

STANDING DOWN STRAIGHT

Jump Rhythm Technique's Rhythm-Driven, Community-Directed Approach to Dance Education

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Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, . . . till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*, and say, This is, and no mistake . . .
(Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*)

For instinct dictates the duty to be done, and intelligence supplies the excuses for evading it.
(Marcel Proust, *The Past Recaptured*)

Introduction

“Stand up straight!” So countless boys have been told to keep them focused in gym class, countless girls have been told to keep them from slouching, and countless dance students have been told to keep them on the path to dancing beautifully. To individuals who have been taught that the way to be strong, or feel confident, or look beautiful is by “standing up straight,” a class in Jump Rhythm Technique can feel odd. It can feel odd or even shocking because its approach to movement learning teaches people to stand *down* straight.

Standing down straight means standing on two feet with both stability and relaxation. The human body realizes this apparently paradoxical condition by stacking its three principal weights – the head, torso, and pelvis – on top of each other, gathering them toward the body's axis of gravity,* and dropping them through the legs and feet

*The axis of gravity is the imaginary plumb line running vertically through the skeleton that joins the top of the skeleton that joins the top of the head, balanced on the spine, to a point on the ground equidistant between the center of the arches of the feet, or, when standing on one foot, the center of the arch of that foot.

into the supporting earth. From this fully grounded state, the body is able to move vigorously outward into space without doing injury to itself. Standing down straight may not help a person achieve idealized strength, confidence, or beauty, but it does free the body to perform with the power and efficiency that thousands of years of evolution have built into it.

In using standing down straight as the foundation of all class work, Jump Rhythm Technique offers a fresh alternative to conventional systems of dance study. Instead of developing exercises constructed upon a partly or fully uplifted posture, it bases its pedagogy on three behaviors that have been in existence for as long as people have moved from their deepest impulses. These are:

1. Grounding the body so that it can move with power and efficiency.
2. Singing as well as dancing the rhythms of movement.
3. Using rhythm-driven group and partner dancing to build community.

By focusing on movement efficiency and rhythm-driven performance, Jump Rhythm Technique guides students toward the goal of *full-bodied rhythm-making*. This process transforms the dancing body, accompanied by the scat-singing voice, into a dynamically expressive, rhythm-accurate percussion instrument.

Part One describes each of the technique's three behavior-based practices; it concludes with a discussion of how standing down straight serves full-bodied rhythm-making. Part Two reflects on how standing down straight strengthens not only the rhythmic and dynamic expressiveness in one's dancing but also the way the student relates to both self and community.

PART ONE

Grounding the body so that it can move with power and efficiency

This first human behavior, systematized into lying, seated, and standing exercises, guides students to make alignment and movement choices that allow the body to dance with maximum efficiency. Maximum efficiency means working “with minimal expenditure of energy to achieve the desired goal,” as Lulu E. Sweigard explains it.¹ The potential for moving efficiently comes from what Sweigard calls the body’s “innate wisdom”:

Fortunately, there resides within the nervous system a good deal of innate wisdom to accept only that which automatically chooses, if given the chance, the neuromuscular pathways best suited to reach a given goal in movement.²

Students of Jump Rhythm explore what the body “automatically chooses, if given the chance.” At the same time, they examine patterns of both standing and moving that *they* have chosen, whether consciously or unconsciously. They are encouraged to pay particular attention to postural habits that may be causing them to use excess muscle tension. Mabel E. Todd describes such habits as “arbitrary postures of static design.”³ She suggests that they derive “not from mechanical or physical considerations of what balance means [but from] mechanically false ideas.”⁴

In a typical Jump Rhythm class, students work with a life-size model of the human skeleton. Seeing how the bones interact with each other reveals how the body has been constructed to operate with efficiency. For instance, the two sets of bones forming the shoulder girdle, the clavicles and scapulae, are meant to sit on the ribcage and hang from the spine. In mechanically efficient movement they are not meant to be lifted and tensely held there. Given how evolution has intended the body to work, it is

interesting to note what teachers of conventional techniques often say in class. Using commands like “expand the chest,” “suck in the abdominals,” or “raise the chin,” they are effectively instructing the shoulder girdle to lift up, to a greater or lesser degree. For that’s what the shoulders automatically do whenever the chest expands, the abdominal muscles over-contract, or the chin tilts upward.

