

Dance Journal

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Modern Dance Technique III: Collette Stewart

Spring, 2004

April. 13, 2004 — May 6, 2004

Jan 22, 2004

The main topic of this class was the use of weight and suspension. During the floor warm-up exercises, we practised dropping the weight of the head, which creates momentum. From the mirror, I thought that I was following the exercise well. However, I did not really feel the “weight of the head”. Instead, my movement was controlled. – I did not feel the suspension. It is not easy to “let it go”. The standing warm-ups followed the same theme. Somehow, my joints still felt tight. In the cross-floor combination, I was doing much better than last class. I felt my weight. The exercises outside of the classroom help! I noticed an interesting phenomenon. When Collette demonstrates, she really makes grant movements. I can clearly see the shift of weight, and the momentum created by it. However, when the class practised, I saw different versions of interpretation. Some people followed the format and tempo quite well, yet there was lack of power in their movements. They showed different poses and some transition steps, yet no momentum. There were also some people trying hard to master the momentum, maybe looking awkward, but I think that is the only way to reach the purpose of the class.

Jan 27, 2004

I was glad that Collette used me as a demo to show a wrong interpretation of the extension of the spine. Otherwise I wouldn't have been able to realize my error. Marline once said, “There is no simple exercise”. This is really true. From the demo, the extension and the arch of the back looked simple. But I didn't really know how to position my tailbone, or how to correctly “extend the spine”. I think the explanation from Collette helps me a lot in understanding each exercise: the placement of the torso and the tail, the difference between throw and stretch, how to use the suspension and the drop of weight etc. With those explanations, I understood her demo much better.

Sometimes it is hard to distinguish the “momentum of the weight” and being sloppy. When I focus on weight shifting, I tend to let my movement go in a sloppy way. This is not correct. To control and to follow the weight do not conflict with each other. While freely exploring the momentum of the body, we should also pay attention to the cleanness of each movement.

Jan 29, 2004

Cross floor:

1. Throw arm left, right; plié, glide to second, en-dedans turn, coupé-twice.

Center:

The new combo is an extension of the old one.

1. 1: lift knee, open (turn to front corner), drop head downstage, plié to second, a small jump to first.
2. tendu (downstage leg), throw arms (upstage up, downstage side, upstage grab), turn on the floor, arch back, extend back, stand on the hands, head down, lift lower body, land with upstage leg on the back.
3. shoulder, upper body claps, head turns and leads to the front, kick upstage leg forth and back, drop hands, glide, turn (led by elbow), rond de jambe (led by the working foot tip), chassé, jump on one foot.
4. upstage foot steps forward, the other foot crosses it, sit on the first foot. (This part is led by upstage arm finger tips, and upstage foot tips, use opposition to keep balance). Shift weight to the upstage leg and back, hands on the floor, push downstage hand, the stretched leg becomes supporting leg, flip the body and the working leg, thrust forward, sit on the bottom, turn in the same direction, flip belly to the floor, centered from the belly, turn to sitting position. (This part, legs lead, and upper body follows)
5. roll back on downstage shoulder, stand up, turn, upper body bends (downstage arm finger tips lead, sit bone sits back to keep opposition), half turn anti-clock wise (throw downstage arm starting from shoulder to create momentum, the other parts follow, wrist keeps opposition). Turn clockwise one circle (starting from the shoulder throw the leading arm (downstage), sit bone down for opposition), lift the downstage knee, stretch backwards.

There are many elements in the warm-up exercises that help in the combination. For example, the dropping head exercise and the throwing arm cross-floor exercise. We use the same opposition in the latter. When the arms are completely thrown out, the sit bone

sits back to keep an opposition, which produce the momentum to pull down the suspension.

Feb 03, 2004

This class focused on the connection of shoulder blades and distinguishing the difference between moving shoulders and shoulder blades. When shoulder blades are connected, the body gets better support, even when one stands on her hands. I found this technique very helpful. When I stood on my hands, I used to feel a bit scared. But after trying to apply the technique, I could control my body better. The cross-floor combinations were aimed at the same theme. I especially paid attention to keep the connection of the shoulder blades, and to how it gave me momentum. It gave “weight” to the movements. I felt more grounded, with more power. Another observation is the usefulness of pli . It was another important technique in the combination. Deep pli s help to shift weight, as well as to give momentum.

Feb 05, 2004

We did an exercise with partners in order to feel shoulder blades. I went first. When my partner held my right arm, I tried to loose control and let it go. But her feedback was that my arm was still tight. Being nervous might be a reason. The left arm was better. After this exercise, I felt my shoulder blades connected. When I move my arms back over the head, I felt that my shoulder blades were controlling the movements. It was different than the movement of shoulders. By using shoulder blades, I found the boundary extended of how far my arms could go backwards over the head. When I stood on my hands, I observed the same difference: disconnected vs. connected shoulder blades. With the former, the lifting of the feet is more a positioning, while with the latter, there was more control and more power. I felt the weight more. The center exercise was combined with the cross floor one. Having practised this combo in my spare time, I was more familiar with it, which allowed me to pay more attention to the technique. However, the left side was less good. I was at a loss from time to time. Should practise more.

