

Rock Voices: The Oral History Project of SRU
Ursula Payne Interview
February 23, 2024
Bailey Library, Slippery Rock University, Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania
Interviewed by Megan John
Transcribed, proofread and edited by Rachel Hoarau and Judy Silva
Reviewed and approved by _____

MJ: It is 2:38 on February 23rd, 2024. I am here doing a Rock Voices interview with Ursula Payne. Hello.

UP: Hi. How are you?

MJ: I'm pretty good. How are you? I see you've got pictures.

UP: I do have pictures!

MJ: That's amazing.

UP: I thought I would bring these because it would help to kind of jog my memory. I recently found these pictures in my office that I was cleaning up. [Laughs] I was going through things and came across some old photos, so I'm just going to put them there and they can help with the spirit of the talk today.

MJ: All right. To start out, could I get some biographical information like your name, date of birth, where you come from and stuff like that.

UP: Sure! Okay. My name is Ursula Payne. I was born August 11, 1969, so I'm definitely a true Leo. I was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, and my mom and dad. . . .

MJ: [Directional guidance on where to look during recording].

UP: Okay [laughs]. Yeah, so I was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, and my father is actually from this area, he grew up in New Castle and my mother grew up in the Huntersville, North Carolina area, and they both met at Knoxville College.

When I was born, they spent about two years in Tennessee because when they graduated from college, they went into education and so they were teaching in the school system there. Then after about two, three years of that, they moved to New Castle. My father came back home to help with his family because he had a large family. So my grandmom and then . . . he had about eight siblings, so [laugh]. He came back to help with the family.

MJ: All right. And then your education. I saw that you're actually in the middle of getting another degree right now.

UP: I am, yes. In terms of my education, I went to undergrad at Slippery Rock University where I received my BA degree in Dance.

From there I got a scholarship and went to the Ohio State University where I earned my Master of Fine Arts in dance. My areas of specialization were performance and then also doing stagings from Lumbar notation score.

Now fast forward twenty-five some odd years later, I decided that I wanted to go back to school for my doctorate. I started that process in 2020 and I'm currently in the dissertation stage, yay [laughs]. Right now, I'm doing data collection and my doctorate in Dance Studies, it's a Ph.D. in Dance Studies through Texas Women's University.

MJ: All right. And you've already partially answered this, but what is your affiliation with Slippery Rock University?

UP: Sure. Slippery Rock and I have a long history. I started here as a student. I came in 1987 and was here until 1992; that's when I graduated. Then I returned back in 1996 as an instructor. I was actually living in New York City at the time, and I applied, and [pause] was hired to do a semester long sabbatical replacement. And it was for a temporary, full-time position that then turned into a tenure track line.

MJ: All right, and then you were already here when it was a university. Did the department you were hired into change while you were here? And if so, how?

UP: Sure. I would say in terms of how the department changed, I think one of the significant things to say is that . . . when I came here as a student, that was when the Department of Dance was first being established, and also the degree, B.A. degree in Dance. It was probably two or three years in its development when I came as a student.

For me, I think that was really important because I had a lot of different interests when I came to Slippery Rock in terms of the variety of things that I was interested in, and in terms of what I could do. Not only was I a dance person, but coming out of high school, I was an athlete. I played basketball and also was on the track and field team. One of the reasons why I chose to come to Slippery Rock was because it gave me the opportunity to dance, but then to also pursue my athletics. So I was on the basketball team and I was also on the track team. I would say, you know, those things were really important for me.

In terms of changes that started to happen, Lucy Sack--who I would say is probably like the mother of the Dance program here, who was really--Lucy Sack and Thom Cobb, they were really a powerful, dynamic duo. I like to credit them for being the ones that really started to make a name for Slippery Rock, in terms of paving the way for it to become a Department of Dance, and then also to have a program.

Then they were able to make a hire, which I think was really significant for the department, and that was Nora Ambrosio. She came, she would have been here . . . I think I was a freshman when she was interviewing, because I do remember her coming here for an interview. Then when she started, I believe--a lot of the ideas that she had--because she was coming from a graduate program at Smith, and then also from having experiences at the University of Maryland, and then the teaching that she did in New York, and just the wealth of information that she had, she was really able to move the department from one place to the next place.

