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DANCE *Studio* LIFE

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5 Modern Techniques for the 21st Century

Dunham, Limón, Horton, Graham, and Cunningham demystified

By Lisa Traiger

TECHNIQUE, AS ANY GOOD TEACHER WILL TELL YOU, IS A MEANS TO AN END, NOT AN END IN ITSELF.

In the 20th century, when modern dance was born, it seemed nearly every choreographer wanted to distinguish herself with a specific style and technique. Numerous camps developed as dancers, students and professionals, aligned themselves in balkanized fashion with a specific choreographer or technique. You could tell a Graham dancer by the way she held her chin and wound her hair in a high, full bun. A Dunham dancer? The walk, like coursing through a sandy beach, gave it away. But today, choreographers and artistic directors demand versatility, not allegiance. The ability to remain flexible enough to tackle any number of stylistic or technical demands is what divides good dancers from great ones. The techniques below may be built on differing foundations but the end result remains constant: well-trained and adaptable dancers.

Dunham Technique

Dunham technique is more than a credo of movement education; it's a way of life. Dancer, choreographer, and anthropologist Katherine Dunham integrated modern dance, practically and metaphorically. While others before her (and certainly since) have used dancers of color in their companies, it was Dunham, through her self-styled movement practice, who brought together African and Caribbean ritual and social dance and Western concert dance into what has become her signature technique. This fusion of polyrhythms and steps draws from ancient ceremonial dances and European-style dance forms.

An anthropology student at the University of Chicago in the 1930s, Dunham traveled to Haiti and Africa to study. There she cemented cultural bonds that have infused her challenging, high-energy technique and left a potent legacy

to 20th-century modern dance.

The Dunham technique requires a flexible torso and spine, an articulated pelvis, and the ability to isolate and control the limbs simultaneously in order to master the polyrhythmic movements. The technique provides dancers with the building blocks to create strong bodies.

A typical Dunham class begins facing the barre in parallel. There dancers acquire the sense of feeling centered while also stretching their muscles, warming up the back, and activating the pelvis and quadriceps with a series of body rolls of the spine, flat-back reaches and forward roll downs, grand pliés, and hinges to the floor.

Away from the barre, the students work on a series of contraction exercises (typically danced to live percussion accompaniment) that requires them to isolate the pelvis; gluteus muscles; and lower, middle, and upper parts of the back and then combine these isolations into full-body rolls of various tempos. Next come progressions across the floor, beginning with the smooth and direct Dunham Walk, which demands that students feel a continuous flow of energy through space as weight shifts across the entire foot with torso held high and chin lifted. Then come traveling isolations requiring students to move the head, shoulders, chest, and hips independently as they move across the floor.

Arms in a Dunham class are typically held in second position, parallel to the floor, with palms facing the floor and elbows lifted. Often culturally specific dances complete a class: *Yanvalou*, performed in 3/4 or 6/8 time, is a worship-based dance that features an undulating torso, arms, and hips; *Zepales*, a Voudoun dance, requires articulate isolations, including percussive shoulders pushing downward that are mirrored by feet in the same rapid tempo, while knees remain slightly bent. Dunham dance

carry within their bodies the roots of some of the world's most ancient cultures; yet this dynamic, multifaceted technique enables them to conquer a variety of styles.



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Where to Study

For all techniques, check college and university dance departments for classes and workshops near you.

The Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance offers open classes and professional, intensive, and independent programs at 316 E. 63rd St., New York, NY; 212-521-3621; www.marthagraham.org.

The Limón Institute (212-777-3353; www.limon.org) offers workshops, professional studies programs, and a summer intensive at Peridance, 890 Broadway, Sixth Floor, New York, NY; 212-505-0886; www.peridance.com.

Open Horton technique classes are offered through The Ailey Extension at the Joan Weill Center for Dance, 405 W. 55th St., New York, NY; 212-405-9000; www.alvinailey.org.

Weekly classes in Dunham technique are offered in the Children's Workshop Studio adjacent to the Katherine Dunham Dynamic Museum, East St. Louis, IL. The 24th Annual Dunham Technique Seminar will be held July 26– August 3, 2008 (tentative); check www.eslarp.uiuc.edu/kdunham for updates. Open Dunham technique classes are also offered through The Ailey Extension at the Joan Weill Center for Dance, 405 W. 55th St., New York, NY; 212-405-9000; www.alvinailey.org.

The Merce Cunningham Studio offers open classes at 55 Bethune St., New York, NY; www.merce.org.