Dance: CU's other professional program

By Brian Kokensparger
Fine and Performing Arts Department

You are probably familiar with Creighton's fine professional programs. Yet it may surprise you to learn that dance is one of them.

"Few people realize that a student with sufficient talent graduates from our dance program fully prepared to audition and perform professionally," said Mrs. Valerie Roche, head of the dance department.

"We take pride in the fact that many of our students go on to major dance companies, such as the San Francisco Ballet, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet Company, and the Houston Ballet," she said. "Some are professional dancers and choreographers in New York."

One of the reasons Creighton students normally make a strong showing in national dance auditions is the solid background in both ballet and modern dance, she said. Students receive instruction and the chance for certification through the Royal Academy of Dancing (R.A.D.), which boasts Her Majesty the Queen of England as its principal patron.

An international examining body, the R.A.D. sets rigid standards for ballet instruction in the hope of maintaining a fundamentally strong future for dance both in England and abroad.

Roche, who holds the elusive Advanced Teachers' Certificate in the Royal Academy, spoke of her own training in Birmingham, England, where she was born and raised.

"I first performed on stage at the tender age of twelve. I, and seven other young girls and boys, were chosen to perform 'Cinderella,' an English pantomime." (Pantomime is a purely British entertainment form that requires performers to sing, dance, act, tell jokes, and even perform gymnastic feats when necessary.)

Though they performed every day, they did not neglect their studies. "Often we were in class between scenes and appearances on stage. As soon as we came off stage we had to hurry to the classroom. It must have been a sight to see all of us sitting at our studies dressed as rabbits and squirrels."

Though this rigorous schedule provided Roche an excellent background for teaching, she said she had never planned on teaching as a career.

"To tell you the truth, I never thought of a teaching career until I came to the United States," she said. "I didn't dislike the idea, it just never crossed my mind."

She and her husband, Percy, arrived in New York in 1961 "just to see what everyone was making a fuss about." Though they didn't plan to stay any longer than a couple of years, they were excited by the opportunities here.

"The United States had a fresh feeling about it; what had already been done in England was just starting here and there was a spirit of adventure," she said.

Roche rode that spirit to Omaha, and a chance item in the newspaper started her teaching career.

"I was reading the (Omaha) World-Herald, and I noticed an article about the beginning of the Omaha Regional Ballet Academy," she said. "But what really drew my curiosity was that Emaline Skinner (the school's director) planned to follow the Royal Academy of Dance syllabus."

She said she found herself welcomed with open arms, and when Emaline Skinner's husband was posted overseas, she took over as the director. The organization later became known as the Omaha Academy of Ballet.

She came to Creighton soon after. Her first studio area was the range in the Old Gym, when dance was offered by the Physical Education department. She moved into the Fine Arts building when the newly-formed Fine and Performing Arts department moved in.

She then set about developing a program that now includes two full-time instructors and one part-time member. The department offers courses in ballet, modern, pointe, jazz, tap, character dance, plus composition, pedagogy, labanotation, and dance history.

Besides teaching at Creighton, Roche continues as the director of the Omaha Academy of Ballet, started Creighton's performance group, Company of Dancers."

She is presently very busy with final stages of rehearsal for "Peter the Wolf," a dance drama that will be offered this weekend when "A Company of Dancers" takes the stage at the Fine Performing Arts Center.