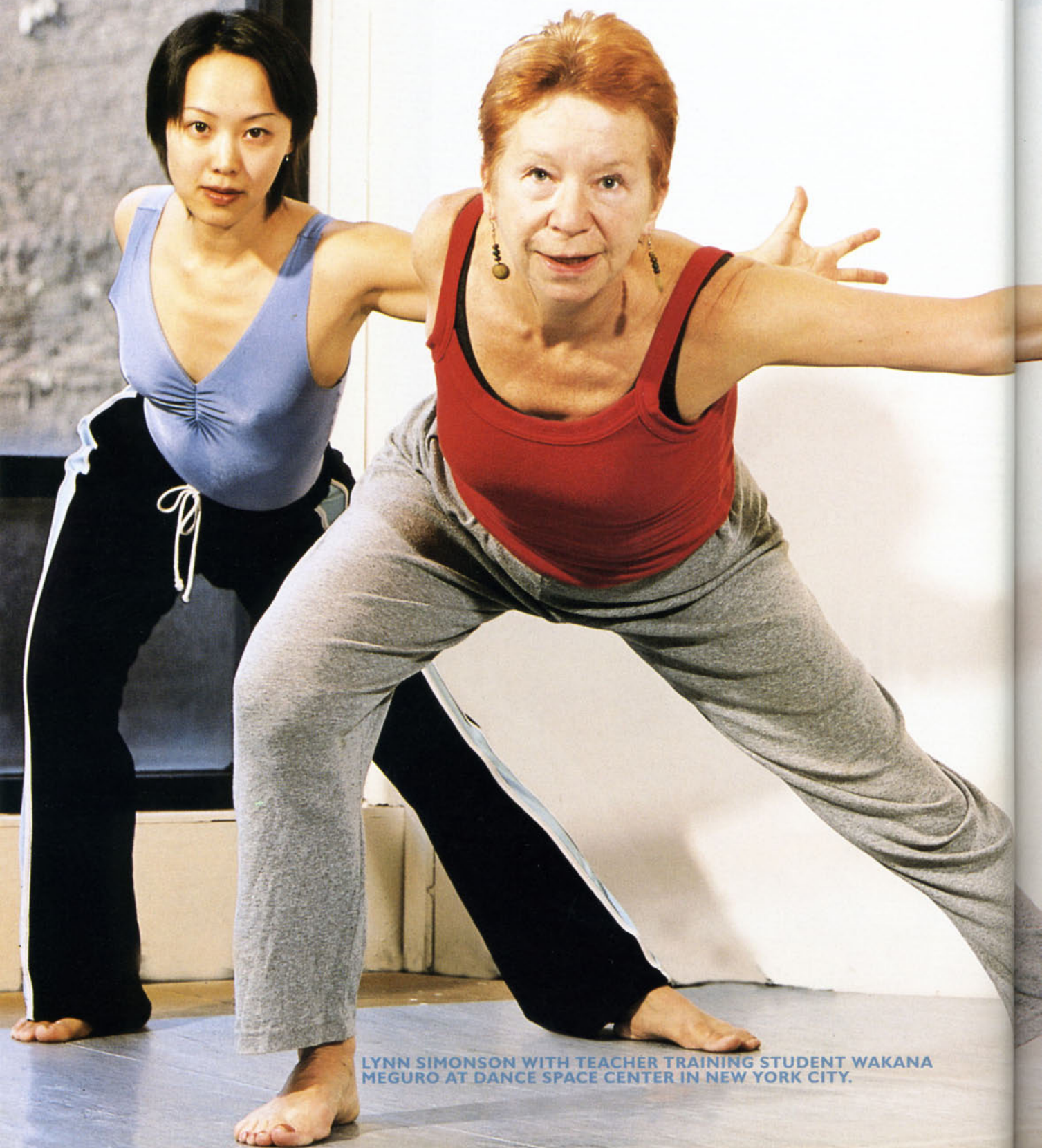


simonson



LYNN SIMONSON WITH TEACHER TRAINING STUDENT WAKANA MEGURO AT DANCE SPACE CENTER IN NEW YORK CITY.

