

Dancing without Injuries

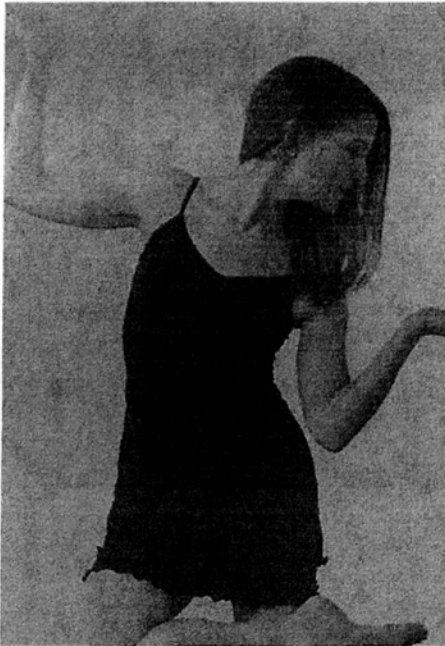


Photo Donna Hagerman
Andrea Downie

By Andrea Downie

Like many young girls, I wanted to dance. As a teenager, my evenings were spent in the dance studio and my summers away from home at various intensives. Dancing was my passion and I wanted to make it my profession. However, during these years, I suffered several injuries that required physiotherapy, including chondromalacia patellae, a roughening of the articular cartilage on the back of the knee-caps, which caused me pain. I was given remedial exercises to improve the muscle balance around my knees and continued to dance. Like many of my peers, I assumed that injuries were an unfortunate, but inevitable, part of dance.

During the first year of my dance degree, a kinesiologist suggested that I consider another career, that my knee problems were structural and couldn't withstand the demands of dance. I was warned that I might not be walking into my 30's should I continue to dance on "those knees." I was devastated!

On choreographing with dancers:

Usually in ballet, the dancers are all the same. So what I like to do is the opposite of that. It's to play with tall, short, fat, black and white. I like different characters and to play with them as what they really are. When I began to work - my first show - I choreographed everything and I was showing people exactly what I wanted them to do - which movement, which order, how. Now I don't do that any more. We improvise a lot and I try to use people for what they are. So I don't use the dancers to reproduce what I do. I use the

Fortunately, I had already been accepted into a Jacob's Pillow dance intensive, and that summer I met the creator of the Simonson Technique, Lynn Simonson herself.

Within a few days of taking Lynn's classes I felt a wonderful shift - my knees felt better, my joints freer and my body stronger. Although these were my first Simonson classes, I had a definite sense of coming home. I decided to speak to Lynn about the kinesiologist's assessment, and she offered me a different prospect for my future. Lynn believed I could dance indefinitely and without pain, by learning how to work safely and correctly according to the needs of my body. She explained the importance of not hyper-extending my knees, and showed me how to stand, move and dance in a manner that would not stress my knees. That summer, I learned how to listen to my body rather than to force it - by the end of the program, I came to believe a future in dance was still possible.

In subsequent summers, I followed Lynn to various intensives and, upon completing my dance degree, moved to New York City to study her technique at Dance Space Amsterdam (formerly Dance Space Centre). There I took daily Simonson classes in which we were encouraged to work within our natural range of motion, and to find correct body alignment based on our individual and mechanical requirements. We were asked to be "present", to accept what we could do at that moment, while remaining open to new possibilities. From this point onwards, I found an ease in my new alignment and movement patterns. This training facilitated great changes in my body, my movement and my artistry.

I was so inspired to share what I learned with Canadian dancers that I applied for, and was accepted to, become a certified teacher of the Simonson Technique. The course examines the technique's methodology and pedagogy, and Lynn's "organic approach to movement." Her technique was developed some 35 years ago and guided by her belief that everyone can dance, injury-free. "My goal was to create an intelligent and logical method to prepare the body for dance without injury," she once said.

dancers to create with their own body what I think is nice to do. My work is not to make pure choreography.

On dancing in his forties:

I don't feel like I cannot dance any more. I just feel it changes. Now I dance more with my fingers, with my face. I don't jump high any more, that's for sure. My feeling is that now I do this solo, I feel good on stage. Twenty years ago, I was a much better dancer, but I could never perform alone on stage like that. And now I have a feeling that

The technique is founded on principles of anatomy and kinesiology, focusing on developing body awareness about personal limitations and capabilities, rather than trying to make the body fit some pre-described ideal. We study anatomy and become skilled at assessing posture. We learn how to identify and teach various learning styles, and practice instructional techniques that create supportive environments.

I now realize that the Simonson Technique has broad implications - its principles can be applied to ballet, modern and other forms of dance. Teachers are free to create and choreograph exercises and combinations according to personal style. I remember Lynn saying: "Simonson fundamentals are the base of the training. The choreographer's voice is what changes ... and the Simonson Technique supports this change."

To this day, I continue to work with Lynn, refining my skills as a teacher of the Simonson Technique. She generously shares her expertise and experience with me, helping me learn how to guide my own students. I am thrilled to see dancers of all levels, from beginner through advanced, ceasing to fight themselves while rediscovering their innate knowledge of how to allow beautiful and healthy movement to occur.

A decade later, after working with the principles of the Simonson Technique, I have not sustained a single dance injury. My body feels healthy and strong - I am now in my 30s and in a body that feels far better than it did when I was a teen.

What I consider pleasing to the eye is different now than when I began my dance career so many years ago. To me, what is beautiful is healthy. I am grateful to the Simonson Technique, which is leading the way to reducing chronic injury. I wonder if the aesthetics of dance will change in this direction as more dancers experience healthier approaches to movement? ♪

Andrea Downie is a Vancouver-based dance teacher. She is currently teaching the Simonson Technique at the Shadbolt Centre for the Arts in Burnaby and at Onedance Creative Art Centre in North Vancouver. Email Andrea at downieback@aol.com.

I can do it alone. Even if I improvise a lot, I have feeling that I have a big bag on my back and that for every second I can take something out of the bag because the bag is full.

The Dance Centre, Eponymous and New Works present Philippe Decouflé in Solo - Le doute m'habite (The doubt within me) at the Vancouver Playhouse, February 16 & 17, 2007. Tickets from 604 280 3311 www.ticketmaster.ca. Additional material from the Bangkok Post/Outlook, July 12, 2006; article by Amitha Amranand. ♪