

THIS MONTH

Lynn Simonson

# TEACHER'S WISDOM

Jazz dancer Lynn Simonson created the Simonson technique when chronic injuries drove her to investigate an anatomically sound approach to movement. Writer Michelle Vellucci talked with her following class at Dance Space Center in New York, co-founded by Simonson in 1984. For twelve years, Simonson also directed the Jazz Project and the New Vision for Dance program at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival.

**HOW DID YOU DEVELOP THE SIMONSON TECHNIQUE?** I didn't plan to develop a technique. When I was 24, I was asked to teach in Amsterdam, and I had a lot of adult beginners who'd never danced before. I began thinking about developing and preparing a non-dancer for dance. I started looking at their bodies and noticed that beginners usually lean back. Why? Because their weight's forward in their pelvis. I think that faulty alignment is what predisposes you to injuries.

A lot of my warm-up was about stretching the muscles so that there was freer range of motion through the joints, and yet I followed a sequence that I had learned in ballet—pliés, tendus, développés. My students were improving rapidly, and I began to progress the training to different levels.

**THE WARM-UP PART OF YOUR CLASS RUNS A LITTLE OVER AN HOUR. WHY DO YOU GIVE SO MUCH TIME TO IT?** We don't consider it a warm-up. We are training bodies. We work a lot on vertical alignment, helping students find the plumb line of the shoulder over the trochanter over the ankle. It prepares the body to dance in a way that is, I believe, more likely to be injury-free. That's what it's all about—correcting misalignment patterns and finding out through sensory awareness how it feels, not how it looks. We help each student understand that his body is different from the person standing next to him. We don't ask that all students do 180-degree rotation, because—guess what?—your body doesn't do that. And on top of that, your body is asymmetrical, so one leg rotates more than the other. The class is long so that you have time to keep reassessing and listening to your body.

**HOW DID YOUR OWN EXPERIENCES WITH INJURIES INFORM YOUR TECHNIQUE?** I knew nothing about the body. Of course, growing up I had Russian ballet—Vaganova training. My teachers were amazing; they were from Ballets Russes. They



Simonson shares principles of anatomy and kinesiology with students.

imparted history and the passion of movement and music to me. But I had hyperextended knees and forced turnout. My kneecap was dislocating now and then, and the ligaments were over-stretched in the backs of my knees. It wasn't until I was 19 and had, yet again, dislocated my knee in a jazz class that I was directed to a doctor who worked with dancers (which was pretty rare in the early '60s) and he explained to me why it happened. That was a turning point for me. Boom—I needed to know about anatomy, and I wanted to learn about the body. It excited me. That injury was a blessing. In fact, injuries are there to tell you something.

**HOW DOES THE SIMONSON TECHNIQUE PREPARE DANCERS FOR PROFESSIONAL CAREERS?** It's a foundation that prepares you equally to go into modern or into jazz. We develop the body based on principles of anatomy and kinesiology.

Send your suggestions to: DANCE MAGAZINE, 333 Seventh Ave., 11th Floor, New York, NY 10001, Attn: Teacher's Wisdom.

**HOW DOES JAZZ MUSIC INFLUENCE WHAT YOU DO?** I've always loved jazz music, and I think the rhythmic feeling that is so essential to it has helped me translate movement deeper into my body. If you listen to a jazz quartet, for instance, it becomes possible to hear all four instruments at once. They're all different layers of sound. That's what it's about for me when I dance. Part of it is keeping rhythm. But part of my body, like lifting the chest, or the quality of moving an arm through space, can be like a long note of a saxophone against the rhythm of my feet. It's all these different dynamics that are working.

**WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON PROBLEMS YOU SEE IN STUDENTS COMING TO YOU FOR THE FIRST TIME?** Hypertonic quadriceps, first of all, that go along with hyperextension. If someone's been trained to push their knees back, the quads automatically contract. Also, the alignment pattern of pelvis tucked forward, weight into the hip flexors.

It's hard to let go of the mindset of working with pressure and force. If you're 16 and you have a grinding in your hip, or if you already have pain in your knees, you cannot accept that as being the norm. Nevertheless, your body's trying to tell you something. We dancers tend to put up with it, we push on—we don't give in to pain. Not cool. If you want a career in dance, then you need to ask questions.

**WHERE DO YOU DRAW THE LINE BETWEEN HELPING DANCERS MOVE SAFELY AND PUSHING THEM TO WORK HARDER?** Extension comes over time as you stretch more, and there's a lot of stretching in my technique. But we're not going to urge students to raise their leg at the expense of the standing leg rolling in at the knee, or the foot or the pelvis tucking under. That doesn't mean we don't push students to do more, but I'm not training them: I'm teaching dance, so there's no end gaming for me. I don't care if you get in a company or not, I just care that the quality of your dance experience is rewarding for you. I want to give you the greatest gift I can, which is the gift of yourself, of knowing yourself. ■