

FACE TO FACE | by Jeni Tu

TEACHING

Billy Siegenfeld

The creator of Jump Rhythm Technique talks about the limitations of ballet training, where jazz dance is headed and why dancers need to get back to the primal joy of movement.

Jazz dance is notoriously hard to define, a genre that can mean very different things to different people. But for Billy Siegenfeld, it's simple: Jazz is the most fundamental dance of all, a way of moving that originates in the native impulses and, most importantly, natural rhythms of the human body.

This belief is at the root of Jump Rhythm Technique, which Siegenfeld created in the 1980s, first as a means to regain his own love of movement, and then to help others achieve better body connectivity—and, oftentimes, cathartic release. For nearly two decades now, he has been teaching Jump Rhythm at schools and workshops around the world, as well as directing his Chicago-based company, Jump Rhythm Jazz Project.

A latecomer to formal dance training, Siegenfeld nevertheless vividly remembers a childhood spent dancing in his living room, tuning in to the likes of Peter Gennaro on TV and watching relatives partner-dance at family functions. It was in his last year as an undergraduate at Brown University, where he was majoring in literature, that he decided to take the leap into studying dance more seriously. After attending American Dance Festival, he moved to New York in 1970 to study as well as dance with Don Redlich Dance Company and direct a series of his own dance groups. From 1982 to 1991, he served as director of the dance program

at New York City's Hunter College, during which time he also obtained a master's in dance from New York University. In 1993, he was invited to join the faculty of Northwestern University, where he continues to teach.

Dance Teacher: Can you explain the Jump Rhythm basics?

Billy Siegenfeld: Well, Jump Rhythm Technique's principal goal is to fuse the dancing body and the singing voice into a single percussion instrument that is both emotionally expressive and rhythmically precise. So what we do with our system of training is take people step by step into the kind of bodywork that will allow that to happen.

The very first part involves the concept that I call "standing down straight"—to stand with both stability and relaxation, as the human skeleton is asking us to

stand. The joint relaxation that accompanies standing down straight frees up the body to move very quickly with all its body parts and specifically those that I call the four primary drum beaters—the hands, head and voice.

DT: Walk me through an introductory class.

BS: First, we stand in a circle and talk about what it feels like to stand down straight. People are eventually coaxed into letting go of their body enough so that they start getting grounded. I set up a beat and we start singing it. For three measures of eight,

