



Letting the Joy In

By Nancy Wozny

Lynn Simonson, shown here teaching in Bruges, Belgium, in 1978, developed a body-conscious jazz technique that has had a huge influence on the teaching field.

How Lynn Simonson found her jazz groove

LYNN SIMONSON CAN IDENTIFY THE EXACT MOMENT SHE FELL IN LOVE WITH JAZZ DANCE:

As a teenager, she danced around the room to Miles Davis' famous album, *Kind of Blue*. "I think I was wearing my pointe shoes at the time," says Simonson, the creator of the Simonson Technique and co-founder of Dance New Amsterdam (DNA) in New York City. "The music struck an immediate chord with me."

Now 65 and retired from studio ownership, she stays on as an advisor and continues to offer the Simonson Technique Teaching Training Certification Course, now going on its 25th year at DNA. Simonson can boast a slew of impressive professional credits, including co-founding the eclectic troupe Dance Theatre Collection, but it's her body-focused technique and teacher-training program that she considers her legacy to jazz dance education. Simonson Technique sets the standard for somatic-based dance technique across the modern/jazz board.

The core teaching values of Simonson Technique are straightforward:

- Each dancer is an individual and can learn to work and dance safely within his or her own bodily limitations.
- A dance class is a humane environment where the teacher knows the name and any past injuries of each student. Time is allocated in the first few moments to access any special needs.
- Teachers must have comprehensive anatomical knowledge that can prevent future injuries.
- Precise, well-timed verbal cueing and clear demonstration accommodate a broad style of learners. Simonson Technique teachers use language very effectively to help dancers understand a combination or exercise.
- Combinations set to jazz music, at tempos appropriate to the level, provide the core of a dance class.

All of these tenets derive directly from Simonson's experiences as a dancer, choreographer, and teacher of nearly 50 years.

Simonson grew up in Seattle, in a family of professional classical musicians, and she admits, "I was the rebel when I went into jazz." When she and her mother, Louise Simonson, started taking ballet classes together at the school of former Ballet Russe dancers Marian and Illaria Ladré, she was 8 and her mother, 30.

Eventually her mother opened her own studio and Simonson started her teaching career at age 13, with pre-ballet. She was teaching ballet by age 16 and remembers how intuitive it was for her. "I knew not to push turnout, but I didn't know *how* I knew that," says Simonson. "I had a dream of joining the Ballet Russe but it folded by the time I was ready; I was given such a passion for dance history by my teachers. It's so important to honor where you came from."

Her work in Equity summer stock musicals in Seattle in the early 1960s immersed her in yet another language for dance. "Classical ballet is such a tunnel-vision world," Simonson says. "Doing musical theater opened my life; it's where I first heard jazz music."

Simonson moved to New York when she was 18. "I was lucky to arrive in New York with my Equity card and 10 musicals under my belt," she recalls. "So many people came with no performing experience." She remembers what fun it was to learn "Steam Heat" from *Pajama Game*, which she first performed in Equity summer stock in Seattle. "It was so joyful," she says.

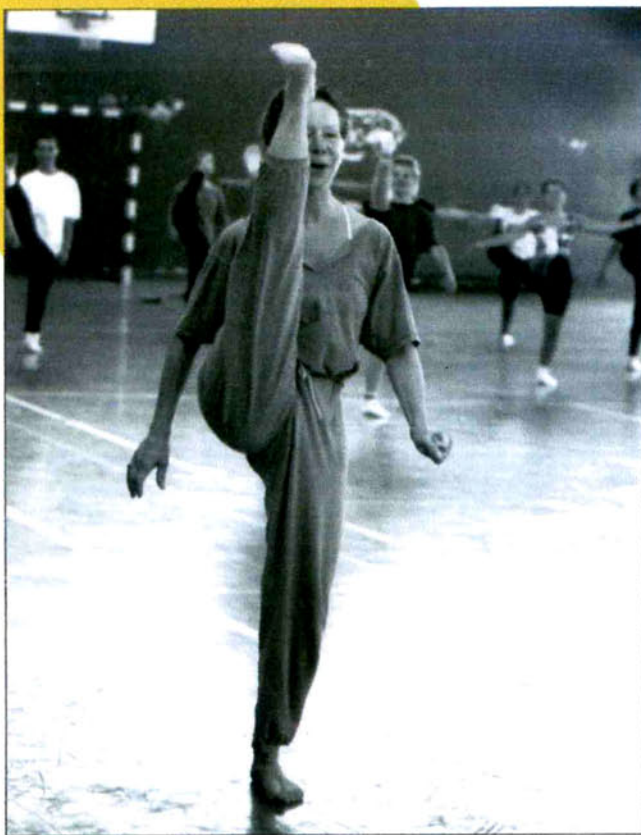
Connecting to the feeling of joy remains a central tenant in her technique. Within a short time Simonson got a job dancing in the ballet corps for Radio City Music Hall. With four shows a day, seven days a week, she learned a lot about the importance of taking care of one's body, another central theme in her method. Although she was a strong ballet dancer, her hyperextended knees were sometimes an issue for the body-conscious dancer. "Once I looked in the mirror, I noticed how far back my knees curved. I hated being so freaky," she remembers. "That look in the mirror saved my life." Becoming aware of one's own unique anatomy is a must for any dancer, she contends.

