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Cover image of Austin Maiteen
by Josh Brewer Photography

Modern

Why and how to teach modern dance to young students

By Lisa Okuhn

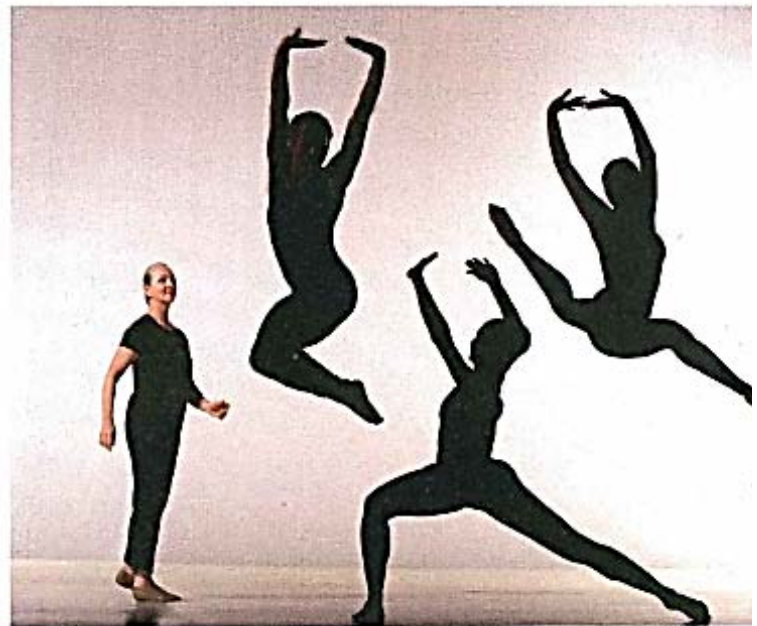
human movement and expand the parameters of the form. They developed theories, languages, and to varying degrees, defined techniques. In doing so, they redefined how we see, do, and think about dance.

