. That was really inspiring, just to be able to bring that level of joy and excitement to the island after such devastation.”

Another highlight of her career was performing in a Kate Spade New York campaign. “What was so special about that project in particular,” she told the *Daltonian*, “was not only was it a campaign for Kate Spade in the fall, but it was in New York City, and being born and raised in

New York and having my friends and family be able to see me on billboards across New York City, see me in the train stations [was incredible]. At the time the campaign came out, I was actually touring with *Hamilton*, so I didn't get to see it, but my dad being able to say 'oh, that's my daughter' as I was spinning across screens in the 59th Street train station — I would say that was one of the most special moments of my career."

Mellard brings a lot of what she has learned in her professional dance training and career to the classroom at Dalton. For example, she allows different genres of dance to inform any particular work she is teaching in the classroom. "Given that I have a background in a variety of genres — I started with West African dance when I was a child and then transitioned to ballet, modern, jazz, tap, etc. — I try to make my class as well-rounded as possible," she says. "Even if [the dance I am teaching] is rooted in one specific discipline, I use things that I've learned in other forms of dance to support that style. So, for instance, if I'm teaching modern dance/contemporary, I'll pull a lot from West African dance influences like being grounded into the earth and focusing on stamina and strength. Also [I pull] from ballet classes where I often had to work on strength and flexibility, poise and grace, and agility and precision. So I would say that that is a lot of what is at the core of my teaching practice."

Additionally, Mellard uses her experience auditioning to help prepare Dalton dancers to distinguish themselves when trying to get cast in a role or get into a dance program. "[One] thing that I like to do in my classes is prepare my dancers for the real world, whether you are preparing for an audition at Dalton or an audition for colleges. If you are preparing for interviews in the future, how do you present yourself in a confident way so that you stand out among your competitors?"

The key to doing this, she explains, is not only having impeccable dance technique, but also understanding your character. "In musical theater specifically," she explains, "so much of the time we are asked to have a point of view about what we're doing. We are not just dancers on a stage; we are part of the story. So I performed in *Hamilton*, and I was a redcoat soldier which is completely different from how I would operate as a bluecoat soldier or when I transition to someone who is in a tavern who is going to drink 'to the revolution.' So I really try to emphasize why we're moving in a certain way and what is the story behind it."

In her Jazz Dance class this fall, Mellard taught her students iconic choreography from shows such as *Chicago*, *Hamilton*, and *West Side Story*. Her teaching style stressed fidelity to the original combination and the spirit of those shows, but left room for individual students' interpretation. She explained: "I feel like if I'm going to do the choreography justice I have to pull from those people who taught me, especially because with those shows in particular I learned the original choreography so I want to uphold that integrity and make sure it's in alignment with what the original ideas of the show were, what the intentions were for the dancers when they were learning the choreography and executing it on stage. And I don't want to ever give dancers material or inspiration that would detract from the original idea of the story. But I do want to encourage individuality throughout. I think there is still space for new dancers that are learning the material to have their own perspective and point of view while staying within the world of the choreographer's vision."

Mellard is thrilled to be teaching at Dalton and says that, in the future, she would love to see a production of *West Side Story* mounted here. She thinks it would be a perfect fit for our school "because it takes place in New York and the students here are at the right age so it would be perfect and appropriate to [perform here]. It speaks to a lot of issues that are currently happening in society that I think it's important to address and what better way to address it than through art? The music is timeless. The choreography is timeless. I think it would be a really great opportunity for the students at Dalton to perform it."

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