THIS MONTH

Billy Siegenfeld TEACHER'S Wisdom

TLC Chicago-based Billy Siegenfeld is a jumping, tap-dancing choreographer and teacher who created his own dance style with his troupe, Jump Rhythm Jazz Project. He merges Gene Kelly's silken moves with high-energy tap, and brings it all close to the ground. He received the 2006 Ruth Page Award for his unique dance vocabulary and was honored at the 2005 Jazz Dance World Congress. In 2005 he traveled to Finland as a Fulbright Senior Specialist to teach theory and practice of JRJP technique. He is on the faculty of Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, and his technique is also taught at Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Lynchburg, Virginia. Writer Lynn Voedisch interviewed him after class at the Joel Hall Dance Center in Chicago.

Photo: David Lewis

Jump Rhythm Jazz technique: moving the way a cat jumps off a fence.

I WOULD IMAGINE THAT CLASSICALLY TRAINED DANCERS HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOU ARE DOING WHEN YOU START CLASS. IS THAT TRUE? ARE THEY PUZZLED? Of course they are. They are thinking that they ought to shut up—it's dance class. Instead, we start out each class chanting the alphabet and calling out the beat. In ballet technique, the body is held up. This is not good for an aesthetic based on making rhythm. We help them unlearn it by passing through a series of exercises that takes them from the floor to standing. We concentrate on letting go of the bones. I have them sing, which helps release the weight of the pelvis. Engaging the use of the diaphragm leads you to release the internal organs.

WHY DO YOU USE A HUMAN SKELETON TO DEMONSTRATE YOUR TECHNIQUE? I say to students, "This is how the body wants to be. Mess with it at your own risk." The body is perfect for running from a lion or running toward something to eat. It has efficient locomotion. In nature, the rib cage is not lifted [the way it is in ballet]; that lift increases tension in all the joints. It pulls the body away from the ground, and then the body is in a constant state of falling.

HOW DOES YOUR STYLE PROTECT DANCERS FROM INJURY? The technique helps people work through old injuries. When the body is grounded, securely placed on the earth, then it is difficult to hurt yourself. You are letting go of the joints. You move the same way a cat jumps off a fence.

YOUR WARM-UPS ARE UNCONVENTIONAL, WITH PEOPLE ROAMING AROUND THE STUDIO AND VOCALIZING LOUDLY. HOW DO THEY PREPARE THE STUDENTS TO DANCE? We don't force the stretch. I disagree completely with traditional warm-ups. The faster your cardiovascular system starts working, the better. We have shouted accents like "Bim!" "Boom!" "Bah!" at the very beginning of the class. First, accents are tremendously explosive energy. The idea is to let the body behave the way it wants to. Traditional warm-ups make the body do what it doesn't want to do. We work on the efficiency principle—what the body wants to do.

IN CLASS YOU TALK ABOUT A "KINESTHETIC EYE" OR KINESTHESIA. CAN YOU EXPLAIN WHAT THAT IS? In most dance classes you are constantly looking in the mirror to see that you look right. Kinesthesia is a feeling of grounding your body. It depends on feeling if your body is relaxed. It's all about how you take the energy coursing through the body and turn it into clear, articulate movements in space.

YOU ASK YOUR STUDENTS TO CRITIQUE EACH OTHER IN CLASS. HOW IS THIS HELPFUL? It replaces the mirror. It engages the student as a teacher even as the student is learning. Teaching others to feel what the joints are like when they are tense and loose is the best way to learn the rhythm. When you put teacher power into students' hands, it makes them better thinkers about what's right or wrong.

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Most dance classes are so hierarchical. It's funny. It's regressive. It forces students into not being able to talk back. They need to ask questions, engage in conversation. Here they are functioning in conversation with others. They are singing. Go to an African dance class and you will see singing and rhythm-making. It helps to increase the sense of community.

What exactly are the "drumbeaters" you talk about? The two hands, head, and voice. All four parts make rhythm. We use them as we try to transform the dancing body into an articulate, rhythm-making instrument. Human bodies are an outlet for emotional expression. Hands have a voice—look at the Italians. Tell someone you love them, and those drumbeater parts are instinctively engaged. We use the passionate force that's in the body and that comes out in voice, hand-hits, movement of the head. People feel good when they are using the emotional life that's within the body because they are expressing feeling in motion. We've coalesced all four parts. The more coalesced, the clearer the rhythm.

Are parts of hip hop very similar to Jump Rhythm Jazz? We are doing the shapes of hip hop. Both are based on African dancing. We are trying to let the body be in a state of aliveness. Anything that's stiff is not cool.

Can you talk about the role of breath and relaxation in your work? Breathing is putting your body in the best position to scoop up a lot of energy. You must relax before you can fully inhale. That's what helps you expel air by vocalizing. It's finding strength through relaxation. In class, even when you are standing still, you are relaxing for a battement. I like to say we are in active relaxation. The ground is your best friend. Let the muscles and bones fall to the earth as they will. Then you will be moving from a sense of yielding.

Who are your heroes or models? The Nicholas brothers, Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly. All that kind of dance was brilliant, moving quickly with sharpness, humor, and mischievousness. When you see it, you can't help but smile. ■

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