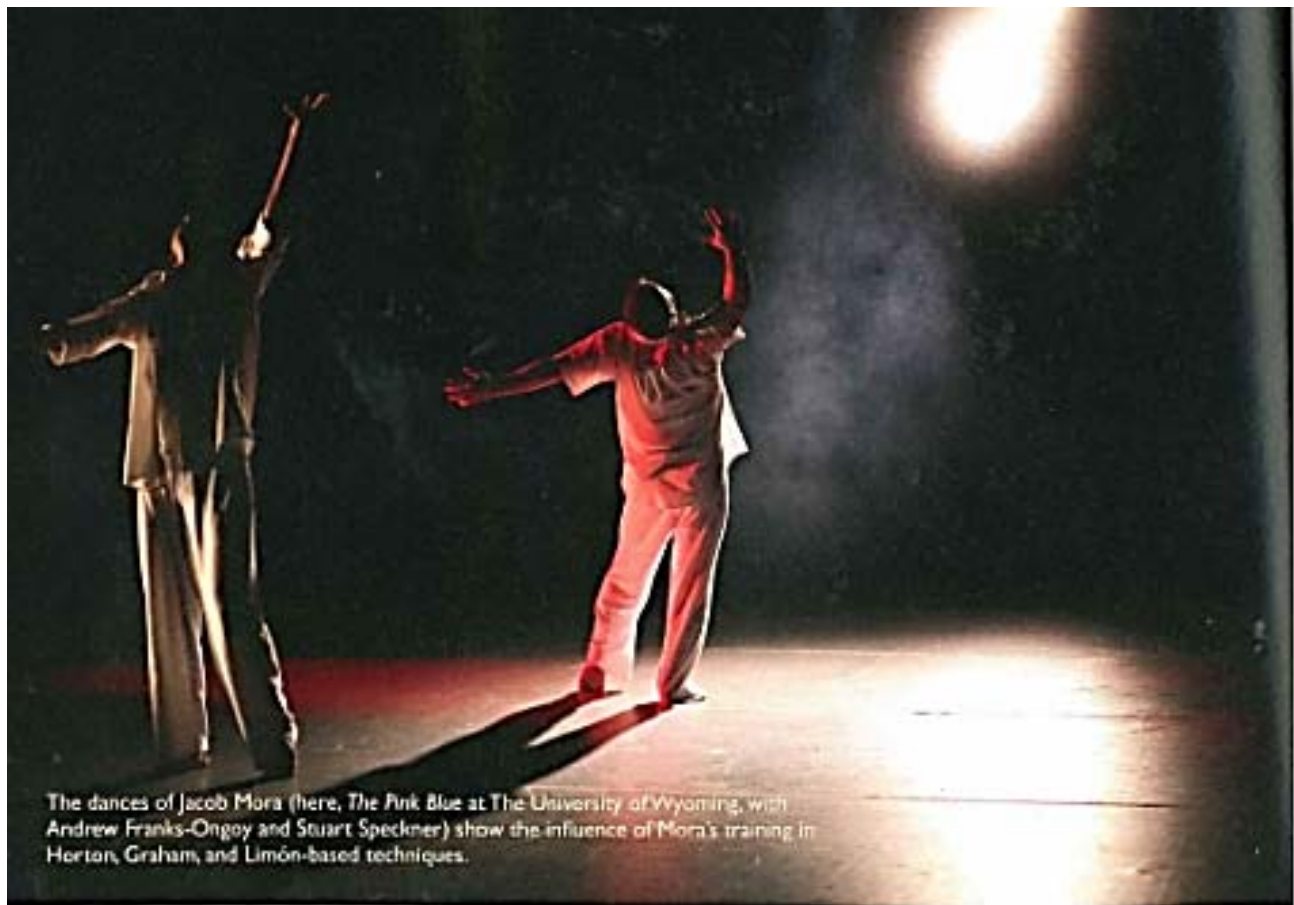
Modern dance today

Like all art forms, modern dance has evolved since its inception. Since the emergence of postmodern dance in the 1960s, many new forms of modern (or the looser term "contemporary") dance technique and performance have arisen, from contact improvisation (see page 74) to Gaga (see page 46). But at the heart of modern dance is the impulse to explore and expand the possibilities of expression through movement.

Linda Mensch, artistic director of The Moving Company Modern Dance Center in Warwick, New York, says people often misunderstand what she does at her school, which also offers classes in ballet and jazz. "Some people think we just put music on and tell people to do whatever they want," she says. She finds herself explaining that there *is* technique and what kinds of techniques there are.

This is it.' " Mora began studying Horton, Limón-based techniques, and Graham, and saw as much of this kind of





The dances of Jacob Mora (here, *The Pink Blue* at The University of Wyoming, with Andrew Franks-Ongoy and Stuart Speckner) show the influence of Mora's training in Horton, Graham, and Limón-based techniques.

dance as he could.

Mora went on to perform with Hannah Kahn Dance Company and Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble; since 2005 he has directed his own company, Moraporvida Contemporary Dance. He teaches modern dance nationally and internationally, including at Sweatshop, a pre-professional dance academy in Denver; the Horton-oriented Cleo Parker Robinson Dance School, also in Denver; and several universities.

Exposing students to modern dance through live performances or videos, suggests Mora, may open up a new world for them, as it did for him.

Importance of foundational techniques

The theories and techniques developed by choreographers like Graham, Cunningham, Limón, and Horton formed the basis for modern dance as we know it today. There are good reasons to pass along the principles these legendary figures developed. "People like Mr. Horton and Martha Graham spent a lot of time figuring out how efficiently and how beautifully bodies can move," says Ana Marie Forsythe, a master Horton teacher who has taught at The

Ailey School since the 1970s, and who runs the Horton training program there.

Foundational training in a codified technique can give dancers a systematic set of knowledge that can help prevent injuries. "Dancers know how their body is working when it's been trained in a specific way, whether it's Horton or Graham or ballet; their bodies have been instructed in how to move carefully, effectively," Forsythe says. "These dancers will have long careers because they have studied these techniques that give them that kind of power—longer than dancers who don't have strong backgrounds."

And, says Forsythe, Lester Horton focused on creating a technique that would produce versatile dancers. "He wanted to see how many ways the body could move. Can it be upside down, turn sideways, jump in the air, and fall on the floor?" Horton training "doesn't stamp people as Horton dancers; it gives them the deep background of vocabulary and intelligence about how the body works that benefits them" no matter what style of dance they do, she says.

Dawn Marie Bazemore trained at Dance Theatre of Harlem, The Ailey School, and Joffrey Ballet School, and

At the heart of modern dance is the impulse to explore and expand the possibilities of expression through movement.