In the mid-1960s, she took her first jazz class with Luigi and her mind opened to a new world. "It was such an exciting time to be studying jazz; we had Broadway dancers in class, and live music," she says. "For me, Luigi was all about the music; he would choreograph by singing the steps and adding another layer over the music." It's no surprise that careful attention to both the style and rhythmic structure of music is another central ingredient in the Simonson method.

The eager young dancer was also studying with such jazz dance notables as Betsy Haug, Claude Thompson, Fred Benjamin, and Jaime Rogers. "In Jaime's class you

'I used to be such a snob and thought I would never be one of those bare-feet people. Although in musical theater you danced in heels, I have always preferred the modern side of staying shoeless.'

—Lynn Simonson



danced with an earthy quality, while Luigi made a lady out of me," she says. During this time she was often baffled at why her teachers couldn't remember her name after she'd been in class for a month. "Once I even wore a T-shirt with my name on it," she says. That experience stayed with her: No student is invisible in Simonson classes.

Simonson found dancing in bare feet a revelation. "I used to be such a snob and thought I would never be one of those bare-feet people," she says. "Although in musical theater you danced in heels, I have always preferred the modern side of staying shoeless." She also became highly aware of the specifics of each jazz dance style. In her technique no single style dominates, which is unusual in the history of style-dependent jazz dance. Since it is less dependent on idiosyncratic movements, dancers can slip easily from one style to another. "Dancers should be prepared to adapt to many styles," Simonson says.

Simonson returned to Seattle after a year in New York, at 19, excited about sharing all that she had learned in New York, and enthusiastically jumped into teaching jazz. (Ann Reinking, one of her students, learned her first shoulder roll from Simonson.) The young teacher found herself deeply engaged in her classes. "I was always questioning the best way to teach something. I had that kind of mind."

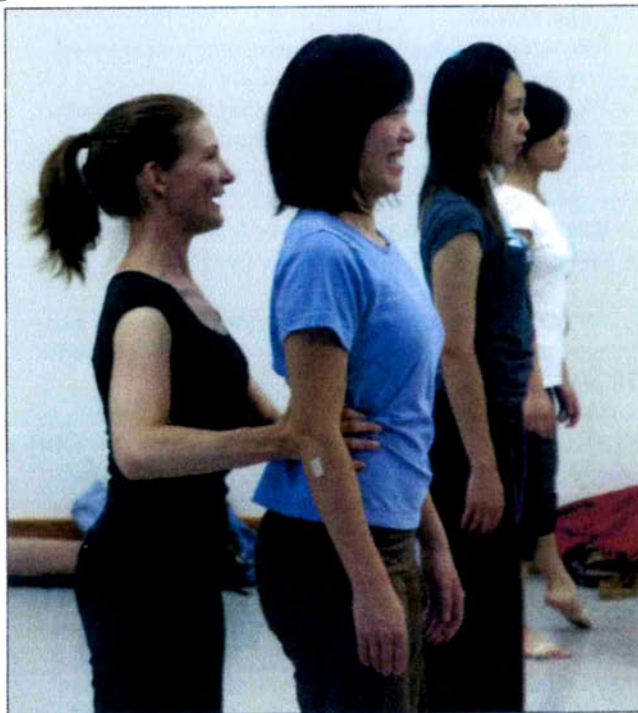
Shortly after returning to New York the following fall Simonson dislocated her knee. She was lucky to get treated

by Dr. Richard Bachrach, The Joffrey Ballet's staff physician at the time and one of only a few dance specialists in New York. "What an amazing experience to find the right doctor. After that, I wanted to know all about the body. I was intrigued when my injured knee actually got stronger after doing the rehab exercises. That injury provided an incredible lesson for me," says Simonson, who then began learning anatomy on her own. "There are no accidents."