The reason for calling out these anti-gravitational commands is understandable. The ballet-based aesthetic that guides these techniques favors a partly or wholly uplifted body image. The instruction to *ex-center* the shoulder and other bones (that is, to pull them away from the skeleton’s axis of gravity) re-shapes the body to conform to this image. Class work in Jump Rhythm does not include directions to ex-center since the goal of the technique, full-bodied rhythm-making, requires that the body behave differently. In order to explode powerful accents into space the body has to ground itself. Its separate parts have to collect toward the axis of gravity so that their mass can drop instantly through the arches of the feet. This weight-grounded stance – that is, standing down straight – frees the body to make split-second transitions between stillness and explosion without causing damage to itself.

Our innate wisdom is consistently telling the body to ground itself before launching into space. Thus, if we slow down enough to sense what the body wants to do when left to its instincts, we note that it performs a two-phase action that is the basis of all efficient movement. In the first of these phases, it drops down. Joint areas like the neck, the lower back, and the knees let go so that the body can lower its center of gravity,* located in the pelvis. In the second of these phases it moves forward. Think of

*The center of gravity is an imaginary point that roughly defines the center of the total body mass. “Its approximate location is in the pelvis, just in front of the upper part of the sacrum.” (Sweigard, *Human Movement Potential*, p. 18).

the two directions the body moves in when it has to push heavy furniture or when someone yells, “Fire!”: *down and forward*. Whether one is moving to protect oneself, to engage in heavy labor, or to perform at high-intensity in arenas like theatre or sports, our survival instincts are always signaling the body to *go down to go forward*.

Jump Rhythm Technique incorporates this two-phase action. Uniquely, its pedagogy focuses primary attention on the two bones of the skeleton that evolution has created to make this action happen. These are the scapula bones, which lie against the right and left sides of the upper back. The way the scapulae hug the back hints at their function. With the joints released, they are able to slide around the ribcage through the horizontal plane and push the body forward. Kinesiologists call this action “abduction.” It is *scapular abduction* that moves the body weight toward the axis of gravity so that it can drop groundward and propel itself through space.

Using the scapulae as engines of forward motion is a new idea for students accustomed to dancing from a base of standing up straight. That’s because years of taking class with even minimal postural uplift introduce muscle tensions that block the scapulae from abducting. That is, standing up straight does not just prevent the scapulae from moving forward. It also *adducts* them, or moves them backward. For instance, a command like “pull up through the front of the body” causes the two scapulae, as well the head, torso, and pelvis, to shift backward. The effect of this weight shift can be sensed immediately. Tension increases in the muscles surrounding the joints of the body and the body’s three main weights fall not through the arches of the feet but into the heels. The muscles are gripping in response to human instinct. They are acting to “save” the body from falling backward. That’s the good news. But the bad news trumps

the good. When such ex-centered body weights, which Sweigard calls “deviations from mechanical balance,” are not corrected, the muscles are forced “to contract to a greater extent to maintain the poorly aligned balance of skeletal parts.”⁵ At these moments, the muscle tissue is effectively behaving like bone. Stiffening with excess tension, it is working to support and *hold up* body weight. But it is such persistent holding patterns in muscles that block the quick spring-action needed for making sharp-accented rhythms – and that may also set up the conditions that lead to chronic pain or injury.

Differently, when the body is standing down straight unneeded tension releases. The muscles ungrasp, the joints unlock, and the scapulae are free to slide around the ribs and push the body forward. Their action not only powers ballistic motions like throwing and kicking but also two of the most common rhythmic activities, walking and running. Indeed, foot-to-foot locomotion doesn’t work with maximum efficiency without the help of the scapulae. Alternately abducting the right and left scapula – a process in Jump Rhythm called *sidedness* – ensures that, “[i]mmediately before stepping, the trunk is inclined toward the direction of progress.”⁶ In sum, the scapulae free both the legs and the body to perform their intended evolutionary roles. The legs do not pull the body but carry it as it drives forward into space, first over one foot then the other in pursuit of its desired goal.