Also while she was here, I think another important person that came was Nola Nolan Holland, or Nola Nolan. She came and was able to really expand what we were able to do in terms of technique, in terms of adding in that ballet component. I think having kind of the four of them, Lucy, Thom, Nora, and then Nola, I think really created something that was special in terms of the department and its growth. So I feel like those things were really pivotal for the development of the program.

I would also have to say another thing that was important, I would have to say would be the *leadership*. Because I remember President Aebersold; he was the president when I was a student. When I came back, my first year of teaching, which was as that sabbatical replacement, he was here, but I think he might have announced his retirement. But that was important because he was familiar with me as a student, with the work that I had been doing, and also how I left and went to Ohio State. Then I was in New York, having a career, and I think he was really open to--as well as the dean. And then of course, the Department went to having a tenure track line that I was then able to apply for. I think all of those changes, or all of those opportunities were really great for our department.

From there, we grew from having 20 majors--well, I can remember when I was in school, we had like seven majors [laughs]. It grew from having a small number of majors to a program that was over 100 majors. That, I think, was something really special.

MJ: Do we still have that many?

UP: I think when you count all of our first and second majors, then I would say, yes, we still have that many. Then if you add in minors, then I would say we're probably up in the 120-130 range. I think it's just perfect for a program of our size.

MJ: Wow. I actually talked to Nora Ambrosio back in April. She was great.

UP: Oh!

MJ: And she told me about the process of finding buildings to teach dance in. It says, what buildings did you work in?

UP: When I came here, I was in the field house, Morrow Field House, that's where my office was. We had the Field House Dance Studio, and that was the major studio for us. That was also the studio that I did most of my dancing in as a student. From there, we were able to acquire the McKay Dance Studio, which was a great addition. Then from there we were able to have West Gym.

Those three studios were really wonderful additions for our program, in terms of facilities. The only issue, though, is that they're in three different places. And so, for a long time, we were spread out kind of all over campus. So, with the renovation of the East-West facility and now the Performing Arts Complex and with the renovation of Miller, it's great because now we're able to be concentrated across two buildings. So, that's wonderful.

MJ: And when you first came to SRU, first as a student, and then again to teach, what was it like when you arrived?

UP: Sure. So, what I remember about Slippery Rock coming here as a student, I was really excited by being here. It was great to be away from home [laughs]. As a high school student, there were different programs and things that Slippery Rock would have on campus that we could come and participate in as students. We used to do academic games and things like that.

MJ: And you were close enough?

UP: New Castle's only about thirty minutes from here. I can remember, we would come in on buses and go to the student union area and participate in [a] variety of different academic games. So we did that.

I remember one year, our band marched in the homecoming parade up here. And then I came for a dance concert to see a program. I also had Thom Cobb when I was a high school student. I had him when I was 15 and 16. It was Thom Cobb and his wife, Christine Cobb. I can't say enough about how influential they've been.

But at any rate, I remember campus being really vibrant, you know, and being excited to be here. Plus, the other thing is, because I was also involved in the Rocklettes and the marching band, we had to come maybe two weeks early for band camp, which was a great way to get acclimated to campus. Then also because we were here, the football team was here-- also there were some other athletic teams--we were able to kind of meet each other, make friends. I think one of the very first people that I met when I was on campus is still one of my best friends today. I'm the godmother of her child [laughs]. We still have those relationships that have persevered through all this time, which is really nice.

So, campus was an exciting place. I think it continues to be, but I do think it has changed in that, you know, like some of the dorms that used to be here when I was a student don't exist anymore. Now we have these housing complexes that are more like apartment-style living. Buildings, certain buildings that used to be oriented for one thing, have now been changed over to do something else. Also the Smith Student Center, we didn't have that. I remember when it was being talked about and then finally when it was finished. So just in terms of the structure of campus, I think those things have really changed a lot. And I think for the better. I still believe Slippery Rock has one of the best and most beautiful campuses in the state system. And I've been to almost all of the campuses.

MJ: All right. What about changes you noticed when you came back to teach?