SAVES

After sustaining injuries that curtailed her ballet career,

Lynn Simonson created a jazz dance technique based on anatomical principles that enables injury-free dancing.

By Susan Elia



"I never decided that there would be a 'Simonson Technique,' " says Lynn Simonson, a slender redhead with a pixie cut and an inquisitive glance. "But when you get farther down the road and look back at your life, you see that everything happens for a reason. There's a blessing in disguise for every injury—the blessing is that you learn about your own body. And that was the start of it all—an injury."

Simonson has been teaching the Simonson Jazz Technique, as it has come to be known, for more than 30 years and has trained teachers in 15 countries. The technique has four basic principles: that a dancer can dance injury free throughout her lifetime; that every student can be taught to dance; that the whole of the person is recognized; and that the rhythms, energy and styles of jazz music are the inspiration for movement.

A native of Seattle, Washington, Simonson started ballet training at age 9. Severely hyperextended, she dislocated her knee at 16. "It was forced turnout," she explains. "I didn't know what that meant to be hyperextended. 'Straighten your leg' to me meant push it back. I recuperated, but I dislocated it again when I came to New York."

Like so many others before her, Simonson had come to Manhattan at 18 "because I wanted to be a famous ballerina," she recalls with a self-deprecating smile. "I came to New York and my first job was in the ballet corps at Radio City Music Hall—four shows a day on pointe." The demands of the schedule were not kind to her knees. "I still kept getting injuries, but I was lucky enough to find a doctor who sat me down and explained to me what had happened: The years of hyperextending, plus all the shows, had weakened the ligaments behind my knee. Because of this discussion, I became fascinated with anatomy. I started reading anatomy books and learning about how and why things work. It's just been a continual process over my life to educate myself about the human body."

"After the last injury, I didn't go back to ballet," she continues. "I was given exercises to rehabilitate my knee. I retrained the muscles and started to work with a consciousness of anatomy."

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I couldn't dance for six weeks, and at age 21, you just think your life's over." She adds with a smile, "but if I hadn't had that injury, I wouldn't be the teacher I am today."

And that is a teacher who passionately loves jazz, both music and dance. "My mom had a ballet studio and I would improvise to Miles Davis' 'Kind of Blue,' " she says. "I even started a little jazz class. But I had no idea what jazz dance was." After her injury, Simonson studied with different jazz teachers and began to take musical theater roles. Eventually, she landed in Holland, where she began to develop in earnest what would become the Simonson Jazz Technique. "I went to Helen LeClerc's school, which was really just a small room without any mirrors. The company was five go-go dancers. But I set about to train those dancers. And that's where the foundation for my technique began. I began looking at bodies, analyzing them, reading my anatomy books, questioning everyone I could—people like Carl Shook and Benjamin Harkavy. It was a very, very instrumental period for me."

After a year, Simonson left Holland to choreograph musicals throughout Europe. In 1972, she returned to NYC, where she gave daily classes. In 1979, Simonson offered her first teachers' training course in Canada, which evolved into the Simonson Teacher Training Program. In 1984, along

