

Hooked on Horton



Ana Marie Forsythe on Lester Horton's legacy and
the need for codified modern dance

By Eliza Randolph

Ana Marie Forsythe still remembers her first Horton technique class, in the late 1950s at the Newark Ballet Academy. Former Horton dancer Joyce Trisler came, at Fred Danieli's invitation, to teach class to his students, who Danieli felt needed to be more versatile dancers. Forsythe was wowed by Trisler—and by what she taught.

"She would come once or twice a week to teach us this Horton technique. No one had any idea what it was at that time—about 1957 or '58," Forsythe says.

That first class is still vivid in her memory. "I walked this tall, beautiful woman, with incredibly long legs and gorgeous feet," she continues. "And she had a personality to go with

that beautiful body, that talent. And I realized, 'This is like all the discipline of ballet, and instead of doing a pirouette upright, I can turn upside down! I can jump sideways in the air and land on the floor.' " I remember being absolutely captivated from the very beginning. And here it is, more than 50 years later, and I'm still captivated by the technique."

Photo by Eduardo Patino

Photo by Marchetti

That technique was developed by California-based dancer, choreographer, and teacher Lester Horton during the 1930s and '40s. He developed his technique—which shows traces of his study of Native American, Japanese, Javanese, and Balinese dance, well as ballet, plus his brief interaction with the Denishawn company—not as a particular philosophy of movement but as a way to correct physical faults and build versatile dancers.

Forsythe has dedicated herself to teaching and preserving the technique, which informs the aesthetic of many beloved companies in the United States, including Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (Ailey himself studied with Horton), Philadanco, and Dallas Black Dance Theater. In the early 1990s Forsythe, who is chair of the Horton department at The Ailey School, co-wrote, with Marjorie B. Percus and Cheryl Bell, a definitive guide to the codified technique, *Dance Technique of Lester Horton*. Forsythe has taught at The Ailey School since the 1970s, and each summer she offers a Horton Pedagogy Workshop there.

A hallmark of Horton technique, says Forsythe, is its accessibility "to every kind of body. It was not designed on a specific body type, so you can successfully do Horton technique even if you have short legs, or if you don't have really high extensions or that much turnout. And it enables people to move in a way that increases their flexibility, so that they do end up getting high legs, and they do improve their turnout and their facility."

Forsythe has taught Horton to all types of dancers—children, professionals, and adults who simply love to take class. "It is always successful," she says. "It's always satisfying to people, because there's a progression about it that's very special. The warm-up is very centering. You start moving right away, rolling down, rolling up, flat backs, laterals, in all kinds of dimensions. And it warms the body up

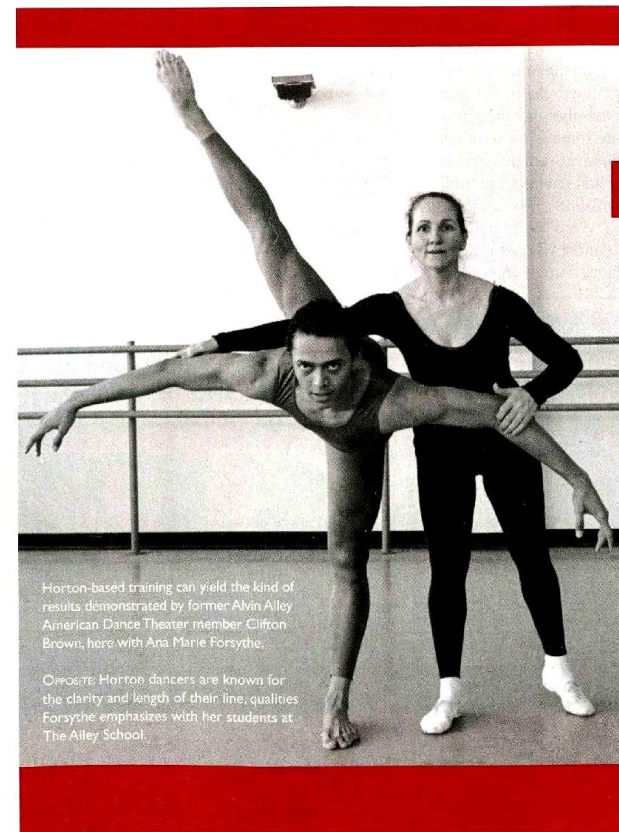
easily and without too much stress.