Feb 10th, 2004

This class we did a whole new set of exercises. The theme was movements initialized from the sit bone, or put another way, the center of the body, and suspense. First, shoulder blades with tendu. Second, fondu with dégagé. Third, swing, plié, and curving with sit bone. In second position, I could easily swing with the tilt of sit bone. However, when both feet were close, it felt harder to hang the upper body and let the sit bone lead. Working with partners helped.

The new combo reflects the same theme. Jump, a swing of the upper body, led by left arm and left foot, jump; arabesque, swing upper body, following the swing of arms, suspense, turn on the floor, suspense, turn on the right arm; push left hand on the floor, led by left foot, turn, suspense, back-roll on right shoulder, sit, knees turn, and sit, side kick. Head down, supported by left hand, jump; roll up, right knee up, left hand push, led by the knee, step in plié. This combo was very fast. There was seldom time for posing. Instead, only enough time for suspense, since it gives the momentum for next movement already, while posing does not. Breathing is important in this combo, since it helps in suspense. Most time sit bone is the center of support. The swings are centered from the sit bone. It acts as the opposition to keep the balance of the body and the gravity.

Feb 12th, 2004

I got bruises on my backbone, shoulder, knees and the top of the foot. This impeded my movements a bit. We practised the combo for the left side. I didn't have any problem on back turning from the right side. Somehow to do it from the left side was a pain. I felt lack of momentum. I couldn't make the whole turn. It seemed my foot was glued to the floor! I did push my hand on the floor, but it didn't help much. I don't know if this is because I didn't get the technique or simply because of the lack of strength. Should check it out with Collette next class. I saw my fellow classmates struggled to keep up with the tempo, and tried hard to apply the techniques: suspense, staying low to the ground. But still not close to what Collette demonstrated. Her movements were clear and powerful. –I should push myself harder in the following classes.

Feb 17, 2004

This class focused on feet: How do we ground ourselves? How to shift weight to different part of the feet? How does that give us momentum? The exercise started with a massaging of the feet. Press all over the bottom; drag each toe; twist toes pair-wise; on the top, for each bone in-between two toes, from the end, iron it; massage the ankle. Seldom doing a foot massage, I found it amazingly useful. I felt the difference. It felt that the foot surface to the ground increased. I could ground myself deeper, drop weight more, and hence got a better balance.

In the following exercises, the usage of feet was emphasized. Each *dégagé* starts from a brush. We have to push the supporting foot to get the working foot even further. It adds energy to the movement. The *tendu* back is always initiated by the sit bone and inner thigh rotation. This is different than being led by the working foot. There is better support from the former.

The new combo was interesting. It combines brushing, weight shifting and balancing, connected by many cute transitions. For example, the turn with Jazz element. I found breathing helps to make the movements clear. The phrases are naturally separated by breathing.

Feb 19, 2004

Several exercises:

Cross floor: grand battement front (down stage leg), *chassé*; grand battement side (the other leg), *chassé*; grand battement back (first leg) and front, upper body turn 180 degree, keep weight on the supporting leg, arms draw circle, and shift weight to the other leg, *pique*.

Note: for front and side battement, the sit bone should be kept straight. For the weight shift transition, should keep the hip bone (the part between waist and the end of legs) square, so as to get strong support.

Center: (weight shifting between feet) step forward (left foot), step back, step to the left; *passé*, open to first position; bend supporting leg, (release upper body till ribs, release shoulders) *developpé* side, *rond de jambe* to the back; shift weight to the hands, suspense legs; legs come down, half *chassé*, upstage arm swing, upper stage leg supports, turn to

the back, chassé, grand step (right foot) forward, weight on the right foot. Right arm draw a circle, end on the waist. Left leg rond de jambe, cross right foot into standing position. Throw right arm, turn, drag in hands, kneel down; up, suspense, back for two steps, suspense, jump, hands on the floor, scoop; shift weight turn (to the right), transition, move forwards to the right. Left leg supporting, opposition with downstage arm, open, close, and led by the swing of the same arm, turn. Facing back, second position, left knee bent, arms second position, grab, head circles to the left, drop left arm, shift the whole weight to the supporting leg, draw back the working leg, step back. Weight in the middle. The right shoulder blade leads the following movements. Rotate, rotate to second position, rotate, upper body follows. Pick up, pique, downstage leg supports, walk back to the starting position.

Several techniques about this combo:

- The contrast of adagio and swift movement.
- The swing of arms, or drag of hands creates the momentum for fast movement.
- Opposition, the support from the “hip bone box”
- The function of the shoulder blade.

===== First hand in =====

Feb 24, 2004

Impromptu was introduced into this class. During warm up, we walked around, found a partner, with whom we stretched. We repeated this multiple times. It is interesting that once people are aware that they will stop to be with a partner, they pay more attention to other people when they are walking. Although it is still random, it becomes more natural that two people end up together and form partners. Take myself as example, I did not pay much attention to my classmates at the beginning. Once when we are called to stop, I moved quickly towards somebody who is still alone. Almost at the same time, I noticed that John was just next to me by my side. And thinking I was aware of him, he leaned towards me. It was awful that I moved away! I think on stage it is the same. One should be aware of the movement of other dancers. Since a piece is a work of cooperation. The audience perceive it as a whole.

