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HEALTH

Dance for the people at the Ailey Extension

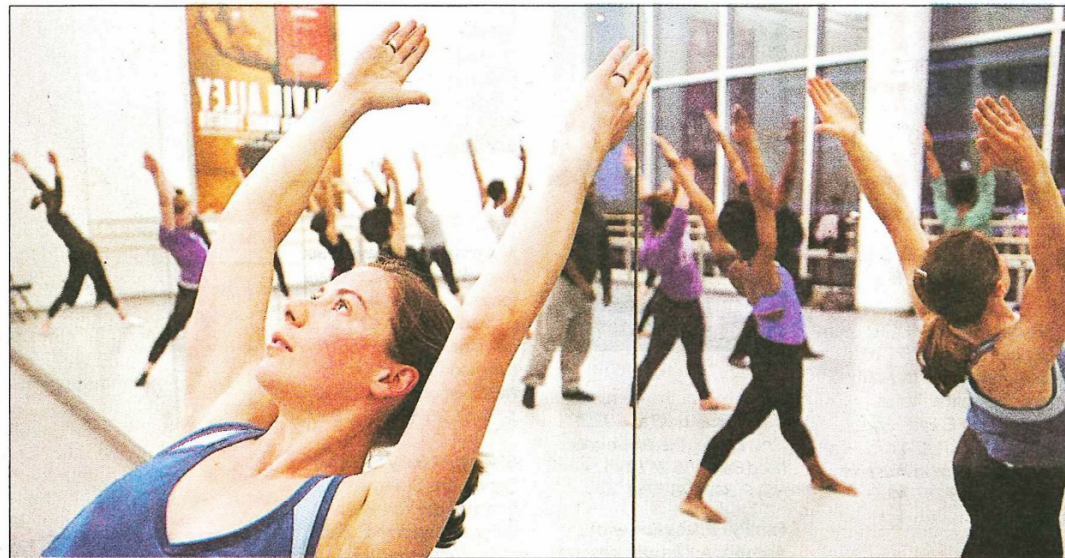
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All nonprofit organizations have a difficult time in these profit-ravenous times, but the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has a hidden weapon: its thriving Ailey Extension program, which offers classes in more than 30 different dance techniques — Zumba, ballet, Capoeira, hip-hop, samba, Horton, tap, jazz and bhangra among them — to the public in about 80 classes a week.

Prices are reasonable — \$17 per 60- or 90-minute class (with volume discounts available) — and instruction is by some of the top teachers in NYC.

The Ailey Extension program, which is open to anyone who wants to go, “matches our mission,” said Lisa Johnson-Willingham, Ailey Extension director. Ailey believed “that dance comes from the people and should be delivered back to the people,” which classes help to do.

Johnson-Willingham dances around the topic of the degree to which Ailey Extension helps to defray costs, but acknowledges



Students take the Horton class at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Extension program for nonprofessional dancers.

that 300 people a day receiving instruction in the spacious studios helps to support the company.

Esther Hsiang, 23, who lives in midtown, was first exposed to the Horton technique at Harvard University, and continued to take classes even after landing a job as a strategy consultant in NYC. Horton, she said, makes her body feel “long and limber.”

“It makes your body very strong,” she said.

But can a nondancer hack the rigors of an Ailey class?

Recently, this reporter took an Ailey Extension class in the Horton technique — taught, coincidentally, by Johnson-Willingham — to find out. Originated by Lester Horton, who was adored by Ailey, the Horton technique is evident in many of Ailey's choreographed works, most markedly “Revelations.”

Designed to fortify, lengthen and strengthen the

body, Horton is rhythm enriched, and incorporates dance elements from many different cultures.

About 50 people of astonishingly different levels of ability showed up to stretch, move and eventually learn a set of increasingly challenging combinations. The vibe was friendly and welcoming, with the less adept and nervous clustering in the back (hello!) as the Horton regulars and more practiced dancers took positions in front.

Johnson-Willingham guided us through a series of fairly manageable ballet positions and T positions, “table top flat back,” squats, swings and lunges. The rhythmic, dynamic moves, with transitions much like those in yoga, became progressively more difficult. Holding a squat while on tiptoe put my muscles in a mercy-begging mood. Just as the Pilates-like floor work was giving me new insight into the inadequacies

Dancer notes

If you're just starting out: **Consider the introductory offer** (two classes for \$25) to sample classes and figure out where you belong level-wise.

Don't sweat the dress. People wear everything from ballet leotards to shorts and dress shirts. Just dress to move comfortably and make sure to check the required footwear. Most people in Horton were barefoot.

Show up early. It takes a few minutes to check in, and there's almost always a line. Classes may be crowded, so you should stake out some prime floor space. (SHEILA ANNE FEENEY)

of my abdominal strength, we were given a rest before instruction in some briskly performed combinations. That is where the real dancers broke away from the pack, leaving the rest of us in their wake.

But it also felt all right to be mediocre. The class may be at a world-renowned center for dancers, but snobby “dance world” airs were absent. And yes, I emerged feeling terrific: stronger, taller and more limber.