

technique

JACQULYN BUGLISI

HOW I TEACH GRAHAM

JACQULYN BUGLISI HAS A FLAIR FOR DRAMA. To encourage the students in her intermediate and advanced Graham classes at The Ailey School to open their sternums in a high release, she tells them to stretch “like a flower came out of your heart.” When attempting to convey the weight of a hand gesture, she explains that they must “pull the hem of heaven from the sky.” During the extensive warm-up sequence, she reminds them that this is no time for complacency: “We don’t do positions. We dance the series.” Despite her penchant for the Graham dramatics, Buglisi is equally quick to curb any excess of melodrama in her students. “No *Swan Lake* with the arms,” she admonishes one whose wrists are limply crossed.

Buglisi’s authority on the Graham technique is formidable—she was a principal dancer with the Martha Graham Dance Company for 12 years. Soon after the birth of her son in 1988, as her association with MGDC was winding down, Denise Jefferson approached her and offered a teaching position at Ailey. Buglisi fondly remembers Alvin Ailey himself taking time to stop in and watch her classes. Within two years, she became the chair for The Ailey School’s Graham-based modern department.

Though most of these students have been studying Graham technique with her for three or four years—as professionals, international, certificate or Ailey/Fordham BFA students—there is conscientiousness on every face: Buglisi has carefully imparted that there are always deeper understandings of the familiar pulses, flexed wrists and energized spirals to explore. Her own attentiveness and investment mirrors that of her students—she calls one who is perpetually in the back row to the front, apparently per an earlier agreement to encourage confidence.

For students who are new to Graham technique, the biggest hurdle can be to find the connection to their centers. “Understanding contraction and release requires such awareness,” says Buglisi. “Once they recognize their centers, that’s really the beginning.” She devotes moments in her class to stillness and introspection, encouraging her students to appreciate their own beauty and potential without getting caught up solely in the mechanics of the movement. “It’s OK to smile!” Buglisi occasionally reminds her class. “Be happy with the image in the mirror.”

BY RACHEL RIZZUTO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATTHEW MURPHY



Jacquelyn Buglisi is a born-and-bred New Yorker who trained at the High School of Performing Arts, where she studied Graham technique. After performing and teaching in Europe for several years, she returned to New York to dance for Pearl Lang and Joyce Trisler. She was a principal dancer with the Martha Graham Dance Company for 12 years. In 1993, she co-founded Buglisi Dance Theatre with fellow Graham dancers Donlin Foreman and associate founders Terese Capucilli and Christine Dakin. She is the chair of the Graham-based modern department at The Ailey School, where she has been teaching for more than 25 years.

Courtney Celeste Spears, 20, is a sophomore Ailey/Fordham BFA student.

technique

Here, student Courtney Celeste Spears demonstrates a short phrase from Martha Graham's 1947 piece *Night Journey*. This combination, which Buglisi uses for across-the-floor work, employs the famous Graham contraction and works on maintaining parallel, moving in space with weight shifts and finding oppositional strength in spiral.



1. Begin facing directly profile, with your hands on your hips and your feet in parallel first.

2. Bring your right leg back, keeping your knees and thighs together, as you contract the torso. Shift the weight over the back heel, and sweep the right arm from side to front. Your right hand is cupped.

3. Release the contraction. Step back with your left leg to parallel fourth position, spiraling your upper torso to the right and moving your right hand to your mouth. Hip bones remain square; abdominals are lifted, and a line of oppositional energy travels from left across the back to right elbow.

4. Turn over the left shoulder to face upstage, remaining in parallel. Bring your right hand to your hip.



5. Continue turning over the left shoulder, completing a 180-degree rotation. Remain in parallel.

6. Step through and shift weight onto your right foot as your right hand, cupped, rises above your head with a bent elbow. As you take a deep contraction, lower your left knee to the floor.

7. Pull yourself into a knee crawl, dragging the left knee along the floor to meet the right knee as it, too, touches the floor.

8. Suspend your weight over your heels in the contraction.

Visit dance-teacher.com to see Buglisi and Spears demonstrate this combination.