

CUNNINGHAM TECHNIQUE

Although Cunningham technique is a modern dance technique, the structure of a class is more similar to a ballet class. Instead of a warm-up that leads to a choreographed phrase or combination, Cunningham exercises utilize his choreography right from the beginning of class.

CLASS STRUCTURE

A basic Cunningham class structure is as follows:

PART 1 STANDING BARRE

Barre begins with warming up the back muscles and spine, focusing on tilting, curving, arching, twisting, and flat back.

Barre continues with a series of exercises that include pliés and tendus, and students are invited to try certain exercises on different, individually chosen, facings.

Exercises progress into larger sequences that begin to move through space.

PART 2 MOVING THROUGH SPACE

Once warm, larger sequences that include turns, leaps, hinges, and falls are introduced. These can be combined with adagios and other phrases that contrast slow, controlled movement, with quick, precise steps.

There is generally no “front” during traveling phrases, and many are performed in a circle.

KEY CONCEPTS WHEN TEACHING

#1 USING THE BACK

The articulation of the spine is crucial to working correctly in a Cunningham class. The spine can move either with or in opposition to the legs.

#2 USING THE SPACE

Cunningham believed that “front” was an individual concept not related to the overall structure of the space or the location of the audience. In other words, the direction you

are currently facing is always front. This can be especially confusing for students who mentally orient themselves towards the mirror.

#3 USING YOUR FOCUS

Cunningham is an extremely cerebral technique. Unlike many modern classes that alternate between periods of concentration and rest, students must be alert and focused throughout the entire class. The technique is extremely rigorous, and requires a more sustained level of personal awareness by the student.

OUR CLASS

We chose to teach three basic exercises: two from the barre, and one that travels. These are simplified versions of exercises that we were taught in class.

#1 ROUNDED SPINE BOUNCES (TAUGHT BY BELINDA)

- Begin in first position, turned out, with arms in a slightly higher than usual second position
- Round the upper spine forward, allowing the arms to curve downwards and gently bounce for 4 counts
- Round up, move the arms back to second, and rotate the spine and upper body to the right diagonal, keeping the hips forward in 4 counts
- Round the upper spine forward in the diagonal and repeat the bounces for 4 counts
- Repeat to the left

#2 FLAT BACK EXTENSIONS (TAUGHT BY BELINDA)

- Begin in first position, turned out, with arms in a low position
- Plié for 4 counts
- Round the upper spine, curving the arms down for 4 counts
- In plié, extend the spine to flat back in 4 counts
- Maintaining the flat back, straighten the legs in 4 counts
- Release the flat back, round up in 8 counts, and rotate the spine and upper body to the right diagonal, keeping the hips forward in 8 counts

- Repeat on the right side, but upon release of the flat back, swing the torso down and **and** over to the left side, and then round up in 8 counts
- Repeat on the left side

#3

TRAVELING JETÉ (TAUGHT BY BENNY)

- Begin in one corner of the room
- Each student travels in a circle around the perimeter of the room using the following steps:
 - Jeté front
 - Jeté side
 - Jeté back
 - Turn around out of the jeté, taking three steps forward in plié with arms in a low curve, and then repeat from the beginning
- Optionally, students may repeat the exercise on the other leg, circling in the opposite direction
- If performing in groups, non-dancing groups should stand in the middle of the circle

HOW WE PREPARED

BENNY

TAKING CLASS

I took the Elementary Cunningham class with Melissa Toogood at Dance New Amsterdam on **December 1, 2013**. This was my first exposure to the Cunningham technique.

Having not been in ballet class for some time, I found the class extremely challenging physically. The ballet vocabulary was familiar and easy to follow, but the nuances of body positioning—especially spinal positioning—differed greatly from what I was used to.

Unfortunately, Ms. Toogood was not a particularly good teacher. As a former member of the company, she clearly knew the material, but she did not break down the exercises, her ability to work with the accompanist was confusing, and she rarely took time to give corrections.

However, I did find the class rewarding in a way I did not expect. I will be the first to admit that I did very few of the exercise correctly, but the degree of effort and concentration required to do them at all is so high that there is definitely a sense of accomplishment.

The movement itself is quite beautiful when done well, and I particularly enjoyed a jeté sequence that we performed in a

circle around the room. The group not dancing stood in the middle of the circle where we could observe and learn. This is one of the exercises Belinda and I will teach in our class.

RESEARCH

In addition to Legg and the Tanzplan Deutschland books, I read selections from *Chance and Circumstance: Twenty Years with Cage and Cunningham*. Written from the perspective of Carolyn Brown, it describes the early years of the company, and its struggles to be accepted.

I also watched the following videos:

Ocean (Minnesota 2008)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1aBJdHnv5tM>

Talking Dance with Merce Cunningham

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPKZ-aD69ec>

Beach Birds 1

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ra2T_iMXQVM

Nearly Ninety

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_CEwdgfhvvs

BELINDA TAKING CLASS

I took the Elementary Cunningham class with Melissa Toogood at Dance New Amsterdam on November 24, 2012. This was not my first experience to the Cunningham technique, as I had taken a class with a teacher in Mexico that had a mixture of techniques. I was not aware of which exercises were particular to the Cunningham technique but this class helped me identify them. However, I considered it my first “conscious” exposure to the technique.

Ms. Toogood was clearly a gifted dancer and former member of the company. She evidently embodied the technique. However, her teaching approaches to explain the exercises in particular and as whole, appeared to be a preconceived set of exercises, for the company perhaps, not for an “elementary class.”

I noticed that the accompaniment was not as vivid and encouraging as I have experienced with other live music classes. I did not perceive a strong relationship between the musician and the instructor. As a matter of fact, there were occasions we repeated the exercises not to fulfill the

movement but to correct the tempo because there was not appropriate communication between them.

Undeniably, the class is very challenging mentally and physically. Even though I was familiar with the ballet vocabulary, it felt very fast paced. Also, I was familiar with the upper body work, the use of the arms, and the bounces.

The footwork was very much the weakest segment for me. The rapid feet and leg combinations through tendus, degages, and battements were tremendously challenging. The fast tempo made the complex phrases quite confusing. On the contrary, across the floor felt easy and fun. I enjoyed the combination of light and strong efforts.

RESEARCH

In addition to Legg, I read chapter 1 of *Basic Concepts in Modern Dance: A creative Approach* by Gay Cheney which gave me an overall look of his work and his partnership with John Cage. I also read *Looking at Contemporary Dance: A Guide for the Internet Age* by Marc Raymond Strauss and Myron Howard Nadel. This was a great resource as I was able to watch the youtube videos as a visual reference to my reading.

I watched the following videos:

Septet 1964

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDGG33vFDSw>

Points in Space 1986

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qf_kLcdijz8

Biped

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YHeoYdDMbLI>

Ocean (Minnesota 2008)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1aBJdHnv5tM>

Beach Birds 1

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ra2T_iMXQVM

Sections of a Cunningham class taught by **????** at Tanzplan Deutschland book DVD resource.

I interviewed Professor Douglas Dunn on December 3, 2012. From California, he moved to New York in 1968 where he trained with the American Ballet Center and at the Merce Cunningham School, performing with the company from 1969-1973.