

Harnessing the Wind

The Art of
Teaching
Modern
Dance

Jan Erkert



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THE ART OF TEACHING MODERN DANCE

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In memory of my father, James Erkert,
who viewed the world with the logic and patience of an engineer;
and my mother, Ruth Erkert, who lived her life with grace, curiosity, and wonder.

Preface

Harnessing *The Wind: The Art of Teaching Modern Dance* is a philosophical guide to the *art* of teaching modern dance, integrating somatic theories, scientific principles, and contemporary aesthetic practices. This book is for any teacher or dancer in the contemporary dance field who, at the end of class, questions what was accomplished that day. It purposely does not provide a set of easy recipes; rather, it encourages lively internal conversation and dialogue among students and colleagues. It asks you to make conscious choices about what, why, and how you teach.

This book will not teach you to teach; the art of teaching is learned through practice in the classroom—making fast decisions, placing hands on students, and finding the right rhythms. But if you are a dance student in a college program taking your first pedagogy course, this book will provide you with the information and theory necessary to begin the task of teaching. If you are a seasoned teacher, this book will inspire new questions, confirm your intuition, and hopefully, introduce new possibilities.

Dance teachers have a long history of learning through experience. Historically, the apprentice system has been our training ground. After logging thousands of hours in class, the dancer becomes a teacher. But the time has come to ground experience with theory. Analytical knowledge confirms intuitive choices and challenges old beliefs. This powerful combination of theory and intuition will help teachers train smart dancers who are ready to handle the demands of contemporary dance.

In each of the fourteen chapters, the main text addresses important issues of dance training. In recent years, somatic practices and scientific research have yielded an explosion of information about movement training, so discussions about anatomy, kinesiology, and somatic approaches are included. This information provides new teachers with a solid theoretical base and provokes experienced teachers to investigate their practice further. Too much theory at one time can be overwhelming, so take one chapter at a time and sit with it for a while. Compare the information to your experience. What rings true for you? What is worth exploring in more detail? What is useful in the classroom? The book's structure progresses as you might, from the first thought of teaching a dance class to the closing applause.

Part I, Philosophy, asks the question, "What am I teaching?" Rooting our teaching in a clear philosophical point of view is the beginning of the journey. Chapter 1, *Dancing Roots: Technique*, defines the role of technique. By looking back at our dance ancestors and conducting a deep, personal investigation of movement, we develop a unique point of view about dance training. Technique should enhance individuality, not erase it; it is within the individual that artistry begins. Chapter 2,

Flying Souls: Artistry, explores the delicate job of nurturing the artist during the quest for technical control.

Part II, Class Preparation, is where the planning process takes shape. A clear vision allows us to develop strategies and goals that are both realistic and comprehensive. Chapter 3, *Sculpting Dreams: Goals*, lays the groundwork for building a progression of movement skills. Rituals provide consistency in order to honor traditions and truths. Principles of neurological learning and movement reeducation are explored in chapter 4, *Centering Minds: Rituals*, helping you to create an environment where students can search for center. Chapter 5, *Gathering Power: Conditioning*, offers information about anatomy, kinesiology, and somatic practices that will enable you to safely incorporate conditioning principles into dance training and produce powerful, resilient dancers. In a technique class, dancers learn by doing, and shaping movement phrases kinesthetically enhances movement learning. While this is a physical art, chapter 6, *Shaping Phrases: Dancing*, asks you to consider elements of phrasing upon entering the studio. To sequence exercises effectively, the dance teacher must consider a vast array of possibilities, such as conditioning, dynamics, and patterning. In chapter 7, *Weaving Light: Sequencing*, graphs and planning guides are provided to help you compose a successful class.

Part III, Class Presentation, is where the spontaneous skills of teaching come into play. The delicate art of pacing requires teachers to keep muscles warm while delivering information. Chapter 8, *Time Flowing: Pacing*, discusses the importance of delivering a class that flows. Learning to see and sense enables a teacher to develop a good eye and gentle touch. Chapter 9, *Body Listening: Corrections*, provides information about reflexes, alignment, and touch, so that your corrections will enhance student performance and confirm the student's innate wisdom. Chapter 10, *Space Moving: Images*, explores the power of images in movement learning. Based on theories stemming from somatic practices, you will learn why images work. Understanding the unique relationship between music and dance unlocks the doors to musicality and phrasing. Chapter 11, *Silence Sounding: Accompanists*, addresses the skills necessary to successfully collaborate with musicians.

