

teach-learn connection

TECHNIQUE MY WAY

Renee Robinson

BY LAUREN KAY

Watching Renee Robinson perform the “umbrella” solo in Alvin Ailey’s *Revelations* is to truly experience Ailey’s legacy. Her regality, energy, and joy are reminiscent of a young Judith Jamison. Over Robinson’s 29-year career she has become something of a queen herself within the company. In her 40s, Robinson still performs with a quiet ferocity, powered by her lithe and muscular physique. But, she says, it’s taken a lot of conscious work and an evolving sense of wellness to maintain her health. *DM* chatted with this modern dance veteran, who also mentors younger dancers, to find out how she stays in shape.

Trying on techniques

Early in her career, Robinson was told by Ailey artistic staff that she needed to focus on lengthening her muscles. She began investigating Zena Rommett’s Floor Barre technique, a workout that involves strengthening and lengthening the body while lying down, through exercises similar to those done at the barre. Robinson has incorporated Floor

Barre into her weekly schedule ever since. “It has reshaped my body,” she says. “Lying down relieves so much pressure and helps you avoid gripping while you work in correct alignment.” Robinson says she’s in a “forever love affair” with the technique; she’s even certified to teach it.

Although Robinson also tried Pilates, she found that it only made her body tighter. She was pleased, however, to later encounter Gyrotonics, which uses machines to aid the body in circular strengthening and stretching movements. She now begins her day with a Gyrotonics session three to four times a week.

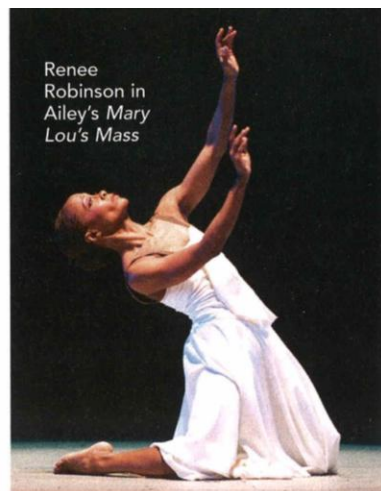
Robinson urges young dancers to “be open to learning about new ways to help your body. Any system that works with a foundation of proper alignment is worth investigating. It may not always be right for you”—as Pilates wasn’t right for her—“but it’s worth looking into.”

Checking in

On the days when Robinson has done Gyrotonics before rehearsal, her subsequent warm-up load is light. When she hasn’t, she begins by lying on her back, “to take a moment to see where my body is that day.” She feels dancers should be encouraged to check in with their bodies before class, instead of just plunging into exercises or a combination. “Young dancers don’t put enough value on understanding their bodies. They don’t take the time to reflect on what is actually going on inside that particular day. If you need to make a strange shape for a dance, fine. But take the time during your next warm-up to get back to your personal zero.”

Creative cardio

Including cardio in her weekly regimen, Robinson says, has been helpful for tackling “killers,” like Ronald K. Brown’s stamina-intensive ballets. While she enjoys biking, swimming, and the elliptical, she prefers running on the treadmill in short intervals. Running for 30 minutes straight, or doing anything so prolonged, she says, is too hard on her knee joints. “I’ll vary the level of intensity,” she says. “I’ll run for two minutes then walk. Or I’ll take cues from the repertoire and alternate small jetés with walking, or step off the sides of the treadmill and back on for coordination. I think, ‘What will translate in the studio?’”



Renee Robinson in Ailey’s *Mary Lou’s Mass*

Intercepting injury

Through her diligent training, Robinson has steered clear of severe injuries. Those she incurred early in her career—shoulder issues and a broken fifth metatarsal—were addressed in what she calls “the old-fashioned way,” which she doesn’t advocate: “Back then we just went to the ER and stayed off of the injury until it healed itself.” These days, she urges dancers to see a physical therapist “as soon as something feels funny. Whether it’s muscle tightness or something more serious, getting that information early on can send you in the right direction. Ask lots of questions, and be curious about how your instrument works.”

From the inside out

On top of cross-training, an interest in nutrition has been key to Robinson’s longevity. “Early on I went through the one-meal-a-day routine,” she says. “It obviously didn’t work for me and won’t work for anyone! I was a vegetarian for a while, and I’ve done cleanses. But I’ve found that a diet of whole foods and leafy greens and vegetables is the best bet.”

Robinson is a huge fan of juicing; she includes vegetables like kale, dandelion, and wheatgrass in her drinks. She also suggests taking vitamins and supplements. “Whole food is best, but B complex is helpful for stress, and essential fatty acids do wonders for your skin and joints.”

Lastly, she adds, “Never underestimate a good night’s sleep! Dancers can keep going even when fatigued, but you aren’t just sleeping, training, and eating for today. You’re doing so for the next day, next year, your whole life’s health. Beauty and strength onstage—and off—come from the inside as well as outside.”

Lauren Kay, a Dance Spirit contributing editor, is a dancer and writer in NYC.

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