UP: Sure! So, I would say in terms of when I came back to teach, again [pause] it's a different experience then because you're going from having that student experience, which is kind of both the social and also the academic, to then the experience of what it is to be a faculty member. And then to actually be part of a group of people where our responsibilities are about delivering a curriculum, right? And it's also about training dancers, and getting them ready to move out into the profession. But then also, I think that whole idea of expanding people's perceptions or ideas about what dance is right? And what dance is as a profession and all that it involves. But then also how dance is very interdisciplinary in terms of all the different areas that it can intersect with in terms of science, technology, health, education.

I think those things have become much more prevalent since the time I started to now. I think people are definitely more open to understanding the diversity of dance as a discipline, as an academic discipline of study, but then also as a performing art. I think that's a good thing.

MJ: All right. And what about your campus activities? This is talking about committees and things, but I know you're also in an administrative position now.

UP: Sure. Yes. I have a lot of campus activities and [pause, laughs] when I was writing this out, I was like, well, I have to kind of track my activities from when I started as a student, right? Because one of the major activities that I was involved in that drew me into the Dance program, and then also that helped me decide that, *Yeah, this is where I want to be and this is what I want to do for the rest of my life*, was Slippery Rock University Dance Theater. Slippery Rock University Dance Theater was our student dance company. That's where a lot of these photos come from, that I have. [They] are from performances and things of either when I was in a faculty-led work, or if I was in a student piece or something like that that got performed. But Slippery Rock, the Dance Theater, was a major thing for me, to evolve as a student.

And then when I came back to Slippery Rock, one of my roles was to become the Slippery Rock University Dance Theater director. I did that for about 20 years; I was the director. As the director, one of the things that I did was not only just coordinating our performances and things that we did on campus, but also taking students off the campus, and traveling to different places, involving students in the American College Dance Festival. That was something that I was involved in when I was a student. And I first was introduced to that through Nora Ambrosio, who was one of my faculty, was one of my professors. I was able to continue that legacy that she started with our students.

Those were activities that we attended every year. Those are things that I looked forward to going to every year, and bringing students to, and having them kind of exposed so that they could see—one of the beauties of going to those kinds of conferences is that you see what people are doing in the field, in our region. You also are able to network and meet people that you're going to come across in the field.

So that's a way of career building and also networking that I think has been really valuable for us. It definitely was valuable for me in terms of everything that I was able to get and also all of the opportunities that emerged out of being involved in those kinds of activities. Then the kind of exposure that it gives to our students, to be able to perform their works, to be able to take classes from a variety of different people. And then also to be able to see, *Okay, yeah, what we're doing here is really great work. What's happening here at Slippery Rock is valuable. You are getting an excellent education, and also the resources you have and all of those kinds of things are really top notch*. That activity, Dance Theater, was major for me.

Another activity was being the director of the Frederick Douglass Institute, which I really also enjoyed. I started doing that while I was the department chair, which was also another important role that I had in the department. I'll talk about the Frederick Douglass Institute: what I really appreciated about that is that it allowed me to also be able to have interaction with students that were outside of the Dance program. Also, [I could] think about diversity, issues of diversity and

also social justice and how to . . . develop programs around those kinds of activities that students can engage with. I think out of that, I made a lot of great collaborative partnerships with people like Cindy LaCom, also with Corrine Gibson. Both of them are not at the institute anymore, but I feel like those were some really valuable connections that I was able to make.

Then as a [chair] of the Dance Department, that was definitely a role that I enjoyed. I loved every second of it [laughs], even through the *challenges* that I faced. I really loved being a chairperson, and I loved the faculty, working with our faculty. I've always felt like our faculty worked well together and that we had some really strong relationships, some solid relationships, which I thought were really productive. I think that was definitely a special period. I also think it was another shift, kind of--when you think about the trajectory of the Department of Dance, that was a shift because we also added two degree programs.

So, we always had the B.A. degree in Dance, then during that time we added the BFA in Dance, the Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, which is more of a professionalized degree. I think that those were really good additions to the curricular array that we were able to offer.

Other activities outside of that that were really important for me were my involvement with the union, with the faculty union, APSCUF. I was on the Promotions Committee, and I also co-chaired the Promotions Committee. One of the things that's special about that is because that's a committee that you are also elected to. So being able to be elected to something by your peers, by the faculty peers, it's affirming and that you're doing the work that you need to do as a faculty member; that you're being present; that you're committed and invested in that governance, or in the shared governance, of the university.

