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Ana Marie Forsythe

Passing down the Horton flame

A group of Ailey students clad in the black-on-black modern dress code moves like a well-oiled machine through Lester Horton's Fortification # 1. Ana Marie Forsythe meanders among the tilting bodies, issuing gentle but firm reminders, touching a rib cage here, redirecting an arm there. Her youthful form and infectious enthusiasm belie her 50 years as a teacher of Horton technique, the rigorous, athletic style that infuses Ailey's classic works.

A former baby ballerina with the Garden State Ballet, Forsythe was introduced to Horton technique at age 12 by Joyce Trisler—a direct disciple of Horton—with whom she later danced. She is chairperson of The Ailey School's Horton Department (where she has taught for 37 years), co-director of the Ailey/Fordham BFA program, and co-author of The Dance Technique of Lester Horton, the only published book documenting the form. Theresa Ruth Howard sat down with Forsythe to learn how she makes even the toughest fortifications a joy to struggle through.

What do you love about the Horton technique? When I was first introduced to Horton, I loved that it had all the discipline and vocabulary of ballet—but you could also turn upside down, you could jump sideways. It was so physical and smart. Horton is an essentially American modern dance technique: It's

adventurous, full-bodied, and has clean lines. It's extremely popular, even more today than when Horton was creating it in the 1930s and '40s. Also, the Horton teachers are very open, inclusive, much like the technique.

Is there an ideal "Horton body"? The technique works on all bodies. One of Horton's goals was to make the style anatomically corrective, so that it didn't tear the body down: You're working parallel or in a comfortable turnout, with natural positions. You're not forcing anything. There are some aspects of the technique that require flexibility, others that don't, where being tighter or stronger can actually be helpful.

Horton is taught through codified movement studies, or "fortifications." Once dancers become familiar with these, how do you prevent them from going on autopilot? It's tricky. I often talk about dynamics and performance quality. I remind them that simply bending forward and coming up is *not* a flat back; a flat back involves your whole personality! And I point out that in a company, you do the same ballets eight days a week, so you have to find ways of keeping familiar material fresh.

Can you say more about your approach to teaching dynamics and musicality? Horton believed that *how* something is done influences how the body develops; the fortifications have

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specific dynamics and musical phrasing built in. They're very disciplined: You *need* to be there on the third beat; it's not negotiable. To teach dynamics, I might give a simple phrase and ask students to do it percussively, then lyrically, then mix it up. Other times I give them a choice, or I'll have them do a combination slowly and then double time, so there's a constant awareness of dynamic quality.

How does Horton translate into contemporary work today? There are so many people choreographing with elements of Horton. Take Complexions—Dwight Rhoden and Desmond Richardson were both trained in the technique. You may not see a “Horton” step in their choreography, but there is a connection. Here at The Ailey School, we're lucky: We have Ailey's and Judith Jamison's legacies showing their roots, so it's clear that it remains relevant.

You're very precise with your use of touch in class. What is your philosophy on that? I usually announce that I do and will touch your body, so students know. But I've discovered that less is more: If I just use a finger instead of a hand, that works better.

What's your advice to teachers whose students are struggling, either with the technique or mastery of the movement? You warn the students that it won't be easy, that it's a process. And then you trust them to figure it out. It's OK to have messes—sometimes a class just falls apart. I give them a minute to get it together.

After all these years of teaching Horton, how do you feel? What have you learned? I am still excited by it. I continue to find new connections that make me say, “Oh, I never thought of that.” One thing I've figured out is how to break down material, so that newcomers to Horton can put phrases together within a couple of weeks, using a vocabulary of just five or six movements. If movement is dissected in a clear way, dancers can learn some difficult things early in their training.

My job is to make my students the best dancers I can in the time that I have with them, to share the qualities that they'll need as professionals. ■