

# Woman

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# CATHERINE COLE



**In *Five Foot Feat* obstacles become thresholds into new realities, as amputee Catherine Cole transforms into a mermaid. Photo by Rod Lathim (costume by Barbara Lackner)**

**By Kara Watkins**

It's a sunny Wednesday in early fall, and as I turn the corner and enter a 4th floor office in UC Santa Barbara's Interdisciplinary Humanities Center (IHC), Catherine Cole, associate professor of dramatic art and associate director of special projects in the IHC, turns from her conversation with a colleague and greets me with a warm smile. She invites me to join her in a small conference room and we settle into a relaxed conversation. I quickly sense Cole, who recently celebrated her 42nd birthday, is a woman determined to live her life to the fullest. Considering the challenges she's faced over the last few years, I might easily assume her appreciation for life stems from being a cancer survivor - she did, after all, lose her left leg to a sarcoma in 2001 - and I'd be right, but only to a point.

Cole credits her illness for rekindling her creative spark and for turning her into a bigger risk-taker; without it, she would never have written *Out on a Limb* (an

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award-winning play based on her cancer experience), or tackled the seemingly impossible challenge of performing in a dance piece (the inspirational and well-received *Five Foot Feet*). But, it's also clear that Cole refuses to dwell on what she's lost, to let her battle with cancer and resulting amputation define her or dictate her future. Clearly, Cole's strength of character, creative ingenuity, and *joie de vivre* developed long before any cancerous tumor.

Cole spent the first 18 years of her life in the Detroit suburb of Dearborn, Mich. Her father worked as a physical chemist for the Ford Motor Company, while her mother, a former nurse, devoted herself to raising Cole and her two siblings. When her father accepted a job at Pasadena's Cal Tech and moved the family to Southern California, Cole entered her freshman year at nearby Occidental College, majoring in English. During her junior year, a Japanese roommate invited Cole to spend a few months in Japan. The trip, she says, "was such an eye-opener," exposing her to the rich beauty of non-Western culture.

A few career assessment tests and a graduation later, Cole "jumped into the fray" of New York City, determined to work in theatre or publishing. Temp jobs and freelance directing gigs kept her busy. Six years later, however, she had grown disenchanted with her itinerant lifestyle. "I'm someone who needs to be rooted in a place to flourish," she notes.

She also wanted to see more of the world outside of The Big Apple, despite feeling very much at home there. "New York is a bit of a fish bowl," Cole states, "and if you're a young person living there and you've lived a relatively sheltered life, as I had, the experiences you have will be intense, but they're going to be about New York. I needed to have other, broadening experiences." Graduate school, she reasoned, would allow her do just that: "I'd find some part of the world to research and write on and go live in for a time."

Japan seemed the natural choice. After all, she'd been taking Japanese language classes and was interested in studying Japanese theatre. But then she met a man. Kwame Braun, an American filmmaker (currently on the faculty in the UCSB Film Studies department), had been raised in the West African country of Ghana by his physician parents. The relationship became serious (they later married), and the couple traveled overseas to visit his parents. That journey, much like the college trip to Japan, transformed her perspective of the world. She was especially intrigued by how performance was so deeply entwined with Ghanaian culture and society.

Upon her return to the States, Cole began researching grad schools in earnest. She liked Northwestern University's interdisciplinary approach, and it boasted a strong African Theatre faculty and doctoral program and the largest collection of Africana materials of anywhere in the world; it was the perfect match for her interests and goals. She enrolled in Northwestern's Interdisciplinary Program in Theatre and Drama, in one stroke trading New York for Chicago, Japan for Ghana.

Due to the limited demand for specialists in African theatre, though, Cole found her academic job search somewhat challenging. Nonetheless, in 1997 UCSB recognized her potential and offered Cole a position in the department of dramatic

arts, a post she felt honored to accept. "It was a big leap for the department to bring me on," she recalls. "Up to that point the curriculum had very much been focused on Europe and North America."

Cole, the first woman professor in UCSB's graduate theatre section, worked hard and quickly gained the respect and admiration of colleagues and students alike, garnering several teaching awards along the way.

Then, just two years into her career and soon after the birth of her son Aaron, her world shifted dramatically. The discovery that she had cancer not only forced Cole to face her own mortality, but also unleashed an unexpected wellspring of creative energy. She noticed, too, that she felt much more willing to take chances, especially while performing.



**Catherine Cole is lifted to new heights by fellow, Five Foot Feet performers Matthew Adams, left, and Christopher Pilafian.** Photo by Djamel E. Ramoul

"I think I am much more forthright now about doing what I want to do and not letting my own inner critic or more practical side stop me," she observes. "What are the risks, really? Nothing like what's at stake when you go into the operating room. What's the worst that could happen? I might look dumb, or some people will be bored."

