

THE DANCE ENTHUSIAST

Moving Caribbean in NYC: Joan Peters, Teacher of the Katherine Dunham Technique at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's School

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November 14, 2016



While a New York native born and bred, Joan Peters moves Caribbean almost everyday and has done so, amazingly, since the age of five. It all started when her great-aunt, who loved to read about Katherine Dunham (the legendary dancer, anthropologist, writer and activist who famously brought dances of the Caribbean to stage prominence) sought out the pioneer's dance classes for her young niece.

I imagine the older woman might have wanted her young relation to capture not only the sparkle and excitement of Dunham's work at the time, but also some of the weight and strength of a Black woman who actively fought against segregation and discrimination during a moment in history when being vocal was not popular. Dunham often refused to dance in houses that were segregated or would speak out against segregation at the end of her performances. In Brazil, when she and her company were refused lodgings in a first class hotel, Dunham made certain the fact was highly publicized. The outrage and attention put towards this issue resulted in the 1951 Afonso Arinos law, which made racial discrimination in public places a felony in that country.

Says Ms. Peters, as we grab a moment to chat after her regular Friday afternoon Dunham class, "That was where my great-aunt wanted me to go, so that's where I went." Joan Peters has been the Chairperson for the Dunham Technique at The Ailey School since 1978. It seems her great-aunt was onto something.

Peters remembers Dunham as a fantastic teacher, but her main instructor was Syvilla Fort who ran the Dunham School and later started her own studio in New York -- the Phillips Fort Studio of Theater Dance. Peters would take class there with her good friend Alvin Ailey. "Those classes were unbelievable. We would walk in and down one end of the barre you would see Eartha Kitt. Then at the other end of the barre you would see Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, Marlon Brando, Susan Strasberg, Chita Rivera, and the list went on. The room would be packed with stars. At the time we thought every studio was like that," she laughs.

And the music? "At the Dunham school? My gosh, at the Dunham school you could have maybe as many as ten drummers around the room. Then you might have two or three guitars, flutes, fifes, all of that. They were very into music. You took class to an orchestra."



What was it about Dunham dance classes that caught the attention of students, from five-year-olds to movie stars? “They knew the work you would get and the strength that it built in you. Once people found that out, everyone was coming — all of Broadway. You could hardly enter class for all those people piling in. As young as I was [when she started] at five, I saw the strength. You got stronger each class. And, they didn’t treat us like babies. They said to me, ‘If you are going to take these classes you are going to have to be a big girl, not a baby.’ We could be babies after class. People would pick us up, swing us around and hug us, but during class it was very strict.”

In this rigorous atmosphere Peters advanced rapidly and soon started teaching Dunham classes to both children and adults at the ripe old age of eleven.

Picture a petite, quiet pre-teen in the front of a room filled with scores of serious students and professional musicians waiting for her to set the class rhythm. Says Peters, “I wasn’t happy. The children teased me saying, ‘It was so funny watching the teacher’s mommy bring her in to teach class,’ and then, when I was starting to teach adults, they would go into shock when they saw this little girl up there. Syvilla Fort came in from time to time say, ‘Give her a chance.’”

Eventually, Peters’ gifts won over pupils.

Today as she sits in front of her classes, demonstrating with one hand and underlining the beat of movement while holding a long, carved wooden staff (her signature teaching prop) in the other, Peters’ goals remain to strengthen students, all while keeping the atmosphere relaxed. “There is discipline. You have to build up strength and stamina, but the students need a community too, where they know they can be loose rather than holding back, where they can let you see what is in them. They need to build up the ‘inner thing’ that they share with audience. If they don’t have an inner light, they have nothing.”

While moving Caribbean has something to do with choreography — specific body undulations, percussive isolations, with patterns, rhythms, and placements, as handed down by Katherine Dunham and other masters of African Diaspora and Caribbean dance— it also reflects an inextinguishable spirit that must communicate and be heard despite all odds.



As Ms. Peters and I are about to wrap up, I ask her to tell me about the elegant, carved staff she constantly holds at her side. The faces etched into it seem to peer at the students along with her as she taps the floor to organize speeds or emphasize crucial steps.

“Why, I started using that when I was eleven, I needed to have something to let people know to listen to me.”

Watch video here:

<http://www.dance-enthusiast.com/features/view/Moving-Caribbean-in-New-York-City-Joan-Peters-Katherine-Dunham-Alvin-Ailey-American-Dance-Theater-#.WCnH6wBIQnM.gmail>