Singing as well as dancing the rhythms of movement

In the second practice of Jump Rhythm, the exercises build upon an inside sensation that human beings experience beginning at birth – the impulse to engage in rhythmically repeatable motor activity. Starting with heart-beats, breathings-in, and

breathings-out, and then quickly progressing to the organism's first visibly rhythmic action, making sucking motions with the mouth during breast-feeding, humans use both rhythmic motion and rhythmic vocalization to help foster survival. As the infant grows to child, movements like bouncing the body up and down or rocking it from side to side, and vocalizations like crying, talking nonsense syllables, or singing nursery rhymes form the inerasable foundation of a person's neuromuscular histories. As Roger Pryor Dodge comments,

It becomes an arbitrary act to keep out of time. Keeping time is both pleasurable and imperative. It gives form to variety and thereby becomes a vehicle within which expressive movement crystallizes.⁷

Because keeping time is an integral part of every human being's neuromuscular make-up, and because fundamental behaviors like shifting weight from foot to foot and vocalizing are rhythmic in essence, students of Jump Rhythm sing as well as dance rhythm. Using jazz-based scat-singing, they learn to expel bursts of non-word syllables that match the rhythms of the movements they're doing in their bodies. The singing has two purposes. The first of these causes the weight of the pelvis to drop, which is critical to standing down straight. In vigorous vocalization, the diaphragm pumps downward through the cavity of the torso. The diaphragm is allowed to work in this way because "the soft and flexible abdominal wall gives way . . . to make the needed room" for the diaphragm's vertical descent during inhalation.⁸ The front-most part of this abdominal wall is the muscle group called the *rectus abdominis*. Since the *rectus* is attached to the pelvis, relaxing it contributes to letting the pelvis as well as the rest of the body's bones release and drop through the axis of gravity.

Second, vocalizing while dancing introduces into class work a performance practice that is associated with a tradition that Jump Rhythm Technique honors. The tradition, one that has been carried forward by African Americans from its beginnings in Africa, is, as Jacqui Malone describes it, that of using “rhythmical movement as a unifying mechanism and a profound spiritual expression.”⁹ The practice is that of fusing dancing and singing, movement and sound, into a single performative action.

Rhythm-charged tradition and practice exist in today’s world because, against all odds, they survived slavery and subsequent race-provoked oppression. They endured through black minstrelsy in the nineteenth century, and then – with growing rejection of the “blackface fixation” syndrome¹⁰ passed down through minstrelsy – increasingly flourished in the twentieth century in forms like vaudeville-produced song-and-dance acts, performed and recorded blues, jazz, and gospel music, Broadway stage productions, musical shorts and feature-length musical films, dance concerts, rock and roll shows, tap festivals, and sung and danced outgrowths of hip-hop. Today the vitalizing effect of the African American aesthetic on the performing arts world-wide is inarguable.

The roots of both tradition and practice, as mentioned, are in Africa. There the rhythmically percussive dancer is considered a rhythmically percussive singer. Further, both dancer and singer are considered drummers since they treat the body and voice as percussion instruments capable of striking rhythms both against the space and in synchronicity with their fellow performers. In the Bantu languages of Africa there is even a word that reflects this multiple-performance concept. “Ngoma,” literally

translated, means “drum.” But the term is also used to mean “drumming and rhythmic song-dancing.”¹¹

Robert Farris Thompson explains how this percussive way of performing infuses voice and movement in West African cultures. The dances done there are

talking dances, and the point of the conversation is the expression of percussive concepts. . . . Africans seem to dance with full muscular actions that are so palpably syllabic that one can scarcely fail to comprehend the sense of linguistic community that pervades the whole.¹²

Daniel Levitin also comments on the sound-movement partnership, referencing the work of ethnomusicologist John Blacking:

The embodied nature of music, the indivisibility of movement and sound, the anthropologist John Blacking writes, characterizes music across cultures and across times. Most of us would be shocked if audience members at a symphonic concert got out of their chairs and clapped their hands, whooped, hollered, and danced as was de rigeur at a James Brown concert.¹³

It is no surprise that Levitin invokes James Brown. His performances are models of brilliantly rhythmic, seamlessly joined dancing and singing.

In sum, performing rhythm vocally as well as motionally supports two objectives. It reinforces the goal of Jump Rhythm’s first practice, that of grounding the body so that it can move with power and efficiency; and it connects students to “the indivisibility of movement and sound,” in particular to the way African American-based performance uses the language of rhythm to fuse music and dance.