Taking up dance as an amputee was enormously risky, but incredibly cathartic. Her newfound passion led to the creation of Five Foot Feet, first produced for Santa Barbara audiences in 2001 and later revived for a North American tour in 2004. Cole says the piece, in which she and two other performers portray through dance individual journeys of self-discovery and acceptance, "was more substantive and risky than anything else I've done."

Still dancing regularly, Cole is reaping the health benefits. "I can fall over very easily at moment," she notes, "and dance training enhances my balance, flexibility, stamina, and coordination. It's absolutely central to my health now; dance is going to mean the difference between me and a wheelchair."

The arts have played an influential role throughout Cole's life. Spending her

childhood enveloped by segregation, the contrasts between wealthy, mostly white suburban Dearborn, and Motor City's rough, mostly black downtown neighborhoods, did not escape her notice. However bleak the conditions, she also observed that the city's cultural and fine arts centers (often located in the roughest neighborhoods), such as the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Bonstelle Theatre, were almost magical places where racial tensions melted and segregation disappeared. Frequent visits to these racially mixed artistic havens made a lasting impression on Cole.

Indeed, her childhood experiences planted the seed for her fervent belief that art plays a significant role in transforming individuals and entire cultures, a subject that reverberates throughout Cole's professional and creative endeavors.

"I have an almost religious belief in the transformative capacity of art," she affirms. "The arts are historically and throughout the world the vanguard of social change because they break patterns, form community, bring people together who might otherwise be segregated from one another."

She sees examples of this power in action all around the globe, notably in post-apartheid Johannesburg, South Africa, where the arts are loosening boundaries of race and class, opening up public spaces, and easing fears. To Cole, the arts are the catalyst, "the yeast in the dough" bubbling up and mixing with master planning and systemic change to complete the transformative process.

Cole herself has sprinkled some of that active yeast right here in Isla Vista, a community that has historically struggled with intense social issues. Putting her theory into action, Cole initiated the now two-year-old Isla Vista Arts program ([www.islavista-arts.org](http://www.islavista-arts.org)), which offers UCSB students (and the community at large) arts-based entertainment as counter-programming to IV's alcohol-soaked parties.

"People tend to think of IV as a sort of Bacchanalia where anything goes," she says, "but it actually isn't." In fact, Cole claims the majority of IV residents are serious students who shy away from the party scene. She may be right; drive by the Camino Real Cinemas, Borders, and Starbucks at Camino Real Marketplace on any given night and you'll find them packed with co-eds hanging out with friends or studying.

The idea for Isla Vista Arts came to Cole a few years ago while she was teaching a class called Race, Gender and Performance. Through



*"I think I am much more forthright now about doing what I want to do and not letting my own inner critic or more practical side stop me," Cole observes.*

Photo by Megan Sorel

her students' writing assignments, she realized IV residents were dealing with some heavy issues, including exploitive landlords, gender issues, age and racial segregation, even segregation between IV and the campus itself, not to mention the partying. "It struck me," she recalls, "that there's something really big here that I'm missing about their experience here at UCSB."

A few months after the class ended, Cole joined the UCSB Academic Senate at the invitation of senate chair Walter Yuen. He asked her to think of a campus issue she'd like to address. Knowing exactly what she wanted to do, she asked for and received the funding she needed to get the innovative yet risky Isla Vista Arts project off the ground. Can the arts really help connect a segmented community and build a bridge between IV and UCSB? Cole believes they can, and are.

The key to the program's success, Cole says, is providing students, UCSB faculty and staff, and others in the surrounding communities with attractive, edgy programming just as predictable as the weekend festivities on Del Playa, yet different from what they'd find in downtown Santa Barbara. And it's working. The weekly slate of bargain-priced screenings of classic or cult films (maybe even a double feature), student-produced improv comedy or theatre performances, or maybe a live band or two, consistently draws good crowds. Even better, the promise of positive change continues to rise; the cultural revival is being met with renewed interest in and commitment to IV on the part of campus administration, business owners and city planners. That makes Cole very happy.

Never one to remain idle for long, Cole is already hard at work on her next batch of ambitious projects. She's collaborating on a new dance performance piece, and come spring she'll take a sabbatical to finish a book exploring the relationship between performance and social change in contemporary South Africa. Closer to home, she's focusing on raising her son, now 7 years old. The classroom beckons as well. "It's such a privilege to learn and share, to take complex ideas and make them accessible for my students," she explains. It's a

busy life, but Catherine Cole wouldn't have it any other way.