That role was really important for me because one of the reasons I wanted to participate in being a committee member for the Promotions Committee is because I wanted to see what kinds of scholarship faculty were doing. I came away from being on that committee--I was so amazed by our faculty, because you got to see kind of the depths of the research that is happening with our faculty members on campus, and then all the things that they're doing curricularly, in terms of their instructional designs, any kind of innovations that they're doing, collaborations and things of that nature. And so I always felt inspired after being and serving on that committee. That also was a great way for me to try to model what I was doing in terms of research, and also up the ante on some of the things that I was pursuing in terms of my scholarship and my creative activity.

So I would say those were kind of the major things for me. I think all of that helped me to be able to make the *transition* to the role that I'm in now, which is serving as associate provost. I'm new in the role, but I was an interim associate provost for about a year and eight months. So now that I've made the transition to permanent, that's definitely a different step because now I'm moving from being faculty over to management. But I still take all of the experience and all of the diversity of experiences that I've had on campus, from being a student to being a faculty member to coming up through the ranks. I feel like all of those things inform what I'm doing in the role now.

I think all of that is important. It also is a testament to this place and to this institution, and also how I feel I've been supported as a faculty member, in terms of my own professional development, and then also in having the opportunity to be able to have progression, in terms of leadership, and to nurture that within myself. I think it's important. I think it's special. It doesn't happen everywhere, because, still Black women are probably about 2% of people in higher education, upper level administrative roles, you know, Black women are only 2%---if that! [Laughs]. Okay? So representation, I think, matters. I think it means a lot. It's not easy to get there, because it does take an investment of time. It takes [pause] the numerous sacrifices I've made to my own personal life and also professional life. But I feel like I'm at a good place.

MJ: So, during your time here, what would you consider your accomplishments?

UP: Well, I think everything I described [laughs].

MJ: Definitely.

UP: [Laughs]. Everything I described but I think, you know, for me, I would have to say, having the perseverance and the passion, not just for my field of dance, but for the institution at large, to stay. And to really be committed to what it means to be here and to be present and to be fully engaged in the campus community. So for me, I feel like that's my biggest accomplishment because it's not easy! It's not easy being a Black female. I'm a cis-gendered Black female in a predominantly White environment. In a rural place--I mean, yes, I grew up in New Castle, which is thirty minutes away from here, but even living there is not easy [laughs].

And I also like to think of myself as being very global-minded. In terms of just the way I think about things and the way I see myself in the world, and also a person who has traveled the world. I've been able to travel to about 30 different countries and [I've] probably taken about 40 international trips. So I think that has also given me a perspective.

And what I think about all that I've been able to accomplish, from that 18-year-old that stepped foot on this campus [laughs], I'm very proud of that. I also think Slippery Rock has been for me--it was a gateway to the rest of the world. I think that has been really good. Yeah. Because I went to Ohio State for graduate school. Ohio State is like a city unto itself [laughs]. Okay? But I felt like I was able to go to a school like that because I went to Slippery Rock. I was nurtured and affirmed as an undergraduate student. All of the resources that we had went to undergraduate students [laughs], in the program. And so by the time I was able to step foot on a campus as big as Ohio State and the Ohio State dance program, they had graduate students. They had a full-fledged MFA degree, and then they eventually had a doctorate.

I think all of those things are important because it just speaks to the kind of preparation that I received from Slippery Rock and that in turn, I have worked to be able to make sure students have that. So that it's cyclical, right? [Laughs].

MJ: Yeah. Now when you came back to campus to teach, who are the leaders among the administration and the faculty. You mentioned some Dance professors that had really helped shape the department. What was it like then when you first came and how was it changed?

UP: Yeah, sure. Again, when I first came, when you think of the people who were here: Thom Cobb, Lucy Sack and then Nora Ambrosio was added, and then Nola Nolan. And the four of them really helped to move the needle in terms of being able to grow the department.

Then I was added, and then the five of us really, I think, worked well together to do that. From there, Jennifer Keller came and she was another fabulous addition to the program. And then Melissa Teodoro. And then also with that we had staff like Andy Hasenpflug, who I think really helped to transform what we were able to do as instructors. Working with his music and his compositions, and also the students being able to dance in environments with live music, I think really elevated the learning that was happening.