Using rhythm-driven group and partner dancing to build community

The third behavior-based practice of Jump Rhythm Technique responds to a social instinct that conventional dance training rarely introduces into classes – that of pulsing the body so that it synchronizes, or entrains rhythmically, with other bodies. As

Mickey Hart suggests, entrainment between people can happen with little effort because “nature is efficient and it takes much less energy to pulse together than in opposition.”¹⁴ During class, rhythmic improvisation connects students to this ages-old impulse. Friedrich Nietzsche commented on the bonding powers of danced rituals and celebrations in his description of the ancient Dionysian rites in Greece: “[A]ll the rigid, hostile barriers that necessity, caprice, or impudent conventions have fixed between man and man are broken.”¹⁵ In her study of vernacular dance, Barbara Ehrenreich expands on Nietzsche’s perception. She applies it to the way group dancing has acted through history as a path out of self-isolation and toward connecting with others:

First, . . . such rituals serve to break down the sufferer’s sense of isolation and reconnect him or her with the human community. Second, . . . they encourage the experience of self-loss, that is, a release, however temporary, from the prison of the self, or at least from the anxious business of evaluating how one stands in the group or in the eyes of an ever-critical God.¹⁶

Ehrenreich calls the engine of danced rituals “synchronous rhythmic activity.”¹⁷ She identifies how such pulsing, group-shared motion has relieved people of the lower classes from hardship in their lives. She also notes how these folk enactments of joyous, body-releasing motion have sometimes challenged a given society’s “social hierarchy”:

The aspect of “civilization” that is most hostile to festivity is not capitalism or industrialism – both of which are fairly recent innovations – but social hierarchy, which is far more ancient.¹⁸

Jump Rhythm Technique incorporates dancing rhythmically in groups and with partners because it helps students work in less hierarchical relationships. Improvisations structured around “synchronous rhythmic dancing” reinforce the “self-loss” that moves students toward, not away from each other. For this reason class work often begins in a circle. The instructor or a student sings out a beat, which is also referred to as “the

tempo of the quarter note.” Next, with joints loose and weight grounded, everyone begins scatting the quarter notes and pulsing them through the body using the quality of motion familiar to jazz performance called “swing-bounce.” Then, using their hands as drumbeaters to accompany the scat-sung sounds in their voices, they start engaging in rhythmic conversation with each other. One at a time, each student sings out a sentence-like burst of rhythm within a given number of quarter notes (8 or 4, usually). An individual or the group scats back a sharp-accented rhythm within the same duration.

Such ongoing exchanges of rhythm trace their origin to the African performance practice of call-and-response. Thompson explains how a “politics of perfection” guides call-and-response and leads its participants toward less hierarchical relationships:

The rights and feelings of others loom very large in African creativity. It does not matter, according to the canon of African call-and-response, how many new steps or verses the person elaborates in his head; if he is . . . lacking in generosity or some other ideal quality, then he may never be given a chance to elaborate his ideas in public Call-and-response goes to the very heart of good government¹⁹

While students of Jump Rhythm also perform some exercises in the spatial arrangements common to typical dance technique classes – lying, sitting, or standing on the floor facing the instructor and the mirror – these configurations never last long. Fixed, they would tend to obstruct the “generosity” and “good government” Thompson identifies as critical components of call-and-response. The circle and other clustered groupings dissolve the military-like, single-direction facing and coax students to connect with each other conversationally, in their questions and comments as well as in their dancing and singing. At the same time, they help students monitor, if not modify their tendencies to equate technical study with self-isolation or compulsive one-upsmanship.

To summarize, Jump Rhythm Technique weaves together three practices – standing down straight using gravity-directed body mechanics, singing as well as dancing the rhythms of movement, and improvising in rhythmic community with others – to create an innovative approach to movement learning. Jump Rhythm resembles other dance techniques by teaching speed and precision of motor learning and control of the body in space. It differs from these techniques by shaping instinctive body behaviors into exercises and studies that strengthen students’ command of the one language used in all dance forms performed in relation to metrical music, rhythm.

How standing down straight serves full-bodied rhythm-making

In general, some degree of standing up straight is used in core dance techniques taught in universities, high schools, and private studios in this country. This choice makes sense: the techniques base at least a part of their instruction on the long-established pedagogy of ballet. One of the principal goals of ballet-based training requires that the dancer move through space with a partly or wholly uplifted body. The exercises accordingly focus on ex-centering certain body parts like the head, shoulder girdle, and arms, placing special emphasis on using the motion of turn-out to ex-center the legs and feet. Both upper and lower body parts move away from the axis of gravity because of a reciprocal neuromuscular reflex: lifting the weights of the upper body, however slightly, causes the lumbar spine (the lower back) to hyperextend, the pelvis to tilt, and the legs to turn out; turning out the legs, however slightly, causes the pelvis to tilt, the lumbar to hyperextend and the upper body parts to lift.