During the 1960s, Simonson supported herself through jobs at Radio City Music Hall, Latin Fire Folies, go-go dancing in New Jersey clubs, touring shows of *Brigadoon* and *West Side Story*, and a string of other jobs, including television specials and an off-Broadway show.

In 1967 Simonson moved to Amsterdam, The Netherlands, to teach and perform for a former New York classmate, Helen LeClerc (whom some people called the "mother of jazz dance in Amsterdam"). It was there that the roots of Simonson Technique emerged, in its creator's teaching of recreational dance to adult beginners. She had to figure out a way for mature dancers to move safely. "That's when my mind really began to work. I started working in parallel, and waiting longer to get to grand pliés. Things starting falling into place," she says. "If you can teach beginners, you can teach anyone."

During the next year she organized her own summer course for recreational adult students, and her European



TOP: Simonson's lifelong body awareness has kept her mobile, as this 1996 photo of her teaching in France proves. ABOVE: Andrea Downie works with students in an intermediate-level Simonson Technique class at the Shadbolt Centre for the Arts near Vancouver, BC.

Top photo courtesy Dance New Amsterdam; bottom photo by Doug Marks



During Simonson's time in Europe, the components of her technique fell into place. In this 1977 photo she was teaching in Bruges, Belgium.

teaching career took off. Between 1969 and 1976 she taught jazz for the Internationale Sommerakademie des Tanzes (International Summer Academy of Dances) in Cologne, Germany, and studied with such renowned masters as Donald McKayle, Glen Tetley, Antony Tudor, and Hans van Manen. "I took as many classes as I could," she remembers. "I taught alongside those notables and took their classes during the course. We taught together for years."

Early on, Simonson noticed that she had a keen eye for her fellow students' idiosyncrasies. "I would notice if one shoulder was higher than the other and how that affected their traps," she says. "I had X-ray vision." Learning how to access a student's alignment accurately and quickly is part of the training process for teachers.

By 1977 the components of her technique had fallen into place and she was ready to take the next step: training teachers in her method. With the help and support of Jacqueline Lemieux, a respected teacher in Canada, Simonson presented her first teacher-training class in Sherbrooke, Quebec. "I had carte blanche to develop a two-week program with four to five hours a day—two hours of technique class and the rest teaching principles," says Simonson. "I think Jacqueline was the first person in Quebec to organize an open course for those who wanted to teach jazz."

Each June and October, Simonson heads to New

York City to conduct her 36-hour teacher training workshops. Each group is limited to six students, so each gets ample time to practice teaching. In picking the students, Simonson looks for prospects who are at least intermediate-level dancers and who are truly interested in developing as teachers; she's less concerned that they want to teach the Simonson Technique. "I want teachers to leave as clear communicators," she says. "My training is also applicable to teaching yoga, Pilates, and modern dance."

Applicants must attend 12 anatomy awareness classes before receiving their certification and must be familiar with the Simonson Technique. (Classes are available at DNA.) She teaches a separate training session just for international students. Because language is so specific in a Simonson class, she prefers to run separate groups.

Teachers learn the basic format of her two-hour class,

'I want teachers to leave as clear communicators. My training is also applicable to teaching yoga, Pilates, and modern dance.'

—Lynn Simonson



Lynn Simonson (left) with former student Andrea Downie, who says she found her teacher's work "inspiring and life-changing."

which includes progressions, practice teaching, issues with the use of music, choreographing combinations, and anatomy for dance teachers. She focuses on central concepts such as turnout; foot, knee, and hip placement; and ways to recognize over-taxed muscles and ligaments. Simonson realizes that anatomy is a lifelong pursuit; her training is designed to get teachers on a learning path. Participants take turns giving lessons and getting feedback from Simonson and other teachers. "It's a very intense process," she says.

A Simonson class consists of a fixed sequence of exercises that are designed to progressively warm up the body. The first 10 minutes are used for stretching, culminating in a circulation stretch that concentrates on large muscle groups. Next come muscle toning and strengthening exercises: pliés, tendus, développés, and—in more advanced levels—an adagio. Floor work for deeper stretching and abdominal work precedes isolations, movements across the floor, and grands battements. Placement and alignment take a high priority. The actual exercises can vary and Simonson encourages her teachers to be creative and find their own voice.

