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## UVI to Offer Virtual Dance Workshops to Showcase New Bachelor of Fine Arts Dance Program With Instructors Elle Nielsen and Djassi DaCosta

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**Elle Nielsen** By. ELLE NIELSEN (VIA FACEBOOK)

Dance instructors from the University of the Virgin Islands' Department of Communication and Performing Arts are presenting virtual dance workshops this month to highlight the dance techniques and academic studies offered in the newly launched bachelor of fine arts dance program, the institution of high learning made known via release Wednesday. The workshops are offered free of charge to the public, and high school students are encouraged to participate.

"We are very fortunate to have two phenomenal instructors who are both highly trained and have extensive teaching and performance experience around the world," said Dr. Vanda Espinosa, a

UVI English professor and dancer, who was instrumental in advocating for the development of the dance program.

A native of New York City, UVI Assistant Professor Djassi DaCosta Johnson grew up frequently visiting her grandfather on St. Croix. Her position at UVI now brings her back to her childhood playground with a new purpose – to expand accessibility for students who want to enter the field of dance.

“Black dancers and black female dancers in leadership roles are underrepresented in the industry. It is still a very elitist industry and I would like to help build this department to open awareness and help bring about change,” she said.

Throughout her accomplished career, DaCosta Johnson has performed with dance companies and taught different forms of dance in the U.S., Europe and South America, according to the release. Her multifaceted career encompasses choreography, television, photography, filmmaking and writing. DaCosta Johnson studied dance as a fellow at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center and earned a master of fine arts in dance and new media from New York University Tisch School of the Arts.

Born and raised on St. Croix, UVI dance instructor, Elle Nielsen, studied dance throughout her youth at the Caribbean Dance School before heading to the mainland where she earned a bachelor of fine arts in dance at Jacksonville University, and then a master of fine arts in dance at Florida State University. She has performed throughout the U.S. and taught dance to all age groups. With her strong connections to the Virgin Islands dance community, Nielsen is well poised to partner with the local community to support and grow the new program, the release stated.

“There are a lot of artists in the Virgin Islands that don’t have that outlet to foster their professional growth,” she said. According to the release, Nielsen hopes the new degree program will give local students the confidence to pursue their passion and will give way to greater acceptance in the community of dance as a profession.

“We are delighted to have a dance curriculum that will make the performing arts division complete,” said Dr. Espinosa. “I really give much credit to Dean Engerman and her vision of having a comprehensive performing arts program at UVI that not only incorporates music and theater, but also dance.”

To bring that vision to life, Dr. Kimarie Engerman, dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, assembled a team of consultants within UVI and in the Virgin Islands dance community to design a program that would serve the needs of Virgin Islands students and attract students from abroad, UVI said. The result is a program that aims to be as academically rigorous as it is technically challenging. Students will combine dance training including classical ballet and modern dance techniques with classroom courses such as the history of dance and postmodern dance.

“We also see a unique way to differentiate our program by emphasizing Afro-Caribbean dance, given the historical and cultural role of dance in our region and throughout the African diaspora,” said Espinosa. “We believe that focus will not only be relevant to our local students, but also appeal to mainland and international students looking for an authentic cultural experience.”

DaCosta Johnson will host a workshop from 3:30 to 4:45 pm. on Friday, Nov. 27. The Zoom meeting ID is 613-204-9503. Nielsen will host a workshop from 5:30 to 6:30 pm on Monday, Nov. 30. The Zoom meeting ID is 831-335-2442, passcode: 2020DAN.

For more information about the UVI dance program, contact Dion Parson, chair of the Communication and Performing Arts Department at [dionparson@gmail.com](mailto:dionparson@gmail.com). Applications for admission for the Spring 2021 semester will be accepted until December 15, 2020. To apply to UVI, visit [www.uvi.edu/apply](http://www.uvi.edu/apply).

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