Choreographer Jacob Mora emphasizes the necessity of diverse training for serious students.

danced with Philadanco and in musical theater. A fall 2014 artist in residence at Virginia Commonwealth University, she also teaches ballet and Horton technique at Wayne Ballet & Center for Dance Arts in Wayne, Pennsylvania, and at Berk's Ballet Theatre Conservatory of Dance, in Reading. Bazemore agrees that techniques like Graham and Horton are designed to build efficient, functional, strong, and versatile bodies. She believes the knowledge young dancers absorb in foundational study is especially important. "These young bodies are still figuring out what they're going to do, and they're still changing—so we're giving them information that is safe and helpful," she says.

Forsythe believes there are other reasons Horton can be particularly appealing to young dancers. "The technique has incredibly clean and clear lines," she says. "There's no ambiguity in it, and that's refreshing for young students. It's either right or wrong. That's one of the things that make the technique so accessible to young dancers in training."

Mensch began offering a pure Graham technique class at her school when she discovered that a parent in a Mommy and Me class, Aimee Phelan-Deconinck, had studied and performed with Martha Graham Dance Company. Mensch hired her, and Phelan-Deconinck's open class has proved to be a hit with young students. "The kids love it," Mensch says. "They like the way it feels. I was actually very surprised. It's not 'fun.' But they feel very dancerly. They walk out very tall when they're finished. It's so deep—deep in the muscles."

Unlike Horton, Graham, and Cunningham techniques, the technique and principles developed by José Limón are less a codified set of exercises than an approach to movement, says Becky Brown, program manager at the Limón School. Brown, who also teaches Limón technique at The Ailey School and Ballet Hispanico, says Limón and Doris Humphrey, his teacher and mentor, were engaged in an ongoing exploration of "fall and recovery; suspension;

succession—one thing moving after the other; the idea of tension and how we use that; how we resist gravity and how we allow it to influence us."

A guiding tenet in Humphrey/Limón technique is that, as Brown puts it, "we focus on being human beings first and dancers second. We use our experience of being a human being to train our bodies to express ourselves and to communicate. We deal with our humanity, with our successes and our failures; we fall and we recover. The idea of ideas opposing in your brain: how can you find that in your body? That goes into the technique."

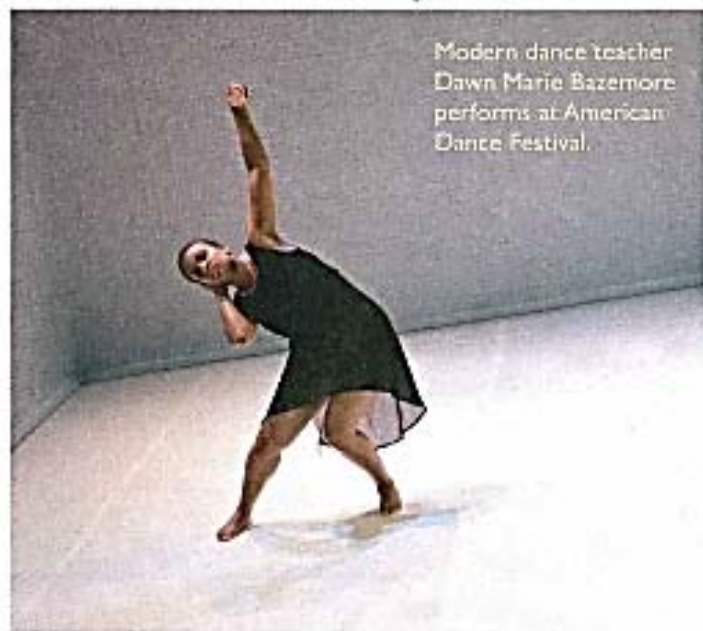
This, she thinks, can be especially fertile ground for young dancers who are finding their voice and their place in the world. Furthermore, the Humphrey/Limón approach forms an open-ended yet defined platform that teachers can use to teach important movement concepts. Limón principles—movement ideas and qualities that are familiar to most people (think about swinging from a rope, or bouncing a ball)—form a sound and accessible basis on which to build a good general modern dance class for dancers of all ages.

Where to study

Whether you're looking for deep knowledge of a codified modern technique, or ideas for your general modern classes, teacher workshops abound.

The Martha Graham School offers a full range of programs, including a one-year teacher training program. The summer and winter intensives offer immersive experiences in technique and repertory.

