



# Robin Dunn

gives  
**HIP-HOP**

by Ariel Osterweis Scott

## F.A.C.E. Lift

Photography by Arthur Coopchik

It's not often that you hear "locking," "turnout," and "namaste" in a single breath. That is, unless, you are in conversation with Robin Dunn. From teaching hip-hop to founding a self-empowerment program, Dunn's disparate influences include freestyle, marketing and yoga. She has brought together her background in the dance and music industries to inspire a new generation of performing artists and business professionals who benefit from her patented F.A.C.E. Method and her hip-hop dance classes at the Ailey School and Steps on Broadway.

### GIVING F.A.C.E.

An acronym for "focus, attitude, confidence, energy and eye contact," the F.A.C.E. method is just as much a training of the mind as it is a training of the body. Taught in a studio environment, F.A.C.E. allows students to access their performance potential by providing them with a set of tools for projecting outward toward their audience with intention and commitment.

Dunn began teaching F.A.C.E. at the Broadway Dance Center in New York City under the guise of "Stage Moves." Frequented by performers such as Brooke Shields, "Stage Moves" made use of tangible elements such as hip-hop moves, microphones and mic stands to help recording artists become comfortable with their performing bodies. It was not until a television interviewer realized that Dunn's "focus, attitude,



confidence, energy and eye contact" spelled "F.A.C.E." that the class and its method earned a new name.

What does hip-hop have to do with F.A.C.E., ? Dunn has years of experience in all facets of hip-hop, from dance to music to artist management. In fact, she and her sisters, Desiree Dunn Crichlow and Greta Dunn, once created and ran a company called "Duntori and Company, Inc.," an artist development and management consultant company. Dunn's degree in marketing from Baruch College augmented her performing experience with reliable business tools. "We were the Motown without the record label, providing image control, choreography and media coaching," Dunn said. Having toured with bands as a dancer, managed hip-hop artists and trained with hip-hop greats Buddha Stretch and Mr. Wiggles, Dunn incorporates her knowledge of the entertainment industry into the F.A.C.E. method. Nevertheless, her F.A.C.E. classes are taught separately from her hip-hop classes; what the classes share is a commitment to inspiration.

## IN-SPARATION

It may seem unlikely that someone with so much business savvy would remain so committed to her students' spiritual well-being, but Dunn's message of inspiration is actually the key to her success. Dunn takes seriously the "in" of "inspiration," focusing on what her friend and vocal coach Craig Derry called "inside work." According to Dunn, "It's important...that the younger dancers really take the time to do the inside work because we're all so over-stimulated by the outside visual [world] that less time is spent tapping into that power within us." For Dunn, performance—whether onstage or in the boardroom—is an outer manifestation of internal labor. Dunn said, "F.A.C.E. is a culmination of my life's work. It allows students to look inside themselves, adjusting that, being clear about it and being confident about projecting that out into the world. For performing artists, it's on camera and onstage, and for business professionals it's about improving their performance in the work place."

F.A.C.E. develops "body awareness, but more importantly, it's self-awareness. I focus heavily on inspiration. At the beginning of my class, we lie on the floor and do a short meditation, and at the end, we do a closing meditation." Dunn is not shy about the "inside work" she has had to do in her own life to propel her through tough times. For Dunn, breathing exercises and spiritual awareness are just as important as tendus and popping. Dunn brings spirituality down to a practical level. She said, "I've been in therapy for a long time; I've studied acting; I've studied voice; I've studied dance. So, this (F.A.C.E.) allows me to do all of it." Furthermore, she finds inspiration in physi-

cal practices such as Amparo Yoga and through public figures such as Oprah Winfrey, who have made explicit the connection between spirituality and success.

## SURVIVAL TOOLS

In today's climate of quick-fix logic and designer bodies, many people engage in spiritual practices such as yoga in an effort to streamline their musculature. The spiritual dimension of such practices can become diluted or ignored. On the other hand, Dunn never even mentions "tone," "weight," or "beauty" in her discussion of F.A.C.E. or hip-hop. Instead, she focuses on movement and visualization.

For example, she said, "Colorizing is an exercise I do in my F.A.C.E. Method. I use color to give concrete meaning to an individual's energy. It's a form of visualization. I ask each person their favorite color, and then I ask [them] to use the color to give... meaning to their energy. To place meaning outside—and inside—one's body empowers performers in a dance and entertainment culture whose obsession with appearance can lead to dangerous patterns such as eating disorders and low self-confidence."