Then we had other additions. We had people like Teena Custer that came through and, and then Lindsay Viatori, who then ended up as a tenure track--well, she's tenured now--faculty member. And now we have new faculty that are coming into the fold. Just in terms of that trajectory, I think all of that was exciting.

I would say other people that weren't involved with Dance, but that were inspirational for me: the different presidents that we've had over the years. President Aebersold definitely was one. G. Warren Smith and also Bob Smith. I loved both of them [laughs]. I mean, when they retired, I was crying [laughs] because I really appreciated both of those presidents and the interest that they had in our program, and then just how they were as individuals, just in terms of being able to speak to them and things like that as a faculty member.

And then we had Cheryl Norton. She was able to give the green light for us to move forward with the BFA degree in Dance. I was really excited by her because of that. Then we also had Bill Behre. What I really appreciated about Bill Behre is that of his leadership, he appointed me as a diversity liaison officer, and I was able to serve as that for a semester, which also meant that I was corresponding with people at the PASSHE level. I think that was one of the things that helped me to help elevate my confidence to be able to apply for a role like Interim Associate Provost. So I think for me, that was a really big step. I'm always thankful to him for that opportunity.

Now we have Dr. Riley, who, or President Riley, who I'm really looking forward to just seeing kind of how her presidency goes. I'm very excited by her, the leadership that she brings, and then also being appointed now to a permanent role of Associate Provost. Then we had people like Wilma Cavill, who was a *name* here [laughs]. I remember her . . . she was really a part of the fabric of Slippery Rock. All of the little lessons that I learned from her--just from sitting at her table that she used to have when we used to have a faculty club, and where we would go to lunch and things like that. So just all the little things that I learned from her over the years, I still hold dear to my heart.

Then there was Dean Eva Tsuquiashi-Daddesio who was the Dean of the College of . . . I think at that point it was the College of Humanities, Fine and Performing Arts before it moved to the College of Liberal Arts. She was the dean that was really an encourager for me to move into the role of chair, and to nominate myself to run for that position. The mentoring that I received from

her was really valuable. I think a lot of what I learned from her, I take into these roles that I'm in now because she was a powerful person.

I think that's the other story about Slippery Rock is that there are so many powerful female leaders that I really got to look up to. Then I was able to learn from, and that served as models for me. There is another person, Dr. Sue Hannam. She was a dean, but she was a dean in . . . it would have been Health Sciences, Exercise Science around in there, right? [Laughs].

[Clarification about spelling of Hannam].

UP: She would always take the time to talk to me, and to have conversations, and ask me different questions because she would have been a senior faculty member when I was coming up. I really looked forward also to her words of wisdom. I really have fond memories of her.

Then there's also Bill Williams who--he was a faculty member, he was our union president, then became our provost. He's also another person that I really was fond of, and I thought just was really supportive of me as a faculty person.

Elliott Baker [laughs]. I really also appreciated Mr. Baker and just everything that he did in Academic Records. I have really great memories of him. Also, there's Jace Condavy, Diana Dreyer, and Dick Wukich, and Alan Levy. All of these people were people that I knew and reached out to at different periods of my career. They were always available, you know, made themselves accessible. I appreciated that.

MJ: You know a lot of people who I've either interviewed or read their interviews for Rock Voices.

UP: Right. Exactly. That tells you how long I've been here [laughs].

MJ: And how connected you are.

UP: Yeah. And then, and then I would say right now Provost Zieg of course, because I work with him, and he's also my direct supervisor. I really can't say how much I've enjoyed working with him, and just how much I've also *learned* from him. Just in terms of the leadership, and then also just the inner workings of the institution and kind of being mentored in that capacity, I think has really been fabulous for me.

Then there's three people that I want to name, faculty: Cindy LaCom, Christophas Walker, Jason Hilton; Jennifer Keller, I've mentioned before, but I feel like these four people have just been gems.

MJ: I've interviewed two of them. They really are. I talked to Cindy LaCom and Dr. Keller.

UP: Yes. Love them! Love them. Okay, now, in terms of major events, right?

MJ: Yeah. If you want to . . . if you want to go there.

