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# DANCE

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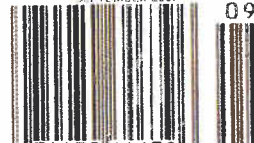


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Peters builds strong backs at The Ailey School.

# Joan Peters

This master of Dunham technique wants dancers to give audiences everything they've got.

*For the past 29 years, Joan Peters has been chairperson for Dunham Technique at The Ailey School in New York City. She is one of only three people approved by Katherine Dunham and The Dunham Institute as a Dunham Certified Instructor and Master Teacher. Peters began dancing at 5 with Syvilla Fort at the Katherine Dunham School of Theatre Dance and taught her first class six years later. She was a company member of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and Talley Beatty Dance Company, and has performed on and off-Broadway and in numerous films. Connie Aitcheson took Peters' class recently and asked about her teaching and the Dunham technique.*

## What role does a strong back play in Dunham Technique?

In order to get through even half of the exercises in class, your back and stomach have to have the strength and stamina to hold you up. After studying how African cultures in the Caribbean danced, Miss Dunham knew her performers had to be strong enough to execute whatever exercises she threw at them. When students first come into my class, I can tell right away whether they have a strong back or not. When they

present a step, you can see if there's any strength behind it. The essentials of Dunham technique are having a strong back, relaxed knees, and body rolls in order to move strongly and fluidly across the floor. Miss Dunham isolated body parts based on principles she learned from traditional Afro-Caribbean dance. She introduced modern dancers to the relaxed back and knees that she saw in Haiti.

For strengthening the back we practice waves through the upper body and flattening of the back. For the knees and legs we do a lot of pliés and relevés. If your back and knees are stiff, it'll be hard for you to do any kind of movement. Once your body is open, you can move more easily.

**The exercises in class isolate different body parts, but how does a student put it together when going across the floor?** Think back to all the things you've done at the barre: working the back, working the stomach, working the legs, and all that. If I tell students while doing traveling steps, "Straight back, plié," but they don't remember to use their stomach muscles to hold their back up, they'll just be hopping across the floor with no strength behind their movement. They have to think of it all at the same time. That's why you hear me say things over and over until you want to scream, but then all of a sudden it's imbedded and you don't have to think so hard about it.

**How do you encourage students to safely push their bodies when they might want to give up?** When the body starts hurting or you start getting tired, you have to keep the thought in mind, "If I keep working at this, my body's gonna get stronger and I won't feel this badly later." You've gotta

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Colin Fowler

fight to keep those legs up during the exercise. Then when you're done, shake them out and just breathe. Eventually it won't hurt as much as it does right now. And remember you're going to need that strength to really move later and let yourself go to the drumbeats.

From the very beginning I tell students to be careful doing this or that, and that caution stays in their head—even when they get tired. They remember, "Oh, I'm supposed to be pulling up here to keep the weight out of my knees so I don't injure them, or I'm supposed to tighten in the middle so I don't injure my back."

What was Miss Dunham like as a teacher? Her classes were so hard! Even though we were just children, she expected the best and never went easy on us. That made us feel like we needed to try even harder. Our bodies became so strong that there was nothing you could do to hold us down. There were times when we had as many as eight drummers, a violinist, a guitarist, and it was like taking class with an orchestra. She was also a wonderful person to talk to. As little children we used to sit and talk with her for hours. She would tell us stories that I grew up never forgetting.

In every class you keep the beat with a cane in addition to an accompanying drummer. Why do you use the cane and how does it help? I started using the cane when I was just a kid teaching some of my first classes at the Dunham School. We used to have a number of drummers, and being so new at teaching I didn't want to have to keep stopping, stopping, stopping. The only way I could keep all those drummers together was to have a set beat and they would play from that.

What qualities do you like to see in a dancer? I get really excited when I see dancers giving something of themselves to the audience. When you can see them giving out everything they've got from in here [*touches her chest*], you can't miss it. You know that it's from inside. ■