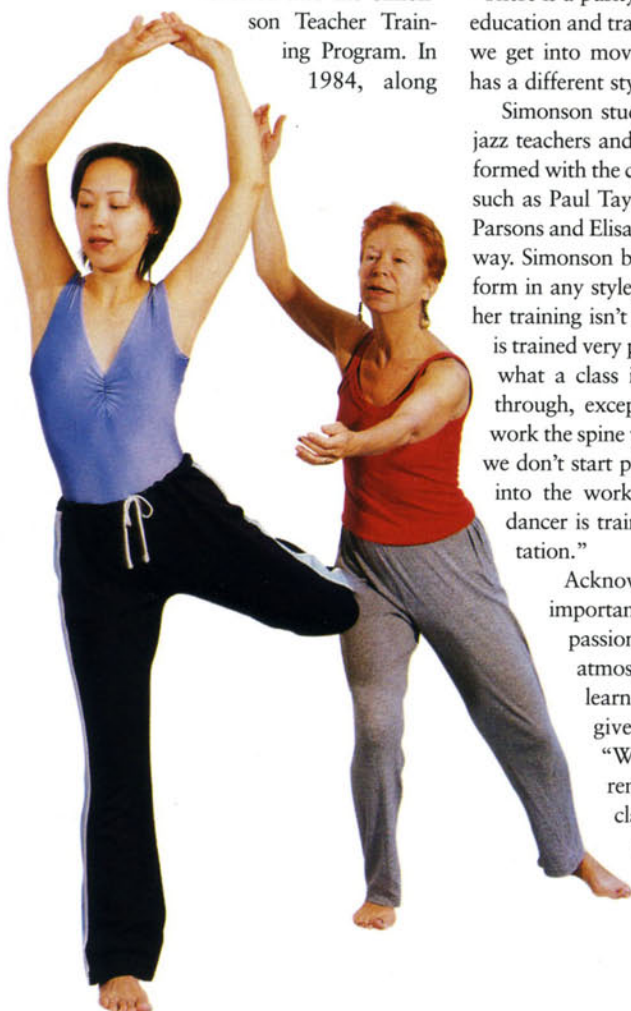
with three partners, Simonson opened Dance Space Center, now an integral part of New York's downtown dance scene.

While she has continued to refine and perfect Simonson jazz technique over the past 20 years, its emphasis on a holistic approach to dancers' bodies and training has remained constant. "Basically it is about the care of the body, so that you can dance injury free," says Simonson, pausing thoughtfully. "Hopefully. The basis of my technique is that each dancer is asked to work within the parameters of his or her own limitations and possibilities. That means that a teacher has to really be able to look at a student and say, 'Okay, this is the rotation of that student, this leg has more turnout than the other and there is scoliosis of the spine.' I train teachers to train their eyes and their understanding anatomically."

While specific, Simonson Technique is also flexible, allowing teachers to infuse the training with their own particular character. "There is a purity of warmup and a clarity of education and training," she explains. "When we get into movement quality, each teacher has a different style."

Simonson students have not only become jazz teachers and dancers, but have also performed with the companies of choreographers such as Paul Taylor, Martha Graham, David Parsons and Elisa Monte, as well as on Broadway. Simonson believes her students can perform in any style, including modern, because her training isn't style dependent. "The body is trained very purely, the class goes through what a class in classical ballet would go through, except we work in parallel. We work the spine very differently; for example, we don't start pliés until at least 20 minutes into the workout. The result is that the dancer is trained very well without affection."

Acknowledging the individual is important to Simonson, who believes passionately in a supportive class atmosphere, in which the teacher learns each student's name and gives corrections positively. "When I came to New York, I remember being in someone's class for six months and the teacher never learned my name," she says. "It was always, 'Okay, you.' I felt invisible. I



Simonson Technique Certification Course

Dance Space Center offers a certification course in Simonson's technique, an organic approach to movement based on principles of anatomy and kinesiology and inspired by jazz music. Hailed as an intelligent and logical method to prepare the body for dance, the Simonson Jazz Technique, with its emphasis on injury prevention, comprises a complete dance technique that not only trains dancers in jazz dance, but prepares them equally well for working in modern and other dance vocabularies. In addition to daily classes at four levels at Dance Space Center, Simonson's technique is taught by certified faculty in 15 countries worldwide.