The principal technical goal of Jump Rhythm is different from that of ballet-based traditions. It is to transform the dancing body, accompanied by the scat-singing voice, into a dynamically expressive, rhythm-accurate percussion instrument. It teaches students to direct their body weight downward since it is the ground not the air that the human body instinctively moves toward when it makes rhythmic accents. The body pulses down since it is the solidity of the earth not the porousness of the air that provides the resistant surface against which the body pushes to create the ballistic motions of rhythm-making. (Think of a common rhythmic gesture like snapping the fingers. The body lets go and the fingers snap down, not up.)

To produce sharp-accented rhythms with power and efficiency, Jump Rhythm Technique guides students to relax the muscle groups that, in ballet-based techniques, are the ones used to support the goals of standing up straight and turning out. These include the *rectus abdominis*, whose contraction beyond normal muscle tone activates “tucking under” the pelvis; the trapezius and deltoid muscles, whose contractions beyond normal tone activate, respectively, lifting the shoulder girdle and head and extending the reach of the arms; and the outward-rotating muscles of the hip joint and the *rectus femoris* (the front-most thigh muscle), whose contractions beyond normal tone activate, respectively, turning out the legs and extending them into space.

Releasing tension in these ex-centering muscle groups helps Jump Rhythm students meet the technique’s goal of full-bodied rhythm-making. It allows the joints to let go so that all of the body’s bones, steered by the scapulae, can gather toward the axis of gravity and ground themselves. It is this earth-rooting motion that frees the body to explode accents into space with speed, force, and precision without doing injury to itself.

Performing a full-bodied accent is central to all class work. It engages two actions, both from a base of standing down straight. In the first action the dancer takes a gestural body part like a hand, a hip, or a foot, which in Jump Rhythm is called a “drumbeater,” and flings it at one of the surfaces surrounding the space of the body, called a “drumhead.” The dancer injects more energy into the drumbeater by throwing the weight of the entire upper body with it. Increasing the mass of flung weight increases both the speed of the throw and the force with which the accent hits.

The accent itself happens in the second action. The dancer makes it by sharply “catching” the drumbeater as it strikes the resistant surface of the drumhead.* Using the process of sidedness, this catch is made by abducting either the right or left scapula, depending on whether the caught weight is being grounded through the right or left foot. (When the weight anchors through both feet, both scapulae abduct.) As the scapula, powered by the muscle groups of the *serratus anterior* and *pectoralis minor*, thrusts forward around the ribs, its motion subtly pulls the other body parts toward the axis of gravity and plummets their combined weight into the floor. The dancer, engaging the second behavior-based practice of Jump Rhythm, intensifies the sharpness of the accent by simultaneously scattling it.

Together the body and voice are creating a moment of physically and emotionally focused rhythm-making. To make itself seen and heard, the energy-charged accent jumps up from the stream of unaccented quarter-note beats pulsing beneath it.

*Drumbeaters like the hands, head, elbows, hips, or feet (when kicking) make accents by striking the resistant surfaces of *imaginary* drumheads – those empty spaces above and around the body waiting to be impacted by dance gesture. In tap dancing, step dancing, or stepping, the drumbeaters of the feet are obviously striking an *actual* drumhead, the floor. In Patting Juba and related forms of body-percussion, the hands are also hitting actual drumheads – other parts of the body.

This forward-moving current of low-energy downbeats is called the *ground rhythm*. The accents that spring up out of it are called the *jump rhythms* because of the way they breach the flow of the ground rhythm to assert themselves. And when a jump rhythm pops up with suddenness, when it jolts the surface of the ground rhythm by exploding an accent on one of the eighth-note or sixteenth-note offbeats sitting between the ground's quarter notes, it transforms into that cherished time-value in jazz, syncopation.

Learning to embody the ground rhythm and then learning to knock out sparkling, syncopated jump rhythms against it introduces a musical skill that is basic to all African-originated, jazz-based rhythm arts – performing polyrhythmically, or playing different rhythms (in this case, the ground and jump rhythms) against each other at the same time. Refining this skill not only strengthens one's ability to use rhythm as a source of dynamic variation in dancing. Guided by the third practice of Jump Rhythm, it also teaches one how to perform in community with other people.

