

# Bender of Twigs



## Nick Johnson

When I was first approached to write something about Professor Nick Johnson for Bender of Twigs, I pondered how to do this. How could I describe the honor it has been to know this incredibly special artist, colleague, and dear friend---and how could I articulate the indelible and transforming gift he has been to the WSU Dance program from the moment he stepped into our dance studios as Director of Dance twenty-five years ago?

One could start with the usual biographical things, of course, but in Nick's case, they are not so usual. He happens to be a world-class Mime Artist, who has counted the legendary Marcel Marceau as mentor and friend. He founded the School for Mime Theatre in Ohio and established the Alithea Mime Theatre in Wichita. His dedication to the fusion of Dance and Mime has enriched WSU students beyond measure, and secured WSU's reputation as the only university in the country to offer Mime as part of a dance curriculum. Through Alithea and Wichita Contemporary Dance Theatre, he has provided valuable travel opportunities for students to places such as Italy, Taiwan, Mexico, Taiwan, Shanghai, Poland, and the United Nations in New York. He has also won multiple awards, including a Fellowship from the Kansas Arts Commission, Art Educator of the Year from the City of Wichita, and several College of Fine Arts awards.

Through the years it has been a privilege to learn from him, and watch how the lives of students, colleagues and the community have literally been changed under his tutelage. His creative works are meant to be as transformative for the dancers who perform them as for the audience. Children and adults alike have been enchanted by his artistry and touched by the passion and compassion of his teaching. Ground-breaking, and innovatively collaborative, his dance and mime works run the gamut of human emotion and explore the depths of the human spirit in ways that challenge and alter the viewer's perceptions, often indelibly.

His artistic Dance and Mime Theatre works have become iconic in the Wichita community, and indeed world-wide over the years: Angels Rising: a poignant and uplifting study of human nature and the evolution of consciousness; Asylum: a raw and piercing examination of mental illness, that offers a beacon of hope; Dante's Nightmares and Dreams (in collaboration with Regina Klenjoski): a phantasmagoric journey through the mind of Dante, in which his allegorical Inferno illuminates the human condition; Brave New World: a brave re-visioning of Aldous Huxley's novel, which exposes society at its most repressive and most liberating; The Wiyos of Oz: a re-telling of Dorothy's coming of age, in collaboration with the unique Wiyos blues/folk band. Through these seminal works, his dancers truly become the "poet-athletes" he inspires them to be.

Creative—Inventive—Visionary—Inspirational—Universal—Inimitable . . . Nick is a true Renaissance Man, Magician of the Arts, Wizard of the Theatre, Mime and Dance Artist Extraordinaire, friend to all and more genuinely captivating than the day is long. A man of compassion, heart, soul, and generosity, he would give (and has given) the shirt off his back to anyone in need. He models a perfect example of "live and let live," yet holds us all to the same integrity he demands of himself. His inexhaustible curiosity and zest for life has inspired us all and made us better by knowing him.

In the words of Wichita's fabled Wizard of Oz, if "a heart is judged not by how much one loves, but by how much one is loved by others," Nick certainly has the largest heart of all. Congratulations on your induction into Bender of Twigs, dear Nick. We all love you!