Creating a welcoming learning environment is a high priority. Besides learning each student's name and any history of injuries, a Simonson teacher is also expected to maintain a tempo appropriate to the class and to position the students with sufficient surrounding space so that each can be seen; there's no hiding in a Simonson class. The orientation often varies as well (the "front" could be the back of the room), and the teacher walks through the room instead of planting herself in front of the group. Corrections are positively framed and appropriate to a student's level.

Simonson stresses using verbal cueing to guide the students through each exercise, which is usually performed three or four times. "A teacher's voice is so important," she says. "We all learn differently; some visually, while others learn through listening." Redundancy, allowing for multiple channels of learning, is embedded into the method.

With each repetition the amount of cueing decreases, so that by the fourth round, the students are dancing fully without verbal direction.

A half-hour is dedicated to the combination, which is set to blues, gospel, Afro-Cuban, and other jazz music. Teaching level-appropriate combinations is key to the training process. Finding appropriate music in a tempo to match the level is also discussed. During the training process teachers bring in music samples to try out. Teachers also learn drumming, a skill Simonson finds essential in developing rhythmic sense.

Although the structure of a Simonson class remains the same, teachers learn how to vary the level of difficulty accordingly. "Each teacher approaches my work in a different way," she says. "The structure allows for teachers to develop clear and distinct voices with a set format."

Andrea Downie, 36, from Vancouver, Canada, first encountered Simonson's teaching 18 years ago at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival. Downie teaches at the Shadbolt Centre for the Arts in Burnaby and is pursuing a master's degree in dance at York University in Toronto. "I found her work inspiring and life-changing," Downie says. When she met Simonson, she had been told to consider another career because of knee injuries. "Lynn offered me hope," says Downie, who is still dancing and teaching. "She taught me how to work safely with my own knees," and how to avoid pain and prevent further damage. Impressed with Simonson's methods, Downie went on to take the teacher training, which she recommends for teachers of all dance genres. "That's the beauty of this technique. It really addresses that each student is an individual," she says. "There's no fitting a dancer into a mold."

Teacher, dancer, and choreographer Diane McCarthy has been teaching Simonson Technique for 20 years at DNA, in addition to classes at the Mark Morris Dance School in Brooklyn and Bates College in Lewiston, Maine. McCarthy believes that the technique has helped to preserve her body. "The warm-up is a slow, integrated approach to getting the body ready to dance," she says, "by isolating internal and external body parts, stabilizing joints and strengthening muscles, methodically covering classical exercises needed for articulation of legs and feet, and slowly adding torso movement with spinal flexion and extension." McCarthy, 47, also appreciates the constant give and take between teacher and students that is the hallmark of a Simonson class.

Today, Simonson is back in the Seattle area, enjoying the freedom of being a guest teacher. She has no plans to make a video—"I can't see who's watching it," she quips—or write a book. "I'm excited by watching how people learn." She continues to refine her technique with each group of new teachers she encounters. "Dance is for everyone; it's inclusive, not exclusive," she says. "Our job is to let the joy in." ♦

MODERNspotlight

A REJUVENATING STYLE
OF MODERN MEETS JAZZ

Soothing Simonson Technique

By Emily Macel

Bodies swooping into arcing releases, arms swinging effortlessly, a flow of windy S-shapes mixed with angular, percussive pauses. You'll find plenty of these moves in the Simonson Technique, and the high-energy classes associated with it are gentle on your body and rejuvenating for your soul. At its core, Simonson focuses on body alignment and awareness of anatomy. Aesthetically, it's a mix of modern and jazz techniques, inspired by ballet, contemporary and Broadway dance styles—with yoga and pilates moves incorporated, too! Put it all together and you get a sweeping fluidity blended with spine and rib articulations that can make your body feel relaxed and invigorated simultaneously.

Emily Herrold, a freshman in the dance program at the State University of New York at Purchase, began taking Simonson classes regularly after a teacher at The Spence School in NYC recommended the style. After just one session, she was hooked. "Simonson teaches you how to move in a safe way, and it engages your core," she says. "It's so helpful because all of these elements are important in many other styles."

Clearly, Simonson encompasses a wide-range of movement, but what makes it different from any other modern or jazz class? For one thing, many modern techniques—Limón, Graham, Cunningham—were formed to further one choreographer's personal style. In contrast, Simonson is a technique *by dancers for dancers*, created by former dancer Lynn Simonson, and later taught by

her performing colleagues. Unlike classes that focus on achieving a choreographer's aesthetic, Simonson classes are structured carefully to warm up the entire body to help performers align their bodies, feel healthy and steady—and even heal from injuries.