Part IV, Professional Concerns, embraces important issues surrounding the teaching professional. In chapter 12, *Energy Talking: Communication*, scientific and educational theories are explored to illuminate the relationship between mind and body particular to the process of learning to dance. Dance training is a rigorous activity putting stress on both body and mind, and students may cope by developing dangerous obsessions or injuries. In chapter 13, *Excellence Training: Health*, you will learn how to recognize problems and intervene when necessary. Teaching dance is a rigorous career demanding tremendous vitality. Chapter 14, *Youth Spinning: Vitality*, addresses ways to maintain a healthy body, a curious mind, and a fresh spirit.

Two additional features of the book will help you dive deeper into your exploration of teaching. Each chapter is followed by an investigation and a reflection.

Because teachers must embody what they teach, the investigations provide guided suggestions for experimentation and observation. These short exercises culminate each chapter and cover a range of activities including writing, drawing, chart making, observing, and experiential processing. The investigations are for anybody, from student to professional. The in-class investigations are designed to encourage teachers to develop new practices within the classroom. These might also be assigned to a student teacher. Take one investigation a day and relish it.

Take a list from one chapter and dwell on it for a year. Return to them again and again and see how your teaching practice has evolved.

Teaching dance is inseparable from life, and so the personal reflections unveil the intangible things we teach such as breath, centering, playfulness, presence, and openness. The reflections are to be read and savored in the studio with a cup of coffee, before class to remember why you are there, or at night curled up in bed. Share them with a friend, a non-dancer, a spouse, or a lover. Perhaps the reflections will help others understand your dancing life and the rigors of this demanding art form.

Accompanying each chapter and reflection are photographs by Erika Dufour, William Frederking, and Rod Murphy. These photographs of dancers who have graced Chicago stages remind us why we are working so hard in the classroom. The illustrations by John Matthews provide a visual stimulus while illuminating the text.

Last, the appendixes include a syllabus for modern technique, a level-placement guide, an assessment report, and evaluation forms. Developed by a faculty team at The Dance Center of Columbia College Chicago, they can be used as resources and guides to your own practice.

Acknowledgments

Jumping off a cliff is a far easier task than writing a book. Little did I know what I was getting into when I entered the world of words. As I plunged into deep waters, a vast community of people came to my rescue. I owe great thanks.

I begin with my husband's son, Mark Lewy, and his gracious wife, Ana, for providing the perfect place to start: a beautiful castle in the rolling vineyards of Spain. When I returned from Spain I printed out what I had written; I could now hold in my hands the results of my labor. But whom could I turn to that would sort through this rough, rough draft? Carol Bobrow carried the perfect credentials: a dear friend and a dance teacher with a passion for reading cookbooks. She gave me confidence when she said the book was like listening to her own thoughts.

Writer and dancer Maggie Kast was next to grace the book. A gentle soul with a sharp intelligence, Maggie imparted the power of nouns and verbs. Editor Maureen Janson ruthlessly covered it with red ink, correcting all the grammar I didn't learn in grade school. Joseph Reiser, a composer and author, said it read more like a memoir—and he said I wasn't famous enough to have a memoir. I thank him for his harsh honesty. Joannie Kaufman, Ginger Farley, Anna Paskevaska, and Beth McNeil provided unique points of view. Selene Carter and Scott Oury expertly pinpointed holes. I thank Irene Dowd for an intelligent, thorough, and generous critique via phone waves. Judy Wright believed in the manuscript from the start; I knew working together would not be dull when she threw off her shoes and jumped into a dance class, nylons and all. My editor, Pat Norris, offered invaluable insight, helping me to wrestle down computer programs as well as words and thoughts. Lee Alexander and Cheryl Ossola worked magic with my words.