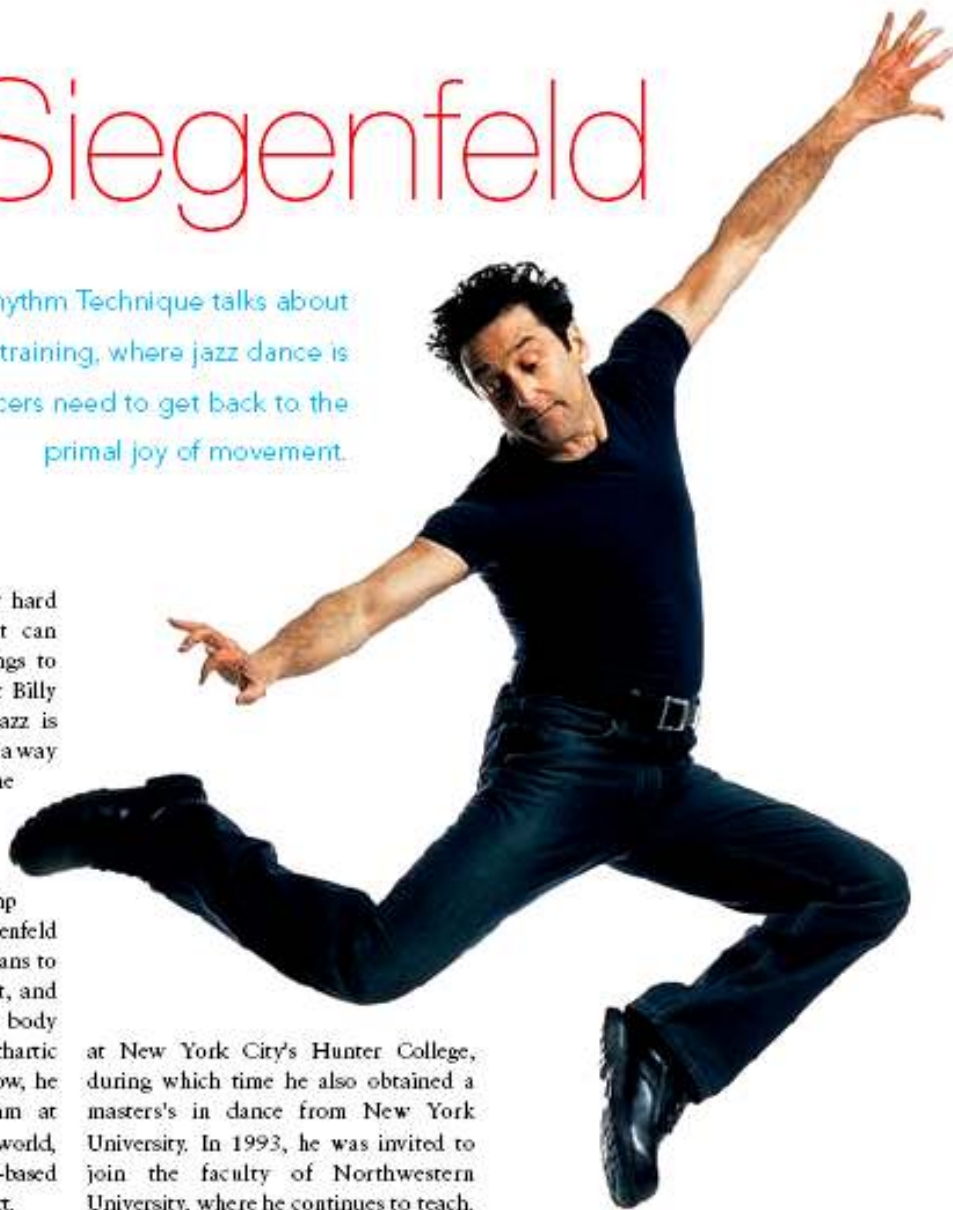


Photo: pph/ly/Wikimedia Commons

FACE TO FACE

people pulse on the beat, and on the fourth, we have what's called a break, in which they can pulse any way they want. The first three measures are to let their bodies experience what it means to embody a pulse in community with all the other people who are in the circle; in the fourth, they get to be an individual.

Next, starting on the ground and then standing, we do formal exercises that are all about letting go of the joints of the body and activating the scapula, which is the prime mover of the body. The scapula is constructed to move the body aggressively forward into space—that's what rhythm is. The doubleness of Jump Rhythm, which is so difficult, is to be both relaxed and also extraordinarily aggressive with your accents.

DT: Why do you bring the singing component into class?

BS: There's both a physiological and an aesthetic reason: When the diaphragm is forcefully engaged—when you sing—it demands that it be allowed to function fully, to move up and down inside the cavity encased by the rib cage. In order for it to do so, you have to drop the pelvis. This is sometimes tough for dancers, because they're used to holding themselves in. By having them sing, they're giving up a kind of control that they associate with "being a real dancer." The aesthetic reason is that it joins you rhythmically with everybody else who's singing; it's kind of an instant community provoker or builder.

DT: How do you get dancers to get over their fear of vocalizing?

BS: We laugh! I make fun of the fear. I say, "Hey, everybody here likes to sing in the shower, don't they? All we're trying to do now is to sing in that kind of way." We're simply trying to get them to behave the way they would when they're alone and feeling unself-conscious. When that happens, they can begin accessing behaviors that have become somewhat segregated in their dance training.

In Jump Rhythm Technique, we want to base the behaviors on ones that

already exist in the human body. I think what's extraordinary about the tradition that I call American rhythm is that people like the Nicholas Brothers, Fred Astaire and Gwen Verdon simply made an art out of that.

DT: Do you think Jump Rhythm Technique has a place in every dancer's training?

BS: I absolutely feel it's universal—and I'm not saying that with any kind of braggadocio, but because it's based in normative human behavior and can be taught to and used by anybody. The way Jump Rhythm can serve dancers in other techniques, especially ballet-based ones, is that it can help them access human motor responses, not just the imposed motor responses.

