

May 2012

chat room

SEEN & HEARD AT THE DANCE TEACHER SUMMIT

SPOTLIGHT ON FINIS JHUNG

A renowned NYC ballet teacher, Finis Jhung was the founding artistic director of Chamber Ballet USA. His students have included dancers from New York City Ballet and American Ballet Theatre as well as several of the boys who danced the role of *Billy Elliot* on Broadway. He is currently on the faculty of The Ailey Extension.

Dance Teacher: When you approach a class of ballet teachers for the first time, where do you begin?

Finis Jhung: I always keep it to the most basic ideas. People come from such varied dance backgrounds and teach in so many different environments, I've learned I can never assume anyone knows what I'm talking about. I make sure teachers understand the fundamentals of body placement, basic turns and basic jumps, as well as traveling across the floor, because that will be the most fun for their kids in ballet class—getting to fly across the floor. I always emphasize the need to make ballet appetizing and *doable*, because it remains one of the best training systems for all styles of dance. It should be something their students can look forward to.



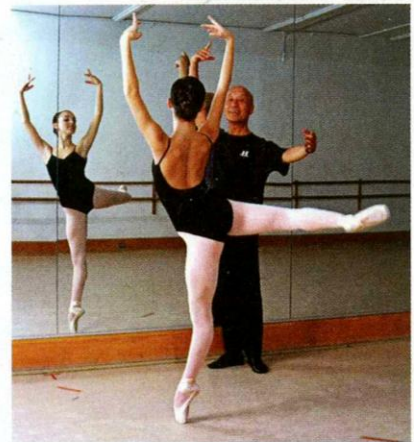
Finis Jhung teaches dancers to move using the whole body.

DT: In your class, you take a unique approach to the barre, with dancers facing and holding the barre at a diagonal. Why do you recommend this?

FJ: Ballet too often focuses on the position leg. Teachers look at where you're pointing that leg, but don't check to see if you're standing up. Dancers look straight ahead, they pull on the barre and there's no energy coming out of the supporting side. Then they have trouble in the center, because they're not on balance. I started having dancers face diagonally into the barre, so they're reaching for it and pressing into it instead of pulling. That way, they're engaging the supporting side in every movement they make.

DT: If teachers were to take away one message from your class, what do you hope it would be?

FJ: I want them to know they can help every single student to improve. As teachers, they can learn to solve dancers' technical problems and make each dancer better than he is right now, but they need to develop X-ray vision. Anyone can see that



something is wrong, but you have to be able to look *inside* the body and figure out *why* it's wrong. The truth is, there are certain things dancers do that make them look clumsy or graceful, or make them stay up or fall over during turns. It's like learning how to cook—if you get a good recipe and you do *exactly* what the recipe says, you're going to be a great cook. It's the same way in dance. You just have to be taught the right things.

—Andrea Marks