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From top: by Renee Hollighead Photographs; courtesy of Selgado; by Kyle Houston

KAREN ARCENEAUX

HOW I TEACH HORTON

Karen Arceneaux is about to deliver some bad news to the group of advanced-beginner Horton students assembled before her: She's cutting the counts in half for an already tricky exercise.

"If it was two counts, now it's one. If it was six, now it's three," she says.

"I'm leaving now," one student announces, semi-laughing.

Arceneaux, without skipping a beat: "The door is locked."

Her quick wit is, as usual, a balm for the dancers' worry. She masterfully walks that careful balance of lightening the mood and centering her students in her Horton technique classes at The Ailey School in New York City—all while instilling a respect and reverence for a time-honored technique.

After Lester Horton began codifying his geometric, shape-oriented modern-dance style in the first half of the 20th century, the choreographer Alvin Ailey (who had danced in Horton's company) skillfully repurposed much of it in his work. It's now an integral part of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's repertory and training program.

But it wasn't a technique Arceneaux discovered until she was in her 20s. A latecomer to dance—she started in college, in Lafayette, Louisiana—she didn't begin training earnestly until a successful audition for the Ailey two-year certification program. There, she studied intensively under Horton master Ana Marie Forsythe.

After a brief stint as assistant to both Forsythe and Denise Jefferson, then-director of The Ailey School, Arceneaux was promoted to school administrator. She remembers hoping that

teachers would call out sick, so she could teach their classes. She laughs when she remembers her earliest teaching experiences—like the time Forsythe came into her class as she was teaching coccyx balances, an exercise done seated on the floor, balancing on the tailbone with the legs lifted. "After, she came to me, and all she said was: 'Coccyx balances are done in a three,'" Arceneaux recalls, mortified. "After that day, I went back to my Horton book. I said, 'I will be ready when they call me to teach.'"

Now, after more than a decade of teaching Horton, she's seen the power it has to change her students' dancing. "They learn how to blend movements," she says. "I tell them, 'Use all of your counts.' If you're using every count, going from one move to the next, it becomes more like a dance and less like an exercise."

"You can go on to any other technique after studying Horton, because it trains your body," she says. "You have positions where one leg is turned out and the back one is parallel. It elongates the body and gives you more strength, coordination, flexibility, proper body alignment. It's such a beautiful technique."

If Arceneaux sounds more than a little in love with Horton, that's because she is. "My Horton book is always at the foot of my bed," she says. "When you're entrusted with something so precious, you don't want to tarnish it. You want to keep it going for the next generation." **DT**

BY RACHEL RIZZUTO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KYLE FROMAN



Karen Arceneaux earned her BFA from the University of Louisiana, Lafayette, and has studied at the American Dance Festival and the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance. After graduating from The Ailey School Certificate Program, she served as the school's administrator from 1999 to 2004 before joining the faculty. She founded her own troupe, Genesis Dance Company, and is a certified personal trainer, group fitness and Zumba instructor.

Whitney Janis is a first-year student in the Ailey professional division.

Arceneaux (left) and Janis at the Ailey Studios in New York City

technique

Step-by-Step: High Lateral, Lateral T and Low Lateral

The lateral T is a hallmark of Horton technique. When executed correctly, the body resembles the letter T: The torso tilts to 90 degrees, and the opposite leg extends for counterbalance. For a more advanced version of this staple movement, Karen Arceneaux has students continue tilting past 90 degrees to create a low lateral before diving to the floor, further demonstrating the clear lines and physical strength central to Horton. —RR



1. Begin in a grand plié in second position, arms also in second and feet in a natural second.



2. Transition to tilted tendu in second, with the working leg in parallel. The palms face each other.



3. Lift the leg in tendu off the floor, and tip the body to the right, moving into a high lateral naturally.



TIP: Keep the standing leg's heel forward and turned out, not parallel.



4. Continue tipping to a lateral T. Imagine someone is pulling on both your hands and foot, in opposite directions.



TIP: Don't let the bottom shoulder spiral forward. Keep both shoulders flat to the front.



5. Continue tilting to a low lateral. The body is no longer parallel to the ground, but is now on a low diagonal.



6. Allow the hands to touch the ground and begin walking them away from the standing leg, as the working leg lowers.



7. Finish by resting the head on the right arm, while on the floor, as the feet remain in first position.

To see Arceneaux and Janis in action, go to dance-teacher.com.

final pose



Lean On Me

Horton teacher Karen Arceneaux
and student Whitney Janis at The Ailey Studios
New York, New York

Photographed by Kyle Froman

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