

*Katherine Crockett (back) and Blakeley White-McGuire in Martha Graham's Diversion of Angels*

Modern **Masters**

By Emily Macel Theys

**WHY YOU NEED TO KNOW THE CLASSIC MODERN TECHNIQUES**

Today the contemporary dance family tree has all kinds of offshoots, but its base includes four modern dance branches: the techniques created by Martha Graham, José Limón, Lester Horton and Merce Cunningham. Even if you don't consider yourself a modern dancer, getting to know these foundational styles will make you a stronger, more versatile performer, and once you've been exposed to them you'll find it easier to absorb the styles of contemporary choreographers. Here's what you need to know about these fundamental modern techniques.

**GRAHAM TECHNIQUE**

Martha Graham, considered one of the mothers of modern dance, formed her company in 1926. Her choreography stems from an emotional and personal place, and so

does Graham technique. "The visceral physicality needed to dance the work connects to inner feelings," says Virginie Mécène, director of the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

Cate Blanchett's character in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* was a Graham dancer, and was doubled by real-life Graham company member Katherine Crockett.

ILLUSTRATION: SARA D. DAVIS; SCOTT GROLLER



spotlight **MODERN**

*Limón Dance Company in José Limón's Missa Brevis*

**DID YOU KNOW?**  
Limón's most famous work—*The Moor's Pavane* (1949), based on the story of Othello—has been performed by many ballet companies, including American Ballet Theatre and Pacific Northwest Ballet.

**The Look**

Three signature moves define Graham technique: the contraction, the release and the spiral. The Graham contraction is a C-curve of the spine. The release is the response to the contraction, which returns the spine to a neutral position or opens the breastbone to the sky. The spiral is a twisting of the torso that starts at the pelvis and then moves up the body. Combinations of these three movements "allow the dancer to project out into space," Mécène says.

**Graham's Legacy Lives On**

After 85 years, the Martha Graham Dance Company is still performing and touring. While students of the Martha Graham School often join the company, those who've studied Graham technique have also gone on to work with Buglisi Dance Theatre, SYREN Modern Dance, Ballet Hispanico and Bill T. Jones—to name just a few!

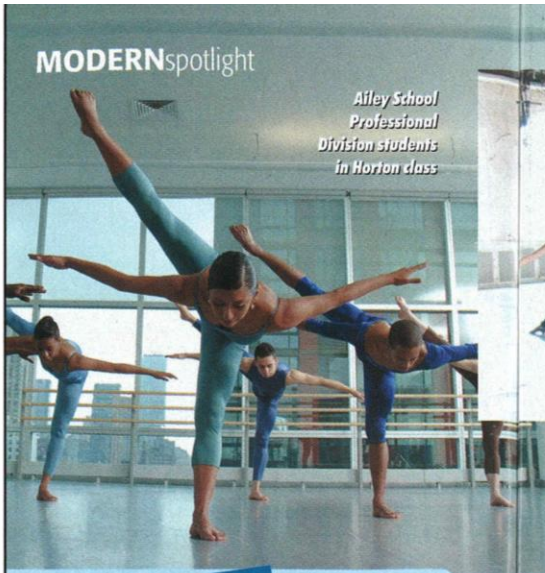
**LIMÓN TECHNIQUE**

Mexican-born José Limón moved to NYC at the age of 20 and studied with modern dance pioneers Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman. Later he formed his own company and developed a distinctive style. "Limón technique is not codified—there aren't movements and positions that you always do," says Alan Danielson, school director at the Limón Institute. "For José it was about the infinite possibilities of dance."

**The Look**

A Limón class emphasizes breathing through

*Ailey School  
Professional  
Division students  
in Horton class*



**DID YOU KNOW?**

Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* prominently features shapes from Horton technique.

the body and expanding your range of motion. "We work on bouncing, swinging and percussive movement," Danielson says. "Timing, shape and energy are all important factors."

**Limón's Legacy Lives On**

The Limón Company performs and tours regularly. Those who've studied at the Limón Institute or performed with the company have gone on to join Mark Morris Dance Group and Doug Varone and Dancers. Jennifer Muller of Jennifer Muller/The Works is also a Limón alum.

**HORTON TECHNIQUE**

Lester Horton formed the Lester Horton Dancers in 1932, and you'll probably recognize the names of its biggest stars: Alvin Ailey and Carmen de Lavallade. "Horton's goal was to create a modern dance technique that was also anatomically corrective," says Ana Marie Forsythe, chair of The Ailey School's Horton department. "His studies of ballet and other techniques taught him that dance usually breaks down the body. He wanted to fix that."

**The Look**

Horton technique classes include flat backs, lateral stretches, leg swings, deep lunges and falls. "Students learn how to sustain

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*Robert Swinston (right),  
Cori Kresge and students  
in a Cunningham  
advanced technique class*

positions without injury," Forsythe says. "The falls are dramatic and exciting, but a safety net is built into each one."

**Horton's Legacy Lives On**

Horton technique classes are offered all over the country, and there are several companies based on the Horton style, including Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and Copious Dance Theater.

**CUNNINGHAM TECHNIQUE**

Merce Cunningham studied at the School of American Ballet and danced in Martha Graham's company before forming his own troupe in 1953. His choreography emphasizes clarity, control, dynamic range and multidirectional use of space—and so does his technique. "Merce used class to experiment with dancers and discover new possibilities," says Robert Swinston, director of choreography at the Merce Cunningham Dance Company.

**The Look**

In a Cunningham class, your upper body and lower body will often be doing totally different things. "He worked the legs separately from the torso," Swinston says. "There are leg movements that look classical, but then the torso moves in opposition to the legs in a non-classical way."

**Cunningham's Legacy Lives On**

Cunningham died in 2009, but MCDC will continue to perform until December 2011. Many former Cunningham dancers, including Karole Armitage and Douglas Dunn, went on to form their own troupes. There are also some European companies that use Cunningham technique as the basis of their choreography. **DS**

Cunningham frequently collaborated with famous artists, including Andy Warhol, John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

(L TO R) EDUARDO PATINO; COURTESY "MONDAYS WITH MERCE"