Simonson Technique Teacher Training Certification Course

Upon successful completion of the Simonson Technique Certification Course, students at the advanced level may apply to become a teacher of the Simonson Technique. The one-year Simonson Technique Teacher Training Certification Course, required in order to teach Simonson Jazz Technique, is an intensive teacher training program directed by Simonson. Held at Dance Space Center in New York City, the course qualifies teachers in all aspects of jazz dance pedagogy, enabling them to teach students ranging from beginner to advanced. Each topic is covered progressively as it relates to the four levels of the technique (beginner through advanced). The program is designed to serve: (1) dancers who have completed the Simonson Technique Certification Course or who have a degree in dance and have now decided to teach; (2) members of the dance community who have worked professionally in dance companies, musical theater and other professional venues and are seeking a career transition into teaching; or (3) established dance teachers who recognize the need for a more complete education in jazz dance. Applications are by direct interview with Simonson.

Teacher Training Course Curriculum

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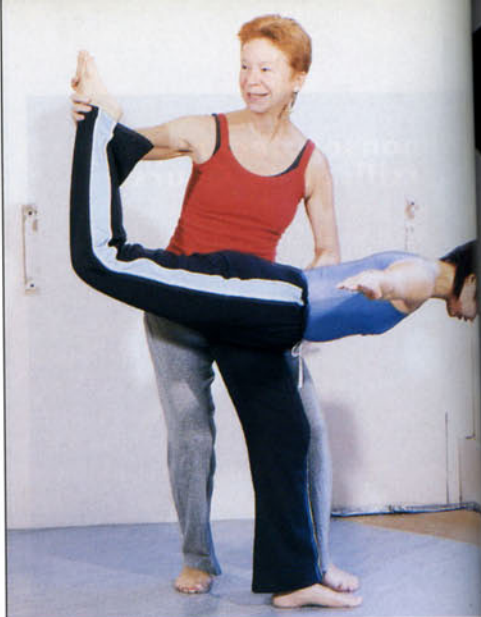
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finally got a sweatshirt and wrote 'Lynn' across the front." She laughs, but quickly turns serious. "When someone validates your existence by saying, 'I notice you, you are important,' then that comes through in the dancing."

Simonson is not only passionate about treating students with respect, but also about the teacher's own responsibility to make a life-long vocation of learning: "Learn more about music, your body and injuries. Have a list of people on hand that a dancer can go to if he or she is injured. Search out your community, talk to the physical therapists. I started yoga at 40 and Alexander technique at 45. That's why my technique keeps evolving. Develop your eye. See how much turnout a student really has. Is it from the hip or the knee? Start to see the body parts as balanced."

Christiane Schorpp, a jazz dance teacher from Germany who's currently halfway through Simonson's eight-month teacher training program, says: "It's definitely a different angle on how to teach, based on alignment and anatomically correct movement. In other classes I felt pressed into a certain form. My body is not typical; I don't have 'good' turnout. I feel in Lynn's technique I can use my body as it is—and teach others to dance injury free and also for themselves."

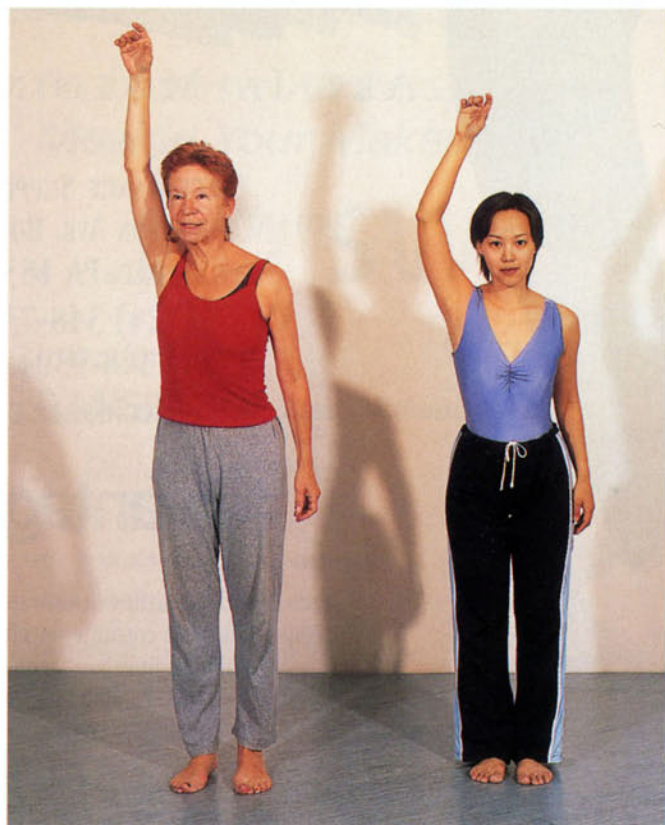
When asked what advice she has for other dance teachers, Lynn Simonson replies, after a pause, "The most important quality in teaching is that you love to teach, that you want to teach and that you want to communicate. That's very different from saying, 'Well, I can't be a dancer, so I'll be a teacher.' That desire to communicate and share knowledge is the most important foundation you can have. And if that is the aspect of your being that you're operating from, then you will continue to search and find out and read and learn. Just never stop learning." **DT**