The ground rhythm heightens sensitivity to community because it asks students to entrain rhythmically, to give their physical and feeling selves over to a pulsing, group-shared beat. It gives them the opportunity to enact what Lawrence W. Levine calls the “participant” aspect of African American-based performance practice.²⁰ Their bodies become vessels of the swing-bounce motion common to all gravity-directed rhythm-making done in groups. To use two of the most enshrined words in the jazz arts, students learn to *swing* by giving in to the ground rhythm, and, through swinging, sense the state of being called *cool* – that fundamental life-quality which encompasses, among other virtues, “patience and collectedness of mind.”²¹

Performing jump rhythms also sensitizes one to community. Its discipline teaches students how to solo without slowing down or speeding up the ground rhythm. It teaches them how to express an accent-charged thought with individuality and daring, but never at the cost of violating the group's primary, agreed-upon value, the ongoing, group-binding beat. In this way, performing rhythm reflects a valued social principle. When a student who is scattin' to a shared beat in a circle of fellow rhythm-makers temporarily takes leave to perform an accent-rich solo, and then, when finished, seamlessly merges her or his swing-bouncing body back into the beat's commonality, that action, in Levine's words,

place[s] the individual in continual dialogue with his community, allowing him at one and the same time to preserve his voice as a distinct entity and to blend it with those of his fellows.²²

Full-bodied rhythm-making thus stimulates students to grow not only technically but expressively. Through constant practice it pushes them to improve what John Cage calls the "clarity" in the rhythmic structure of their dancing. But it also provokes them to monitor that such technical achievement is always balanced by an infusion of what Cage calls "grace," or, the "warm, incalculable, human."²³

PART TWO

The challenge of letting go

In addition to supporting growth in all dance forms whose movement is performed in relation to metrical music, the three behavior-based practices of Jump Rhythm challenge students to build awareness of the "person inside the student."²⁴ Even as they work to undo physical habits that block their bodies from rooting to the earth,

they develop sensitivity to those mental ones that tend to distance them from both their colleagues and their own selves. So, in class, the students are also asked to slow down – slow down enough to pay greater attention to the facts living both within and without them that can guide this growing sensitivity. The word “facts” is used here in the sense once expressed by the poet Robert Frost. He was responding to an interview question about how one can write a poem free of affectation:

Anything you do to the facts falsifies them, but anything the facts do to you – yes, even against your will; yes, resist them with all your strength – transforms them into poetry.²⁵

In this context, Frost is pointing to an axiom about learning that people sometimes overlook. He is suggesting that deeper growth most often happens when we look outside our ego-fortresses and acknowledge the facts about living that have always been present.

The first practice of Jump Rhythm, which refers to the human skeleton as a guide to alignment, focuses on one of these facts – *the gravity-directed wisdom of the body*. The way Jump Rhythm leads students toward this fact is by paraphrasing Frost’s provocative thought: base your movement choices not on what you want to do to gravity but on what gravity wants to do to you. Todd says it this way:

The whole body, enlivened as it is by muscular memory, becomes a sensitive instrument responding with a wisdom far outrunning that of man’s reasoning or conscious control.²⁶

Yet, as time-tested as this wisdom is, it can sometimes be a struggle for students trained in weight-uplifted dance traditions to let gravity’s factualness do to them what it asks. Try as they might, some of them cannot let go of the physical habits that keep their shoulder girdles lifted and legs turned out, to whatever degree.

This resistance to giving in can often stiffen when it involves having to modify emotional as well as neuromuscular holding patterns. Learning to stand down straight, that is, can demand letting go of one's "preconceived notions as to how [one] ought to look,"²⁷ whether in dancing or any other aspect of life. To help students stay in conversation at these times, instructors of Jump Rhythm Technique often refer them to an article written on a master class in singing that comments directly on the subject of letting go. The class was taught to a group of trained singers in New York City by Barbara Cook, acclaimed singer-actress of musical theatre and cabaret. As the journalist Charles Isherwood reports it, most of the voice students taking the class that day "were hiding . . . inside their technique," inside "the chilly armor of their presentational personae."²⁸ He describes how Cook, on seeing these reactions, "set about dragging them out and making them lay bare their own truths [in order to] reveal the radiant human beings lurking quietly within." He then records an insight that she offered to the students: "The place that seems most dangerous is exactly where safety lies."

