The curtain rises, theatrical lights fade up, a sound score begins to waft through the space, and dancers paint the stage with vivid and colorful feats of physical prowess. The audience remains enraptured from beginning to end and marvels at the ability of the dancers to have created all of that “in the moment.” If the choreographer, dancers, and collaborative artists have done their job well, the dance does “magically appear” on stage, and the audience will never be aware of the months, and sometimes years, of creative research that took place to make the dance “materialize.”

As a returning professional choreographer to the academy, my ongoing creative career informs my teaching and provides a model of artistic research for my students. I am drawn to mentoring Undergraduate Research (UR) in dance because I am an active artist-scholar and am passionate about the creative and kinesthetic-based research process. I am equally impassioned about helping young artist-scholars develop their conceptual, theoretical, creative, and kinesthetic research skills. I am also committed to shedding light on what many, including students, view as a “mysterious” process – the act of creating original and creative dance.

Creative Process
Contrary to a commonly held belief, an original dance does not “magically appear” on the stage. Choreographers spend countless hours at their desks, or in their gardens, or walking the city streets thinking about their new creation and waiting for that inspirational ‘aha’ moment when their concept takes form. Once that happens, choreographers move onto the next step, what I call the conceptual research level. During this process, choreographers research a variety of sources related to their concept. These can be visual art genres, works of literature, musical compositions, etc. The next step is to create a storyboard or collage of visual images, quotes from pertinent texts, musical score breakdown and even stage diagrams. This aspect is similar to creating a “road map” or “concept score” for use in the studio.

The choreographer then moves onto the most exploratory and exhaustive part of creative research -- movement generation. This takes place in the dance studio and often includes exploring a variety of movement ideas generated by the choreographer and carried out by the dancers. A general rule of thumb is that it typically takes two to four hours of movement...
exploration to come up with one minute of movement material. So, this part of the creative process is typically the longest and most involved.

Once a first draft of the dance is finished, the choreographer enters the refinement and editing process. During this period, movement phrases are often altered, spacing and timing adjustments occur, and performance coaching begins. It is common for collaborating artists to enter the rehearsal space at this point – the lighting designer, costume designer, sound designer, etc. Typically, the choreographer has been in artistic production meetings with these artists, and the designers are part of the overall artistic vision and creative research. When the piece is finalized and all the elements are in place, the dance is performed on stage and, as stated earlier, the dance “magically appears.”

Mentoring UR in Dance
I have been engaged in mentoring UR in dance and guiding student artist-scholars in the above-mentioned process since arriving at Elon University in 2006. In the summer of 2007, a rising senior dance major and I were the first creative team to be selected to participate in Elon’s highly touted Summer Undergraduate Research Experience (SURE). I have been fortunate to have had two additional students involved in SURE. All three dance majors researched different topics, including: “Abstract Choreographic Theory,” “Investigating and Applying Contemporary Choreographic Theory to Create a Hybrid Dance Piece,” and “Comparing Muscle Activation and Tension during a Ballet Barre and a Somatics in Action Floor Barre.” The first two are obviously creative research projects while the last is a quantifiable dance science research topic. All three projects utilized traditional methods of research, such as literature review and field research. However, the two creative research projects also incorporated movement-specific research instigated by prompts we created together and were carried out in the studio by the student. Additionally, the two creative projects used video analysis of the movement prompts for kinesthetic connection and compositional structure, which required them to learn how to analyze movement for this purpose.

While all three SURE artist-scholars were investigating different lines of inquiry, their research topics were developed in concert with me and had career specific implications. The student who completed the first creative research project mentioned above recently completed her M.F.A. in Dance and is working in the field as a choreographer. The second student has been making her living as a professional performer and choreographer since graduating in 2010, and while the third is only in her junior year, she received a very competitive dance science internship at the Harkness Center for Dance Injuries at the NYU Langone Medical Center for the upcoming summer. I think it is imperative to work closely with the student artist-scholar to help them not only define their research topic and give them the appropriate and field specific tools, but to also help them make the connection of their research to their desired professional track.

I am currently mentoring one junior and three sophomore dance majors on their honors research projects. The junior is researching “Autobiographical Dance Improvisation in Performance” and the sophomores’ topics include: “More Than Just: A Biographical Choreographic Work on the Enslaved,” “Adopting Rhetorical Analysis Frameworks to Explore the Relationship between Learned Movement Techniques and their Gender Representations in Performance,” and “A Choreographic Exploration of the Intersection of Bausch, Forsythe, and Laban Movement Analysis.” The junior is most advanced in her research, having spent the 2012 summer at the Bates Dance Festival where she was immersed in improvisation classes and performances. She also viewed and analyzed numerous videotapes of well-known autobiographical choreographers and improvisatory artists. This student completed an exhaustive literature review before attending the festival and kept a creative and analytical journal. She created a solo based on her summer research that was performed in a professional dance festival in Brooklyn.
this past fall. This student has since choreographed two dance pieces this academic year, all based on her ongoing creative research. She will continue her line of inquiry and will present her final research as part of her Honors Thesis Project and her Dance Thesis Project in 2014. The three sophomores are at varying degrees in their research, though all three choreographed dance pieces in the fall that led them to refining their research project.

Balancing Work and Mentoring
So, how does an artist-scholar balance creative research while mentoring student-artists? Truth be told, it is not easy, but I have developed a few strategies that help me navigate this steep challenge. First, when a student asks me to be their mentor, I don’t immediately say yes. I ask them what their creative and/or scholarly interests are, and they typically have a few creative or scholarly ideas that span a wide range of aesthetics and research topics. If what they are interested in is not my area of specialty and doesn’t match my own research agenda, I refer them to other colleagues who better match their interests. However, if there is a connection between what they want to investigate and my general scope of expertise, I give them my opinion on narrowing down their focus. I then typically recommend books, videos, and artists for them to investigate before our next meeting. I also ask them to be prepared to talk in depth about what they’ve discovered at the next meeting. If the student has not done this preliminary research, I advise them that until they complete this first task, I will not mentor them.

This strategy works well, because it places responsibility on the student to own their research agenda and empowers them both artistically and intellectually. I also like to involve my mentees in my own creative research process as dancers for my on-campus performances or as creative research assistants for my professional off-campus projects. I find this to be an incredibly important tool and efficient manner through which to model creative research methods. The students benefit tremendously from this process, and they often comment on how instrumental it is in their creative and scholarly progress.

So, the next time you are sitting in a theatre, waiting for the curtain to rise and the dancing to begin, enjoy the artistry that unfolds on stage and appreciate the theatrical magic that “mysteriously appears.”