Dunn reminds us, "It goes beyond the artistic side. Your life is going to influence how you are onstage, in front of the camera or doing a presentation at work." Dunn harnesses "the sum total: spirit, self, health and physical body, love and relationships, career and money, family, society and the world outside." Dunn's gift lies in her ability to provide people with practical performance tools through less-than-tangible spiritual, psychological and intellectual guidance. Dunn said, "It's not just about that one show or



presentation. It's about providing the life survival tools" to cope with challenges that may arise. "It's [less] about following one particular method, and [more] about designing what works for you."

## FREESTYLE AND FOUNDATION

Despite F.A.C.E.'s inner focus, Dunn's hip-hop classes are indeed grounded in physical techniques. At the Ailey School and Steps, Dunn teaches freestyle hip-hop. "Within that," she said, "I teach hip-hop dance history and include what I call 'foundation' (what the kids call 'old school')." Dunn said she includes elements of basic breaking, popping, locking and other funk styles." Dunn said, though, that she is not a popper and locker. "I am a freestyler," she said.

Dunn said she has noticed a trend toward foundation break and toward other older dance styles such as now popular voguing: "The whole Willy Ninja thing" is remerging as "a movement," she said. Though pleased with the recent renaissance of breaking and voguing, Dunn (singing the O'Jays jam) warns against doing it merely for the "money, money, money." Dunn is committed to teaching a relatively unadulterated hip-hop form, explaining that in ballet, "You wouldn't mess with a tendu or a rond de jambe, so why would you mess with hip-hop?"

Dunn's hip-hop class unfolds in a format that is fitting with the genre. She tells me, "The cadence of it is like an MC." Dunn asks her class, "What is hip-hop?" Then she professes, "Hip-hop is a culture comprised of four elements." Following a call and response dynamic, she allows students to join her in answering, "They include B-Boying, graffiti arts, MCing, and DJing." Then she goes on to discuss — while teaching — the contributions of the Electric Boogaloo and more.

## FROM WOODSIDE TO "WORK IT"

In addition to teaching at the Ailey School and Steps, Dunn is committed to mentoring students from communities outside Manhattan. Having begun her training in her home borough of Queens, New York, Dunn feels indebted to her first teacher, Charlotte Pollak, in addition to well-known jazz greats Frank Hatchett and Fred Benjamin. Recently, Dunn has been teaching at Earl Mosley's Institute of the Arts in Connecticut. She mentors four young men who assist in her classroom. "I do career counseling and submit them for jobs. I used to work in casting, and I keep my ear out for opportunities for young people," she said.

From casting to managing, dancing to singing, it seems there is little Dunn hasn't tried. Her entre-



preneurial attitude has made its mark throughout her career. With experiences spanning from learning tap in Woodside, Queens to choreographing the live version of Missy Elliott's hit, "Work It," Dunn's vision has altered the terrain of New York City's dance scene. In fact, Dunn was the first person to teach hip-hop in a dance studio environment, introducing hip-hop classes to Broadway Dance Center in 1989. "Classes averaged eighty to a hundred students; we had a publicist and all," recounts Dunn.

Dunn's gift for teaching will not allow her to stop. "In 2003 I was thinking about changing directions and not teaching anymore. Then I got a call from Denise Jefferson, Director of the Ailey School to teach the first hip-hop. "Two years earlier," she said, "I knocked on their door and didn't get a response." Dunn was ready for the task. After all, she had studied ballet, Horton, and Dunham techniques at the Ailey School in her youth, and believed the students would benefit from the introduction of hip-hop technique. She admits, "I was hoping to slow down, but it's like, nope, keep the ice going, keep wrapping your feet and keep saying '5-6-7-8, take it from the top!'"

This fall, Dunn will teach at the Ailey School, Steps on Broadway, Earl Mosley's Institute of the Arts, Young Audiences and Hunter College. Dunn is dedicated to promoting women in hip-hop and said has benefited greatly from the mentorship of hard-working women including her mother, Edith Dunn, Ms. Pollak, and the Ailey School's Denise Jefferson, Joan Peters and Ana Marie Forsythe. In order to honor this tradition of tremendous women in dance, Dunn is planning a Women's History Month workshop, Ladies Get Down, in March, 2009. It will be held at the Ailey Extension and showcase East Coast women in hip-hop. As an entertainment entrepreneur, Robin Dunn reminds us that hip-hop dance is about face, body and soul. Through her unusual combination of hands-on dance training, no-nonsense business advice and spiritual guidance, Dunn teaches her students how to get the job done.\*

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