

(DECEMBER)

CONTENTS

COVER STORIES

- 74 Hilary Rhoda
- 91 Light & Lean
- 88 Too Busy?
- 54 Eat, Drink, Enjoy
- 84 Time to Shine

94

*“To be great,
you have to be smart.
You have to listen
to your body
and study it.”*

—Alvin Ailey dancer Linda Celeste Sims

STYLING: LINDSEY FRUGIER; HAIR: MICHAEL JOHNSON; MAKEUP: JUNIKO MIKA FOR CHANEL; MANICURE: MAKI SAKAMOTO FOR CHANEL LE VERNIS; SET DESIGN: TODD WIGGINS FOR MARY HOWARD STUDIO

(DEC) CONTENTS

74



98



84

FEATURES

67 Unlock the Perfect Gift
Give the gift of inspiration with these 20 thoughtful ideas.

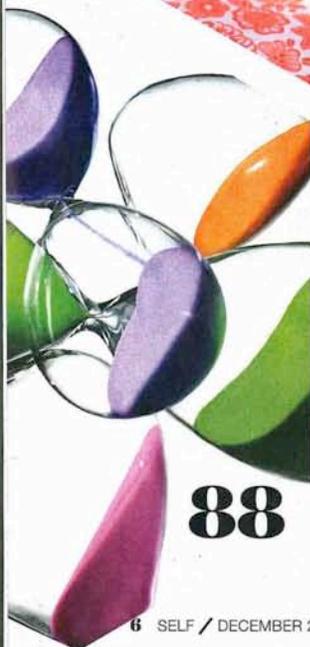
74 American Girl
As athletic as she is gorgeous and driven, Hilary Rhoda is changing the face of the modeling industry.

84 Grab Bags
Add spice to your holiday look with chic clutch-and-mani combos.

94 Light & Lean
Dancer Linda Celeste Sims shares how she stays strong and how to tune in to your own body.

88 The Busy Vortex
Are packed schedules a sign of success, or are we living in overdrive?

98 Better With Butter?
New research suggests a pat can actually be part of a healthy diet.



88



94

LIGHT & LEAN

So much of a dancer's power comes from an ability to tune in to the body, says Alvin Ailey's LINDA CELESTE SIMS. She shares the moves and mental tricks that allow her to soar above the rest.

BY ERIN BRIED PHOTOGRAPHED BY BEN GRIEME

Dancers are famous for their lithe bodies and effortless grace, so it's easy to forget that what makes them appear lighter than air actually requires a tremendous amount of effort. "Even if you have the flexibility, you have to have the strength," says Alvin Ailey dancer Linda Celeste Sims, 38, who has been dazzling audiences with her gravity-defying leaps and acrobatic skill for nearly two decades. "The muscles in my legs are what hold me up and help me jump higher."

Sims spends up to 10 hours a day dancing to build that strength, but what makes her training so effective is her ability to tap into whatever her body is telling her—from what to eat to which muscles need a little extra TLC. "Awareness of your body is key," says Sims, who has become a star of the company thanks in part to her flawless technique and to the unheard-of fact that in the past 18 years, she's never been sidelined by injury. Not *once*. "It's more important for me to pay attention than to push through when I feel sore," she says.

Sims's brand of mental rigor allows her to drive even harder physically, which becomes crucial in December when she takes center stage and the company kicks off its

LEAN > 96



JUMP FOR JOY

"I want to feel happy when I dance," Sims says. "Whatever I can do to make that happen, I'll do it."

TOP: Osken BOTTOM: Cover
LEG WARMERS: KD New York

new season. "I'm the person who says I need to improve," she says. "But, if you play and play a violin, you don't think it needs tuning? Your body is the same way. It's your only instrument."

Sims begins every day with 20 minutes of stretching to a Zena Rommett floor-barre DVD. "It helps me build flexibility and strength," she says. Then, during her seven-hour rehearsal, she monitors her energy, eating fruit to stay fueled. "You'd be amazed how much energy you can get from an orange," she says.

Once rehearsal ends, she assesses her muscles again to see if they feel tight. If so, she hits the pool to swim 30 to 50 laps. "That's my happy place. It works my muscles while lubricating my joints," she says.

She also practices pilates. "Your body shouldn't be compressed. It should be long, lean and strong," Sims says. Rolldowns are her favorite move. "The slower you go, the

deeper you'll click into your stomach."

The benefits of tuning in go far beyond the physical. A 2013 study in the *Journal of Dance & Somatic Practices* found that people who regularly practiced pilates and reported increased mindfulness were more relaxed, less stressed and more confident in the face of difficult tasks. "Pilates, like yoga, can encourage you to be present and to pay attention to your body, allowing you to make better in-the-moment decisions," says study author Karen Caldwell, Ph.D., professor of human development and psychology at Appalachian State University.

For Sims, mindfulness has been key to a long and successful career, not to mention an impressive physique. "To be great, you have to be smart. You have to listen to your body and study it," Sims says. "You can have talent and potential, but if you don't take care of your body, you'll never succeed."

6 MIND/BODY MOVES

These toners also boost mental focus, says Sarita Allen, Sims's pilates teacher (and an Ailey Extension instructor). Try them three times a week.