"Horton was trying to create a technique that was anatomically corrective," she continues. He sought to train dancers not for a particular aesthetic result, but for strength, flexibility, and avoiding injury. For example, Forsythe says, Horton "devised this idea of working one fully turned out leg against a parallel leg. So, you were only working one leg turned out to its max, without having two legs turned out and putting stress on the body."

She describes the technique's approach to falls as another exemplar of his philosophy. Horton dancers can

fall dramatically, in any direction. But each fall is carefully designed, considering such aspects, she says, as "what part of the body is supporting this fall? How are you lowering the body? Are you using your quadriceps, your gluteus maximus; are you using an oppositional pull? How are you getting the body down to the floor so that it looks exciting but is also safe?"

Forsythe thinks people can tell a Horton dancer when they see one, by several subtle signs. "I think there's a clarity of line," she says. "I think they have very supple backs, very high extensions. They connect movement in a certain way. I think there's a depth



Horton-based training can yield the kind of results demonstrated by former Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater member Clifton Brown, here with Ana Marie Forsythe.

OPPOSITE: Horton dancers are known for the clarity and length of their line, qualities Forsythe emphasizes with her students at The Ailey School.

to the way they move that is different from some of the other techniques." Elaborating on the idea of line, she says, "One of [Horton's] favorite words was 'attenuation'—to pull something out to its thinnest. And I love that definition. Because that's what you're doing—you're elongating your line in every possible direction."

When discussing best practices for teaching Horton technique, Forsythe has some straightforward advice. "It's important not to get too percussive," she says. "It's basically a lyrical technique. A lot of jazz teachers do use the Horton warm-up, so it takes on a dynamic quality that's not always what Horton intended."

"The other thing I would say is that the fortification and balance studies he created are beautiful to look at, and they do have a performance quality to them. But teachers need to remember that they need to incorporate some of those designs, some of those movements into combinations so that dancers can understand about transitions," Forsythe says.

"What you're trying to do is train a dancer who can do any kind of dance. And if you only teach the

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studies, if you always do it exactly the same way in every class, then the students don't get the opportunity to experiment, to experience a lateral T coming from another direction."

In an era when modern-dance classes are becoming increasingly eclectic, or in some cases replaced by the broader term "contemporary," Forsythe insists on the importance of accuracy and specificity when teaching codified techniques. "I've had students who say, 'I've never studied

Horton,' " she says, "and then I'll be teaching something and they'll say, 'Oh, I did that!' No one told them what they were learning. And that's a real problem; it upsets me."

She is rigorous about maintaining the integrity of codified techniques and providing context for the exercises used in class. "When a student asks me a question like, 'Is that a tilt?' I say, 'Wait a minute. A tilt is a specific movement in the Graham technique. So don't use that here.' You have to use the terminology of the technique you're studying."

"If you're going to teach a Horton class," she continues, "then teach it as accurately as you possibly can. And if you deviate from that, that's OK. Just be fair and say to your students, 'This is not a Horton study; this is my own information.' I think it's important that dance students know what they're learning. They pay money, they work hard at their craft, and they deserve to have that kind of information given to them."

In considering growth and change in the dance field over time, Forsythe champions the importance and relevance of the codified techniques. "Let's not lump it all together and call it 'contemporary,' " she says. "I don't really approve of that." She takes heart from having recently received the Balasaraswati/Joy Ann Dewey Beinecke Endowed Chair for Distinguished Teaching from the American Dance Festival, a testament to the value of her contributions to the field.

"I don't know what's going to happen to modern dance," she says. "I think these pioneers like Martha Graham and Lester Horton, Cunningham, Limón worked really hard to build a codified technique. And maybe we need the next generation to build a different kind of codified technique."

For her part, Forsythe remains dedicated to Horton technique and what it has to offer. "If it's taught properly," she says, "it really does open up a whole new world." ♦