

## Hilary Cartwright

## TEACHER'S

## Wisdom

**TLC** After a nasty fall on her back curtailed Hilary Cartwright's promising career as a soloist with The Royal Ballet, she spent two years searching for fulfillment outside the world of dance. A few years later she returned as a répétiteur and teacher. Then she took Juliu Horvath's yoga class and knew that she had found a new way of moving. "I felt like I was floating after class." She co-founded New York City's White Cloud Studio, the first Gyrotonic studio, with Mr. Horvath in 1984. She developed her own method, called Yoga for Dancers, and has been teaching it for more than 20 years as well as ballet. She is a unique resource for ballet dancers searching for alternative exercises to strengthen and balance the body. Cartwright teaches ballet and yoga in American Ballet Theatre's summer school and to companies in Japan, Switzerland, Canada, and more. Dena Abergel, of New York City Ballet, has taken Yoga for Dancers with Cartwright for 15 years. Here she asks about her approach.

**WAS TEACHING ALWAYS PART OF YOUR PLAN, OR DID YOU COME TO IT BY DEFAULT?** When I was dancing, I had no interest in teaching whatsoever. But after exploring other interests after my injury, I finally realized that I'd had amazing coaches and teachers and I wanted to give that to other dancers. Now I feel I was meant to be a teacher and that's why I went through my dance career rather rapidly. Dancing leading roles and having that responsibility onstage, I knew the pain, the passion, and the glory of it. Through my own injuries I learned how to approach teaching and deal with the temperament of dancers.

**FOR THOSE WHO HAVE NOT TAKEN YOGA FOR DANCERS, HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE IT IN COMPARISON TO A STANDARD YOGA CLASS?** Although it's based on Hatha and Kundalini yoga, it does not use static poses. While many of the positions are similar, we pass through them fluidly. The other thing is that the buildup of the class is like a ballet class: You start slowly with smaller movements and gradually increase the range of movement.

**CAN YOGA IMPROVE ONE'S PLIÉS AND TENDUS?** Yes, it works on the alignment of the spine, which affects how the pelvis opens. It also affects how the arms are going to move freely out of the scapula area of the back, which becomes your port de bras. The arch and curl of yoga increases the movement in the upper thoracic



Cartwright uses this Da Vinci drawing to help dancers find their center.



"Dance is full of circles, curves, and spirals," says Yoga for Dancers inventor Hilary Cartwright. "The work I do seeks to restore these natural movements."

and lower lumbar regions, which are normally difficult to get to. Increasing the range and mobility while maintaining strength gives you a better understanding of rotational turnout. If you're not locked and holding rigid in the pelvis, there's a little bit of give.

What I've found with both dance and yoga is that it's all about finding the balance and not going to the extremes. You can go to the extension of the movement, but the moment you drop into the extremity of it, you lose the integrity of the line. While there's still an internal strength in the movement itself, it holds an honesty that feels right for the dancer and is pleasing for the audience.

**HOW ARE YOGA AND GYROTONIC USEFUL TO OTHER DANCE TECHNIQUES?** Dance comes down to one basic thing: where you move from. We move from our center. If not, then it gets disjointed, no matter what the style or technique. Your center is a lot lower than most dancers think. It's below your belly button. You learn to connect to your center and move your arms and legs through your body's center. There's a connec-

tion that comes up through the body like a very large V. The easiest way to visualize it is to look at the Leonardo Da Vinci man standing in a circle and you see where all the lines come into the center.

It's like twisting dough from two directions at the same time to unravel the body and become extended through your arms and legs. That's why I do a lot of spiraling and circling. Dance itself is full of circles, curves, and spirals. The work I do seeks to restore these natural movements.

**HOW DID YOGA CHANGE YOUR BALLET TEACHING?** Mostly through the breathwork. Dancers tend to be shallow breathers, and without correct and coordinated breath they are not using their full potential to sustain stamina, muscle flexibility, and strength. It has changed the way I explain how to arrive at certain positions. Some people ask why I don't incorporate more yoga into my ballet classes. I incorporate what I feel is the essence, rather than practicalities. I use the yoga to help stretch properly because most dancers distort anatomically when they stretch.

**YOU OFTEN TEACH THROUGH IMAGERY. CAN YOU SHARE SOME OF YOUR FAVORITE IMAGES?** My cats inspire me. When I work with young students I talk a lot about cats and dogs because they can visualize them. It makes them very alert and gives them a different energy. Swimming is another thing—feeling like you're in the ocean, going through waves, helps to give an undulation through the body.

**WHAT ARE THE GREATEST STUMBLING BLOCKS FOR DANCE STUDENTS, AND HOW DO YOU HELP THEM MOVE FORWARD?** Fear. Fear of doing it wrong, not knowing how to do something, fear of not looking right. Fear makes you hold and go tight. I try to use humor in class to make students laugh, because that helps them relax. Yes, you have to work hard, but it's important not to forget to enjoy dancing. Moving should make you happy. ■

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