

## Opening the Door

### Teaching to the person inside the student

BY BILLY SIEGENFELD

#### THE PERSON WHO HAS MOST INSPIRED

the teaching I do today is my mother. Her name was Charlotte Siegenfeld. She's no longer with us. □ My mother was a high school reading teacher for twenty-five years starting in the 1960s. She was a radical. Not the bomb-throwing kind, but the quietly life-changing kind. Over all those years she kept insisting—largely to an unhearing school administration—that the children who were sent to her didn't have reading problems. She contended they had emotional problems rooted in familial, societal, and/or educational neglect, which may be coupled with other learning disabilities.

It was these, she said, not laziness or whatever else the conventional wisdom labeled them, that blocked the children's desire to learn. Her conviction was that if she could find a way to get to the person behind the resistant student, that student would develop more faith in her or his chances to make it in the world. And along the way, they just might want to do something as uncool as learn how to read.

My mother never wrote any of this down. She thought of it as nothing more than common sense. But the many students who came out of her school more fully alive after studying with her proved the benefit of what I now see was an educa-

tionally rock-solid strategy of tough love.

Guided by my mother's example, I've been learning that my job as a teacher is not to forget that my own particular area of study—dance and its relation to the jazz arts—is a means, not an end. In my mother's tradition of teaching, the most effective instructor uses subject matter not



Jeff Newcomer, courtesy Jump Rhythm Jazz Project

#### Billy Siegenfeld teaches his unique approach to movement at dance festivals worldwide.

as a closed system, intellectually stimulating in itself, but as a kind of transparency on life. The job is to coax, trick, humor, and badger the person fortress inside that resistant student persona to emerge—to be bravely vulnerable enough to enter into a receptive engagement with the world.

The more I learn about teaching, the more I try to encourage students to open this door to themselves—open the door to their eccentricities, to those more nakedly individual responses they might feel don't

belong in a traditional classroom. This challenges students differently from the formal approach of learning for learning's sake or dancing for dancing's sake. My feeling is that emphasis on technique tends to block students from responding with unguarded, from-the-heart instincts. Obsessed with mastering physical skills,

mastering the "outside" of dancing, students are exempt from bringing their insides, their souls, if I may use that word, through the classroom door. I can't find a better word than "soul" to describe the invisible, palpable force that, when we're younger and don't know any better, drives us to make unedited, delightfully eccentric discoveries about the world. These are the discoveries that keep a class fresh, because they jump out of a student's uniqueness and force both fellow students and teachers to reevaluate unconscious dogmas and elitisms.

I love teaching. It keeps me honest. Very honest. If I'm not as resourceful as my students and as honest myself as I want them to be, I don't reach them. Fortunately, I've got some of the feisty spirit of my mother. She is still saying to me, "All you forgot to do is be yourself. Just be yourself, keep listening, and trust the teaching that comes out of that." ■

*Billy Siegenfeld founded the Chicago-based Jump Rhythm Jazz Project and was recently honored by Northwestern University for excellence in teaching. The preceding is an excerpt from his May 30, 2002, acceptance speech.*