Merce Cunningham Trust offers technique classes in New York City and workshops nationally and internationally. The Limón Institute offers ongoing technique classes, two separate nine-month Professional Studies Programs, two annual intensives, and two-week teacher training



Modern dance teacher Dawn Marie Bazemore performs at American Dance Festival.

“We use our experience of being a human being to train our bodies to express ourselves and to communicate.” —Becky Brown

workshops held in New York City and elsewhere. The Ailey School, in addition to open classes and other programs and intensives, offers a Horton pedagogy workshop annually, taught by Forsythe.

Most teacher training workshops enable teachers to incorporate at least some of the material into their classes. “Teachers who take my Horton pedagogy workshop who don’t feel prepared to teach a whole Horton class will take some of the studies they’ve learned that they think are particularly useful for their students,” Forsythe says.

Limón summer teacher training workshops focus on “articulating the principles we work with and providing ways for teachers to incorporate them into their own work,” says Brown. “At the end of one two-week workshop, they’re not going to be a Limón teacher; that’s not the aim of the program.” Teachers come away with a working knowledge of the technique, and “information about its history and its context in the modern dance family tree,” she says. The Limón Institute does offer other resources that allow teachers to bring Limón technique into their classrooms on a deeper level: the Professional Studies Programs, repertory workshops, and advanced teaching workshops.

What to teach, and how

Most teachers agree that it’s important to tell students where the concepts and exercises they’re learning come from. “Don’t use something from one of these foundational modern dance techniques, call it contemporary, and not tell students where it came from,” says Forsythe. “If you’re

going to evolve a technique, you have the responsibility to inform your students where it evolved from.”

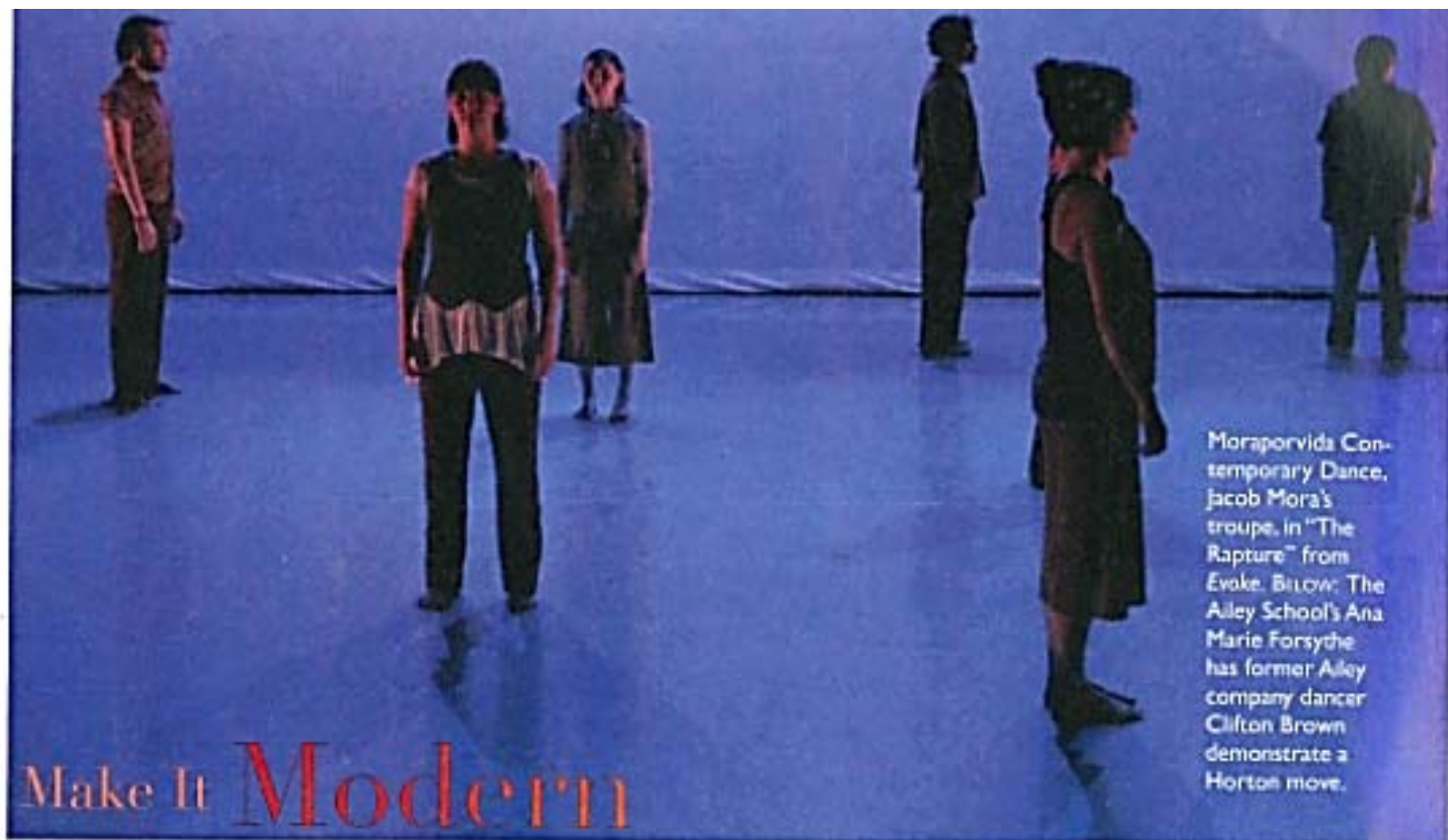
Bazemore concurs that recognizing sources not only confers respect but deepens understanding. “I always say, ‘This is information that I got from Ms. Forsythe, or from [celebrated Horton teacher] Milton Myers,’” she says. “When I’m teaching a Horton class I always have Ms. Forsythe’s book; I’ll say, ‘Come look at the pictures. This is where we’re coming from. This is what we’re working toward.’”