The place that seems most dangerous is exactly where safety lies. Transposed to the work of Jump Rhythm, the place that many trained dance students come to realize is the most dangerous to them – given their histories of dancing with an uplifted posture – is, ironically, the ground. Yet, for some, making this connection can eventually turn out to be invigorating. They begin to appreciate the *supporting* quality of the earth; they begin to sense it is as a place that, when yielded to, can give back both physically and emotionally – that can give back not only what Newton's Third Law of Motion describes as the counter-thrusting "reaction" to every "action" physical bodies make when thrusting downward into the earth, but, equally, the unforced confidence that the

tensions of weight-uplifted dancing often prevent. Further, by teaching their bodies to move by stacking the three units of weight (head, torso, and pelvis) over the arches of the feet, they start experiencing a principle of nature that non-human animals use reflexively – economy of effort. As Todd explains,

the muscles do not have to work nearly so hard to keep them [i.e., the head, torso, and pelvis] there as when they are held out of alignment. Gravity itself is harnessed when we keep our weights balanced.²⁹

After spending time with Jump Rhythm exercises – since time is what’s often needed to help lessen fears about letting go – the pleasures gained from harnessing gravity instead of extra muscle to power movement can persuade students to view standing down straight as a source of richly varied, body-healthy dance expression. At the same time it can lead them to see that working with an uplifted posture is a *choice* – one that a dancer responsibly makes when required to perform balletic or ballet-based movement. Finally, the students begin to view the two foundations of dancing in perspective. Standing down straight is understood as a process determined by gravity-directed nature. Standing up straight is appreciated as an historical invention, a postural artifact created by court dancing masters in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to help members of the upper classes express idealized human behavior in dance.

The inside and the outside

The thinking that guides Jump Rhythm work aligns with the tradition of teaching and art-making that is inspired by processes based in natural, uninvented behavior. Frost, for instance, wanted to create a poetry that sounded like spontaneous speech,

filled with the sounds and rhythms not of refined language but of words spoken by people reacting to the tasks of everyday life: “The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows,” he said in an early poem.³⁰ For him and artists like dancer-choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky, whose 1913 dance *Le Sacre du Printemps* affirmed the kind of naked life-force that conventional artistic taste or social custom did not tolerate, the goal was to make art that was less about fantasy and more about raw human energy. They wanted to create work that, rather than idealize life, could lead, in Frost’s words, to a “clarification of life.”³¹

By paying attention to the facts of instinct-driven human behavior, Jump Rhythm Technique also attempts a clarification of life. It does this by building into its pedagogy a constant observation of nature’s lessons. “Never, no, never, did nature say one thing and wisdom say another,” Edmund Burke observes.³² The technique introduces students to two expressions of nature-directed wisdom, standing down straight and rhythm-driven motion. It unfolds how these behaviors, when studied in combination, can lead students to the mind-body integration that Thompson calls “vital aliveness” – that inside-charged force that can transform dancing into the “joyous play that involves the remarkable process of infusing, democratically, equal life to different body parts.”³³

As suggested in the discussion of the Cook master class, it can sometimes be a challenge for students trained in weight-uplifted techniques to open themselves to “joyous play.” This challenge can compound in today’s world since it is not only ballet-based training that can act to distance them from their instincts. Students are also beginning to lose touch with the body’s primal intelligence to the extent that they increasingly rely on computers to solve the problems of daily life. The work they do

using cyber-technology asks only the most limited engagement of vigorous, weight-thrown/weight-caught actions like pushing, pulling, and grasping. In response to this trend, Blacking offers a reminder:

[I]t is necessary to show that the real sources of technology, of all culture, are to be found in the human body and in cooperative interactions between human bodies.³⁴

The improvisations in Jump Rhythm classes that involve hand-held partner dancing embrace movement as a site for “cooperative interactions between human bodies.” The object in such paired dancing is to unlock the joints so that the body weight can let go and fully pass through the hands to one’s partner’s hands. Both sets of hands can then develop into conduits for weight-giving and weight-receiving. In short, it allows the students to experience *rhythmic conversation*. Alternately pushing against and pulling away from each other, the hands, steered sidely by the abducting scapulae, work to keep the space between the bodies open so that the dancers can, as Thompson writes, “liberate their attention . . . for continuous conversation between motion and music.”³⁵ Such rhythmically swinging, fluently back-and-forth sharing of weight allows two people to dance *with* each other; it leads each member of the partnership toward the goal that Blacking envisions, “resonating with another person.”³⁶