Who taught me how to teach? Of course, my students, and I thank them for their patience. I especially want to thank Michiru Onizuka-Kempen for her passion when I was losing mine, former student Robyn Gravenhorst, who did some fine detective work, and Chansri Green for taking the book on a test-drive. I owe a great debt of gratitude to those dancers who graced my life and my dances. Juli Hallihan-Campbell, Lezlee Crawford, Louise Green, Jen-Jen Lin, Peter Rothblatt, Cecily Sommers, Michael McStraw, and Tim Veach were physicists of movement. Mary Johnston Coursey and Sandra Sucsy reveled in forgotten sensations. Julie Worden, Christine Bornarth, and Anthony Gongora knew and lived ecstatic presence. Chia Yu Chang, Mark Schulze, and Carrie Hanson provided the whole picture to the fragments of my knowledge. Finally, the company of my dreams—Paul Cipponeri, Robbie Cook, Erica Gilfether, Krenly Guzmán, Suet May Ho, and Kim Nelson—was a magical love poem. A great debt of gratitude goes to all.

I thank Jyl Fehrenkamp and Deborah Siegel for helping select photos, and the dancers in the photographs for working so hard and looking so good. Elizabeth Chang, Krenly Guzmán, Christopher Nelson, and Margaret Morris provided graceful bodies and generous spirits for the illustrations.

I don't envy my dance teachers. As a student I was slow, rebellious, and rigid. I thank my first dance teacher, Evelyn Kreason, for lessons in her garage where I thought I was studying toe tap due to a missing comma, and Christopher Flynn from the Joffrey Ballet for limiting me to pliés and tendus. I thank the University of Utah crowd for introducing me to modern dance: Elizabeth Hayes, Shirley Ririe, Loabelle Mangelson, Joan Woodbury, Dr. John Wilson, and Bill Evans. Never letting anyone get away with anything, Shirley Mordine opened my world to weight and space even though it took tears to get there. Each of the following artists gave me a morsel that made me chew for decades: Suzanne Linke, Akira Kasai, Viola Farber, Carla Maxwell, June Finch, Mary Anthony, Margaret H'Doubler, Ralph Lemon, Trisha Brown, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Joe Goode, Chuck Davis, Wally Cardona, Barbara Mahler, Jeff Curtis, Bill T. Jones, Doug Varone, Bebe Miller, Margaret Jenkins, Ellie Klopp, and Rennie Harris. Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, Lisa Clark, Kim Nelson, and Beth Stein opened the doors to the wisdom of somatic practices. My body thanks healer Papillon and yoga teachers Tom Quinn and Suddha.

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Opportunity is everything, so I thank each person who called me on the phone with a job. Special thanks go to Pat Knowles, who observed me teaching a group of unruly children and called the next day with an invitation to teach at the University of Illinois. I wonder what she was thinking. I got to experience hot places like Texas and Taiwan thanks to Susan Douglas Roberts and Ming-Shen Ku, and the coldest places on earth thanks to Linda Shapiro and Emmy Thompson. Maria Inez Camou introduced me to the tango in Montevideo, and Miguel Mancillas, Adriana Castellanos, Athenea Baker, and Marta Ketchum shared the flavors of Mexico despite my ill attempts at Spanish.

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From the top-floor studio of the Dance Center of Columbia College, I look out over the horizontal expanse of Lake Michigan as it butts up to the vertical explosion of skyscrapers. But it is more than the space without; it is the space within that generates excitement. I am indebted to our chairperson, Bonnie Brooks, for engineering release time and supplying the next to the last word, and I thank Columbia College Chicago for a Faculty Development Grant to work on the manuscript. The faculty—Bonnie Brooks, Dardi McGinley-Gallivan, Shirley Mordine, Deborah Siegel, Eduardo Vilaro, Erica Wilson Perkins, and Richard Woodbury—challenge my thinking daily. I thank Pan Papacosta for recharging my interest in physics.

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My granddaughter Nora's passion for feather boas, tutus, and sequins reminds me why I do this. I thank Eloi for teaching me how to tell stories. Camilo's gentle touch and open heart remind me of his father, David—I take comfort in the great chain of genes. A big thank-you goes to Kyle for allowing me to hold him underneath the wind chimes. Finally, I thank my husband, Bernt, for adoring me. I find home intertwined in his strong limbs and sturdy heart.

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part 1

Philosophy



William Frederking, photographer; Sabine Fabie and Mark Schulze, dancers