UP: Is that's where we're going next?

MJ: Yeah. Yeah. If you want to transition for me, then go for it.

UP: Okay [laughs].

I would say two major events that I remember. One as a student, one as a faculty member. The one as a student was not such a great event, but it was a cross burning that happened . . . over on in the Keister Road apartments, I remember this cross burning occurring. It was terrible because it actually happened on the front lawn of one of my closest friend's apartments. I just remember how intimidating that was for us as students; disturbing that something like this is still happening. Okay, was happening back then, and then that would have been in the late '80s. [Pause]. I do have that memory.

Then there was another event that occurred when I was a faculty member that also I'll never forget, and that was the morning of 9/11. When that happened, I was teaching an Introduction to Dance class; it was in a large auditorium; I had a lot of students. I had a morning class and I literally [pause], I saw what happened and then I had to go teach class.

So at that point, the first plane flew into one of the buildings. I had to go to class and I said, *Oh my goodness, what is happening?* I go to class and I get started doing my lecture and I stopped and I said, *Do you guys know what's going on right now?* And they were like, *No*. They were like, *What?* I said, *I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to not do today's lesson*. I said, *Because I think there's something happening right now that is going to be a world changing event*. Okay? And then I said that *I think we need to watch it*.

At that point, we had a live feed of cable into the teaching platform that I was using. And so I put on CNN and we sat there and we watched, and by that point, the second plane--we saw the second plane go into the building and then the collapse. I mean, we were just [pause] speechless, to say the least. Then by that time, that's when we started getting whisperings about the plane that was later going to be the one that actually was grounded by passengers in southern Pennsylvania. So those were really, big events.

MJ: If you want to--Dr. Levy talked about what happened afterward a little bit. That there was some sort of chalk art and then there was like an address, but it was sort of late. If you want to talk about that. An address from the president, I mean.

UP: Yeah, I don't remember.

MJ: Okay.

UP: I don't remember, but I'm sure it happened.

MJ: Yeah. Let's see. Any other memorable events you can think of? Big things that happened?

UP: Oh, well, an event that was more celebratory [laughs]. I can say is when I was a student, we went to New York and performed in the Macy's parade. It was the marching band. I loved [it]. We had a great time and we probably had like six, seven busses [laughs] filled with people. Blase Scarnati was the director at the time, and Thom Cobb was one of our directors in terms of the dancing. He was [pause] I think he was like a marshal--parade marshal or something.

But anyway, we had the *best time* and it was so cold [laughs]. It was very cold, but we really enjoyed it.

I would also have to say another time, I remember when we went to the American College. We were selected; it was during my senior year. My solo was selected, and then it was a group piece that Nola Nolan choreographed called *Red, Yellow, Black and White*.

Our dances were selected to be performed at the national conference, which was at Arizona State University. We flew to Tempe, Arizona. We were able to participate in the festival and then also perform. I had to miss graduation because that was at the time of our graduation ceremony. I had to postpone; I ended up postponing when I walked and I came back. The great thing about that is because when I came back, I walked in the December ceremony with my mother, who was graduating with her master's.

MJ: That's awesome!

UP: Yes [laughs]. Yes.

MJ: Sounds like it was worth missing graduation for.

UP: Yes. Yes. That was great [laughs].

MJ: All right. And now words of wisdom: things you would like members of the community to know or students to know.

UP: I think that Slippery Rock is a wonderful place to learn. I think it is a place that is a gateway for moving forward into your life. It's also a gateway for being able to explore yourself as a global citizen, which I think is important, especially in today's society.

I think the kinds of friendships that you make here, especially as students, the kind of friendships that you develop turn into lifelong friendships. I think that's something that's really valuable, and sometimes you don't realize it until you get older. And then you can reflect back on, *Wow, that was a really special time*.

Then also just in terms of being a place where I have been able to mature in my professional career, and also grow and have aspirations and things of that nature, I feel like this job has been a dream job for me. It has really helped me to fulfill all of the things that I've wanted to do and things that I didn't know that I wanted to do [laughs]. I feel like when you can get that out of being employed and having to work, then that's a blessing. So I really feel like I've been blessed.

MJ: All right. Thank you *very* much. This was awesome.

UP: Yeah, thank you!