Mora was surprised to find that many college students don’t know enough about what’s going on in the dance world—what dance companies are doing or where they come from—to know where they want their careers to go. “Once in a while you have to talk historically,” he says. Using a list he devised called “10 to Know,” he assigns students to learn about a company “and we have a dialogue about it,” he says. “I do this even in studio settings.”

The most important movement principles he brings into the classroom are, he says, “change of weight, undercurves and overcurves, contraction. I subscribe to a lot of Horton principles, so flat backs and laterals are important. The Limón dynamics: fall and recovery, release, swings, rebounds.” Mora combines these ideas but is careful to explain what students are learning. “I say, ‘Now let’s talk about what you are really doing. This is a release swing. This comes out of this technique. You can contract in this technique and in this technique. Let’s talk about the idea that there is a difference between a Graham contraction

(continued on page 97)





Moraporvida Contemporary Dance, Jacob Mora's troupe, in "The Rapture" from *Evoke*. Below: The Ailey School's Ana Marie Forsythe has former Ailey company dancer Clifton Brown demonstrate a Horton move.

Make It Modern

(continued from page 64)

and a Horton contraction and a Cunningham curve and a Limón curve."

Forsythe advocates incorporating a Horton warm-up into a general modern dance class, an approach Bazemore also uses in her contemporary classes at VCU. "I designed a class that was based on concepts from the Horton and Graham techniques, concepts that I felt were beneficial to me in my professional career. I start with a series of Horton flat backs because Horton is so good for strength and for understanding how to use your body in a way that utilizes that strength." She also brings in Graham principles: "the use of spiral in helping you to stand up on two feet or on one leg, contractions, release, learning how to manipulate the spine, and understanding that it comes from the pelvis. Then we work on more contemporary movement phrases; I'll throw in those [Graham and Horton] ideas while we're doing that."

For Brown, the fundamental Limón principles are useful in any classroom. "The elements of breath and gravity, those are key—playing with the weight of the body parts." And, she adds, "I would encourage teachers to convey the Limón movement philosophy that there is no right or wrong—just possibilities."

Being open to other forms in and outside of the classroom is also important. "Given what people ask of dancers, you have to be diverse," Mora says. "Some competition kids have no idea what these foundational techniques are, and they need to learn this as a language. Then you have people who are immersed in Horton or Limón, and they need to take hip-hop or jazz classes." Mora some-

times has his students do contact improvisation, telling them, "We're not going to do it every class, but we're going to do it, and we're going to talk about it. And we're going to keep using aspects of it."

Bazemore also suggests that dancers, "in conjunction with studying these codified techniques, take a class that deals more somatically or deals with release technique as a way of moving. That way you have all the information inside of you, and you're able to do whatever is asked of you. That's the goal." ■