I think we're in a very strongly technical, if not technological, era, and I just feel there's a place now for reclaiming what is essential to all dancing. Ballet is based in folk dancing, but I think it's become so rarefied that it's becoming difficult for audiences to appreciate anything other than the technique. It's like, "Where's the human?"

To the extent that ballet is done to musical accompaniment, it also seems logical to want to be able to move your body with the music. And Jump Rhythm completely teaches that. I've had ballet teachers take the class and go, "This is great. Next time, I'm going to have my students sing the exercise and it's going to make them feel more at one with the movement."

DT: Where did the idea for your technique come from?

BS: It came from my living room when I was about 7. It sounds kind of silly, but that's when I started dancing by myself. I watched *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* at Radio City Music Hall and I made my family stay to watch it again, especially so I could see the dance that preceded the barn-raising. From that point on, I went home and just started doing that sort of bold, rhythmic, folkish dancing. I was that kind of a person.

I think that's why I also started play-

FACE TO FACE



Billy Siegenfeld with Jump Rhythm Jazz Project dancer Jackie Brenner.

ing the drums. I had stuff in me and I loved to get it out kinetically. Getting it out by punching the air—which is basically what you're doing with drums—or by dancing like you're a funky mountain man like in *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* perfectly suited me. Also what fed me is that my family loved to partner-dance. We would go to parties, weddings or bar mitzvahs, and after everybody had their glasses of wine, they would do this rhythmic hand-holding dancing.

DT: When did you actually start your dance training?

BS: Not until college. I thought I was going to graduate school [for literature], but I was also beginning to do shows and theater. The girls in the modern dance program saw that I could move well and said, "C'mon over here." I remember it was April of my senior year and I was finishing my proposal to Princeton, and I had a soulful moment of crisis. I was nervous as hell, because here I was saying, "I don't want to go to graduate school, I want to dance." I thank and bless all of my college women friends who got me into it, and my teacher, Julie Strandberg, who said, "Go to American Dance Festival." I got channeled into formal dance training through ADF, and started studying and working in New York.

About 15 years after I got to New York, there was something missing for me. All of the training that I was doing was not about the rhythmic percussive dancing that I did in my living room. I was also hurting my body tremendously. I almost had to stop dancing. Again, I had another soulful moment of crisis, and I thought, "Okay, Billy, if you're going to continue dancing, what are you going to do to continue dancing?" I thought, "Well, the first thing I want to do is make sure that I bring some joy back into the dancing, I want it to feel good." So I made the radical step of saying, "Why don't you dance the way you did when you first started dancing in the living room?" I started doing a lot of research, watching all the musical films to see the rhythm dancing in them. And I thought, "I know why I love this dancing—because it's rhythm." So I started teaching experimental classes

FACE TO FACE

in this at Hunter College, where I was directing the dance program. It wasn't called Jump Rhythm yet, I just called it a jazz class, because I was playing with making accents on the down-beats and off-beats.

DT: So how did jazz dance become divorced from the rhythm?

BS: My thesis in graduate school was called, "Hunting the Rhythmic Snark: The Search for Swing in Jazz Performance." I was basically trying to say, "If you want to do jazz dancing, you have to use jazz music." There are many, many ways of doing jazz dancing, and if you want to call it jazz, you can. I was just trying to identify for myself what I call classic jazz dancing, which is dancing that is primarily rhythmically driven in a vernacular body. It has to be a vernacular body because you can't do rhythm in an upheld body as explicitly.

DT: Where do you see jazz dance going more generally?

BS: That's a good question, because I feel it's bifurcating into tap or *Stomp*-like movement, which is very vernacularly based, and companies like Gus Giordano's, River North Chicago and Hubbard Street, which are moving more and more toward a strongly ballet-based modern.

DT: And what do you think about the invasion of hip hop?

BS: I love it because it's vernacular, but the ones who are doing it in the studios are just teaching the movement, not the rhythm.

DT: The teaching of hip hop needs to catch up, it seems.

BS: I think so. They teach the moves, what we teach is the rhythm. Every movement that you do has at its core a strongly rhythmic, motional impulse and oftentimes a very emotional one as well. I think Jump Rhythm is interesting to people because we generate the movement rhythmically, and what's so fun about that is that rhythm is inside, not outside, you. **DT**