Susan Elia is a freelance writer based in New York City.

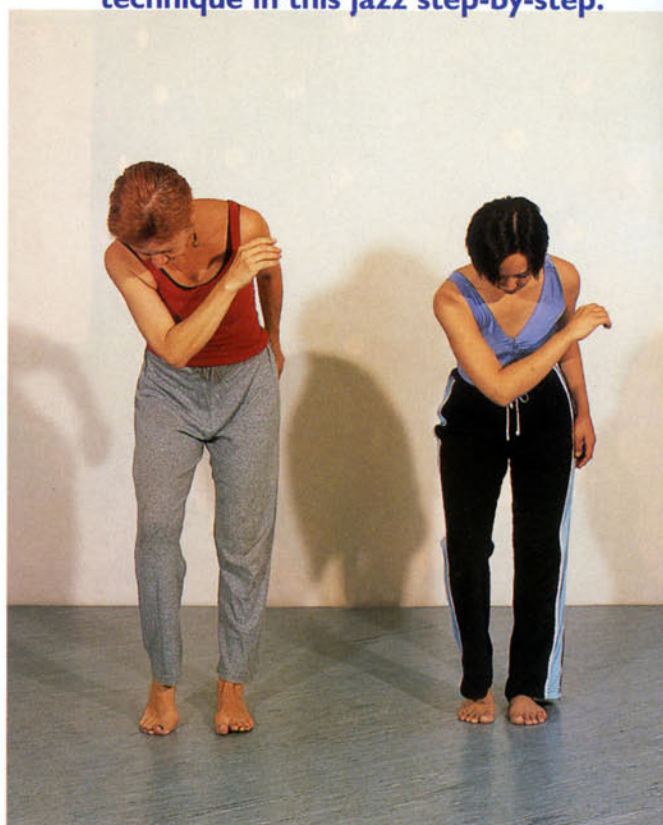
simonson style



Lynn Simonson, with teacher training student Wakana Meguro, demonstrates elements of her technique in this jazz step-by-step.



Step 1. Right arm high, lift ribs up and out of waist, lift right heel with right foot on ball of foot, focus front.



Step 2. Slap right thigh with right hand, from right to left, focus down.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL B. GOODE



Step 3. Plié, release pelvis back (sit), right heel stays up, lift sternum and chin, arms float up high to soft parallel position, focus high.



Step 4. Open left leg wider to side lunge, plié left, focus left, right forearm rests on head.



Step 5. Pelvis shifts back and left, right hand spreads open as right arm presses from high to second, ribs arch from torso on a front diagonal line in space, focus front.



Step 6. Weight shifts to right leg, left foot brushes against floor to point in a low back attitude, right arm behind back, left arm soft overhead, focus front.



Step 7. Left leg front (in turned out fourth croisé,) left arm curved front in first position, body weight front over left leg.



Step 8. Rond de jambe right leg in a parallel attitude from side to front by swinging right leg, placing right hand under thigh, plié left leg, body hinges back, focus diagonal high.