Seasoned dancer spirit behind students

By Jennifer Parker

Her the best legs on campus. And she knows how to use them. Those who know her refer to her as the dancer with the cutest English accent. She is petite well mannered and never slumps her shoulders.

Every day, be it morning or night, Valerie Roche can be found in the dance studio in the Lied center teaching, choreographing or just watching.

Roche, associate professor and dance coordinator, brings years of experience and expertise to the Creighton Dance Department. Roche is a certified associate in both the Royal Academy of Dancing and the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing.

Roche was born in Birmingham, England, where she began dancing at age 4. "I was enrolled in dance classes because my father said I was a weak child," Roche said. She has been dancing ever since. Originally starting in tap and acrobatics, Roche began ballet at age 9. She danced in shows for returning injured soldiers.

She started dancing professionally at age 12. Roche remembers being schooled in between shows, sometimes while still in costume.

Roche continued her professional career until an Achilles tendon injury caused her to quit. She then went on to pharmacy school and became a dispensing assistant.

She married Percival Roche in 1960, and they moved to the United States shortly after. While in Omaha, Roche watched an Omaha Ballet Theatre performance and was impressed. Later a World-Herald newspaper article about a new ballet school had her calling director Emeline Skinner to see if she could get involved.

Skinner and Roche started what is now known as Ballet Omaha in 1962.

"Our goal was to provide well-trained dancers for the Omaha Playhouse and Opera Omaha productions," Roche said.

The first Ballet Omaha production, then called Omaha Regional Ballet Academy, was choreographed by Roche and included the modern Dale Vana work "La Boutique Fantasque." It was performed in the spring of 1964. That winter the company performed "The Nutcracker" for the first time. "The Nutcracker" would become an annual Christmas tradition in Omaha.

Ballet Omaha split into a school and a company in 1972. Roche left Ballet Omaha that year when Creighton approached her with the idea of starting a dance program. Roche started teaching at Creighton while continuing to direct the Omaha Academy of Ballet, the school for Ballet Omaha company members.

The Dance Department started as a club and then grew to become the institution it is today. "Father Lee Lubbers helped turn our club into a major when he started the Fine and Performing Arts Department," Roche said.

The Creighton program now includes all forms of dance, not just ballet. The program includes classes in tap, jazz and modern. "I really like how balanced we've become," Roche said.

Roche isn't afraid to try new things. She often participates in the classes of other faculty members and is not afraid to take the class of passing guest artists.

Children of all ages take classes at the Omaha Academy of Ballet. Additionally, many non-traditional students take Creighton classes. As a result, Roche teaches all age groups from young children to adults.

Roche enjoys teaching because it gives students an appreciation for the arts. "I'm proud of all my students who go on to dance professionally, but I am also proud of my students who use dance in their lives by going into careers such as physical therapy or by serving on arts boards," Roche said.

Students equally appreciate all the opportunities they have in the Creighton dance program. "I didn't know what I wanted to do until I started taking dance," said Adrienne Posey, Arts & Sciences senior.

"Dance started out as a hobby, but then became a part of who I am," said Kara Grimsley, Arts & Sciences junior.

When she's outside of the studio, Roche enjoys gardening and bird watching. Whenever she has any time off, she loves to travel. Roche's husband is from New Zealand, and they love to bird watch there whenever they can.

Roche is now currently working on the Creighton production of "The Nutcracker." Consequently, this is one of the busiest times of the year for her. "If there were eight or nine days in a week, I'd be all right," Roche quipped.

Roche's long-term goals include more dancing. After all, she has to maintain those great legs.

"The best part of my job is seeing all those faces smile in class and rehearsal," Roche said. "Working in the arts and dance may not be the most financially rewarding work, but that's not all that matters, is it?"