Elisa Clark, a former ballerina and now a dancer with Mark Morris Dance Group, started taking Simonson Technique classes 13 years ago for these reasons. "I like that the class is simple but thorough at the same time," she says. "Everything happens in the right order and you feel like you're warming up from the inside out."

Diane McCarthy, a Simonson teacher for 21 years who trained in ballet, Limón and Graham, adds, "With Graham, there's a shape vocabulary. Limón has that dynamic flow. Cunningham is linear. But with Simonson, there's not a vocabulary in that sense. It's more of an awareness. It's a great preparation for other techniques."

Once learned, Simonson can help students in other classes, too. Simonson says students should try to ask themselves questions like, "Is this right for me or harmful to me?" and "Can I adapt it in any way?" in *all* classes. "In Simonson, you learn to recognize not only the mechanics but how the mechanics feel," she says. "So many dancers learn from the outside, externally. But once you learn from the inside, you can understand dance in a deeper and more personal way."

THE ROOTS OF SIMONSON TECHNIQUE

Simonson grew up studying ballet in Seattle, WA, and by 16 she was performing in musicals, too. At 18, she moved to the Big Apple to pursue both ballet and musical theater. She studied with the American Ballet Theatre and took jazz dance classes, but during her second year in NYC, she injured her knee in a class. "That was a turning point in my life," she says. However the accident opened up a new world for Simonson. Her physical therapy inspired her to seek new training methods: "I started to study anatomy, and I was taken over by the idea."

She put that idea of creating a technique ruled by anatomy instead of just style into practice when she was invited to teach in Holland. Later, in the 1970s, Simonson

(Above, left to right) Students in Simonson classes at Dance New Amsterdam in NYC

ALL PHOTOS ELIE CHYUN



moved back to NYC. "I started to teach and my classes grew so quickly that I trained other people to teach my ideas." Some of these first teachers, including Lori Devito, Danny Pepitone and Michael Geiger, formed Dance Space Center in 1984 with Simonson. More than two decades later in 2006, Dance Space became Dance New Amsterdam, which is now a thriving branch of the NYC dance community. Simonson has since moved out of the area, but she's left a lasting impression that's being passed along at DNA, where the majority of Simonson Technique classes are taught. Though NYC is the epicenter of the Simonson universe, classes and workshops focused on the technique can be found throughout the world, given by instructors who have been certified to teach the style.

SIMONSON SESSIONS

Though Simonson classes are labeled Modern/Jazz on DNA's schedule, don't expect Martha Graham's modern or Fosse-style jazz. McCarthy says, "We try to get dancers out of bad habits like hyperextension." So, in many Simonson classes some dancers have to re-learn the basics, like standing in a true neutral position.

In all Simonson classes, students begin with a one-hour warmup. Dancers start with standing exercises that are ultra controlled, methodical, precise and slow—in a relaxing way! First, half head rolls to each side cover four counts; then, through contractions, the back is warmed up. Gentle leg stretches, pliés, tendus and développés are incorporated into the rest of the warmup, which alternates between exploring deep contractions, working in stretched arches and finding a neutral spine position. "I appreciate the long warmups," Emily says. "I have time to work on everything from extension to balancing to connecting with my body. It's very slow and precise so it forces you to pay attention to every single body part."

The second hour of the class is spent moving across the floor turning or jumping. Then, students learn a short phrase incorporating the swooping movements and controlled postures from the warmup. Although classes are structured similarly, each Simonson teacher has a different style, often expressed through music and vibe. Simonson explains, "Because many people are teaching Simonson, a student is able to move between classes and feel comfortable in the base, but still experience different movement qualities."

It seems like McCarthy—and the Simonson Technique—are fulfilling that very quality: "There's something about Simonson that if I have a week off of work, that's when I always sneak down into Diane's Simonson class," Clark says. "I get to move around. It balances my body—I feel warm and lengthened." **DS**

Emily McCarthy is a freelance editor for Dance Magazine, lives and writes in Washington, DC.

Get more dance, more often.

Sign up for our
FREE
bi-weekly
E-Newsletter.

- * Top fashion trends. Plus your Beauty & Style dilemmas solved.
- * Q&As with the hottest dancers on Broadway and TV.
- * Auditions. Follow your dreams!
- * Health & Wellness. Be your best self!

Keltie Colleen photographed by Erin Baiano

www.dancespirit.com