1/ WARM-UP BREATHING

Stand with your back against a wall, heels touching, and inhale, reaching arms out to sides and overhead. Pause, then exhale and squeeze lower abdominal muscles, pulling them toward the spine as arms float down. "Firing up your abs is like turning a key in the ignition for the rest of your practice," Allen says. Continue for 1 minute.

2/ ABDOMINAL SCOOP

Sit on a mat with knees bent, feet flat, spine long and hands grasping hamstrings. Inhale, then exhale as you round lower back, pulling sitz bones together while very slowly and deliberately scooping abs toward spine, rolling backward until arms are straight. Hold 5 seconds; return to start. Do 10 reps.

3/ PELVIC LIFT

Lie on a mat, feet hip-width apart. Press arms and palms firmly into mat and lift hips, keeping shoulders on mat. Hold 10 seconds, pressing hips up and pulling abs in, toes pointed forward and knees, hips and ankles aligned. Roll down one vertebra at a time from neck to tailbone, taking time to elongate and separate each segment of the spine. Do 10 reps.

4/ LEG CIRCLE

Lie on back with legs straight and feet flexed. Inhale and lift right leg, toes pointing up. Exhale as you move right leg across body, down and up to center in a sweeping oval, keeping hips square and flat on the floor. Do 10 reps, then reverse direction. Switch legs; repeat.

5/ CURL-UP

Lie on back, bring knees to chest and hands behind head. Curl up so shoulder blades come off floor; inhaling, stretch legs out at a 45-degree angle from floor to engage inner thighs, abs and buttocks. Exhale, pulling knees back to chest and curling body a little higher. Do 10 reps, using abs to curl higher each time.

6/ ROLL DOWN

Lie on back with legs straight, feet flexed and arms extended overhead, stretching long. Inhale and reach arms to ceiling. Exhale, tuck chin to chest and roll up one vertebra at a time. As arms reach toward toes, pull waist back. Slowly reverse movements to return to start; do 10 reps.

Her light & lean tips

KEEP MOVING

"When I have a day off or have taken a long flight, I like to hop on the elliptical for 40 minutes to get my blood going. I set the resistance to 5 and alternate between jogging and walking every 5 minutes."

TACKLE TIGHTNESS

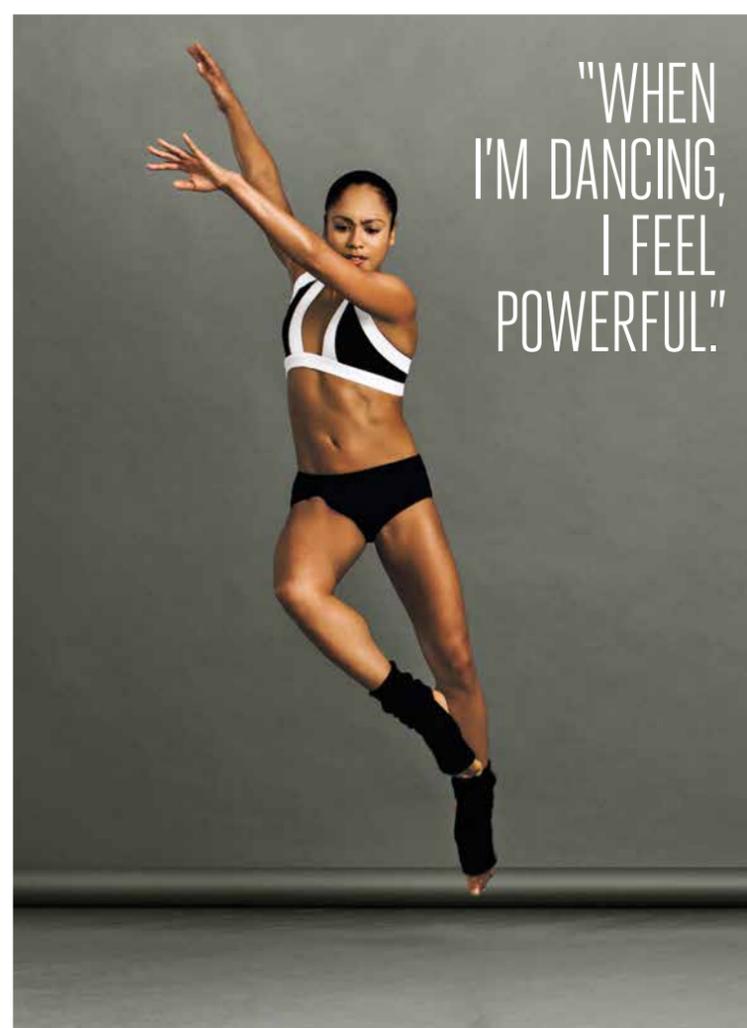
"If I feel sore, I put two hard rubber balls in a sock, lie down on them and roll over them with my neck, back, quads, hams and glutes. (They're like tennis balls, only firmer—you can find them at pet stores.) It's like getting a massage."

BALANCE YOUR BODY

"I have strong legs from dancing, but I need to work on the muscles in my upper body. I do 2 sets of 10 push-ups before every performance to activate my shoulders and fight soreness."

EAT CLEAN

"You have to watch what you put into your body, and it's hard to do that when you eat out. I cook for myself and even bring a hot plate and food processor on the road. My go-tos are yogurt, fruit, green juice and sautéed chicken. I also love wine and a sliver of cheese." Get Sims's favorite performance-day recipes at Self.com/go/linda.



"WHEN I'M DANCING, I FEEL POWERFUL."



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