When watching the history of rhythm-based dancing on film – in those movies, for instance, featuring dancer-singers as various as Fayard and Harold Nicholas, Les Ballets Africains, the South Central L.A. “krumpers,” Fred Astaire, or Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers – it becomes easier to understand why this tradition has survived through the ages in village compounds, on streets, in juke joints and dance halls, and, in more recent history, on the theatrical stage and in film and video. Human beings, it appears, thrive

on the sensory high supplied by rhythm, which, Leopold Senghor writes, feeds us with “the pure expression of life . . . the vibratory shock, the force which, through our sense, grips us at the root of our being [and] illuminates the spirit.”³⁷

The bodies that perform rhythm are anchored in the standing-down-straight posture that people instinctively adopt once a propulsive beat starts up. At these moments the body goes down, not up. And by going down to go forward it becomes capable of expressing the human quality Louis Horst calls “ready roughness”³⁸ – that raw physicality we associate with the kind of folk dancing captured in iconic paintings like Pieter Brueghel The Elder’s *The Wedding Dance* or *The Village Kermis*. Notably, Horst also points out that the decision of court dancing masters to lift the body up from the ground and thus away from its folk roots contributed to dance’s “devitalization.”³⁹

At the center of the word “devitalization” is the word vital, whose root means life. How we know someone is alive is by motion; and how we know that someone is intensely alive is by that combusting phenomenon of life that bursts through ordinary motion called *energy*. Rhythm, the signature characteristic of vital aliveness and vernacular-bodied, beat-driven movement systems like Jump Rhythm, is nothing less than time-articulated energy.

Dance techniques that base their instruction on a foundation of standing up straight, whether wholly or in part, work differently. In the exercises taught in the first half or longer of those classes, students concern themselves more with the expression of space-articulated *shape* than with that of time-articulated *energy*. They work at re-arranging the body parts to fit a particular look, continually judging that look by assessing its reflection in a mirror. Because movement is being sensed primarily with

the eyes, the body is indirectly being taught to serve more as a communicator of space, shape and the outside of itself than of energy, feeling, and the inside of itself.

Students who learn movement rhythmically discover how to trust in kinesthetic and emotional assessments of what they are doing. Since both rhythm and emotion are expressions of energy, not shape, and since energy is a phenomenon felt inside the body, not outside it, they discipline themselves to learn as much by sensing in as by seeing out. In Mary Oliver's rendering of this distinction,

it's not size but surge that tells us
when we're in touch with something real⁴⁰

Technique class thus becomes an opportunity to work at the process Doris Humphrey calls "moving from the inside out"⁴¹ – an opportunity, as Jerzy Grotowski puts it, to "eradicat[e] the blocks"⁴² that get in the way of manifesting the body's inner life. "One mustn't forget, our body is an animal. I am not saying: we are animals; I say: our body is an animal."⁴³

Ultimately, Jump Rhythm offers a way of moving that allows students to benefit fully from what evolution has granted. Guided by its call to give one's weight to the supporting earth, they learn that the qualities of strength, beauty, and confidence can be found as readily in focused relaxation as in regimens of muscular over-use – that "all right doing," to cite an axiom of Zen Buddhist thought, perhaps originates most lastingly in "all right not-doing."⁴⁴ Using the principles of standing down straight and full-bodied rhythm-making to balance effort and yielding, students open themselves to creating in community with others a decidedly human body-music.

"All you need to do is relax, letting the rhythm do with you what it will."⁴⁵

NOTES

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Twentieth Century Timeline of Choreographers and Innovators for “develop[ing] the Jump Rhythm Jazz Technique and found[ing] Jump Rhythm Jazz Project,” and in 1998 the magazine *Dancer* credited him with “inventing the first genuine jazz technique in forty years.” Choreographic honors include the National Performance Network Creation Award in 2003, which led to the productions of *Sorrows of Unison Dancing* and *The News From Poems*; the 1997 Ruth Page Dance Achievement Award for Outstanding Choreography, citing the pieces *Romance in Swingtime* and *No Way Out*, and the 1994 Jazz Dance World Congress Gold Leo Award for Outstanding Choreography, citing *Getting There*. Siegenfeld is also a Charles Deering McCormick Professor of Teaching Excellence at Northwestern University where he teaches Jump Rhythm Technique; Jump Rhythm Tap; Movement Awareness; Choreographing Music; and American Rhythm Dancing and the African American Performance Aesthetic, a video-discussion course which surveys and analyzes filmed excerpts of African-American-influenced, jazz-rhythm-based choreography and dancing in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For further information: www.jrjp.org.