For the cross floor, we were asked to improvise as well. First one person, then two persons and four persons. I felt scared at that moment. I did not know how to move on my own. What should I do? My classmate that were in front of me started off. It felt in no time it was my turn. I shot off without further thinking. Should I roll? Should I stall? Should I kick? Do I look awkward? ... Tons of questions flooded my head. Everybody else seemed know what they were doing, which made me feel even more awkward.

To move with a partner (or partners) was even harder. I (yes, this very self-conscious “I”) did not really feel that I know my classmates. I am not raised up in this culture. Having come here only for a few years, I feel myself a stranger, especially in dance classes. To make things worse, being a computer scientist does not help me on my social skill! Being a non-native English speaker, I feel language a barrier between me and my classmates.

Feb 26, 2004

This was the second time we did impromptu in class. I felt much better! Yeah!!! Don't mind what other people are doing. Just be yourself. Show your characteristics in your movement. To look nice is not a purpose of this exercise, nor is it to invent some nice pose or to apply some material learned in other dance classes. The purpose is simple: to let your body talk, and listen to your body. Awkward or not, it is not important. What is important is whether you follow your body or the opposite situation.

I tried many movements. There are many body parts to employ, the head, the shoulder, the arms, the legs, the feet, the waist etc. etc.. Which one to use to initiate the movement? How do other parts of the body follow? Where does the weight lead me? –I consciously paid more attention to those thoughts. By doing so, I felt my body more and I enjoyed more.

It was also much more fun working with a partner. Despite all the differences we might have, we are dancers. And we work together as dancers. This connection is strong enough to put us into cooperation. I observed my partner closely, trying to figure what she wanted to achieve, and to compensate her with my own movements. Of course, no sophisticated cooperation was introduced by this casual combination. However, sometimes, we figured to get some interesting movement. And again, there are so many things to try out, with or without contact, hands, feet, body... There are many possibilities in interleaving our body movements and thus to create interesting cooperation.

As Collette said, such impromptu helps in the transitions in a combo. The transition becomes more natural and much easier. Indeed, one just need to follow her body. And let the body work its own way out.

March 2, 2004

We practised a set of “hip over hands” exercises. It is amazing to see how well Collette can control the sequence. Technique aside, I think the strength of the abdomen muscle helps. It was bit scary to drop the head during the turn. I felt the partner part was a great facility that helps us on getting the bottom over the shoulders. Yet we still need to work on the control part by practise more. Obviously, it was hard for the majority of the class. Jenny (right spelling?), as an exception, did it pretty well.

I really like the combo we learned today, which is full of contrast and dynamics. There are also many techniques. For the first turn, the upstage arm leads, and the head and the upper body act as the axis from the leaning forward position. The second turn is narrow on a kick. For the jump kick, it is important to lift up the whole upper body before kicking, which brings the height. There is a big suspense before the attitude, which initiates the attitude. I found it hard to do the attitude in time. But I think I found the reason: The suspense can be done faster – all you need to do is to let go of the upper body. The weight will bring it down. There is suspense between the attitude and the jump on hands which is easily being ignored. There are two ways to initiate the jump. First, lean down in a controlled fashion. Second, use suspense to connect the attitude and the jump. With the latter, we can do it faster.

March 4, 2004

Today we did an interesting partner exercise: one person closed her eye, and totally follow the lead of her partner, walking or even jogging around. When I was led, I felt nervous. I was not sure if I would bump into people or the wall. Especially when I heard noise of people coming close, I tended to open my eyes. When it was my partner, John's turn, I could feel his reluctance to follow. Especially when we were close to people. It was even harder to make him run. I had to really push hard. He was afraid!

To trust your partner. I think this is important when one works with a partner. To let go of this uneasiness, and the doubt. Yesterday during our rehearsal, we had this partner part. Although to myself, I tried my best to let go of my own control. Subconsciously I was still full of control of my body. Especially for the part that I was supposed to lie on my partner's back and let the movement of her back to lift up my legs. I felt it was hard to lift my legs. Then my partner pointed out, I didn't totally lie on her back. – I was trying too hard to lift my legs. But that was not the right way. It shouldn't be hard at all. All I need to do is to relax my body, and her lead me. That is, I have to give up the control, and hand it to her! –It is really hard!! Why? I don't trust other people. I am afraid to fall. To use one's own momentum is easy. However to let other's momentum to lead one's body is a scary experience.

Collette also clarified several techniques in the combo we learned. First, after the kick, from the down position up, it was fast (one count), then next count we do the suspense. Second, during the attitude, the head leads the next turn, so that we can reach the suspense. Those techniques add more momentum and contrast to the combination. –We are not “moving”, instead, we are just “following” those momentums. It was fun!

March 23, 2004

We leaned a lovely combination today — a “modernized” Jazz work. This combo borrowed some elements from Jazz, yet they are modified towards Modern elements. To put it in another way, there are less positioning, but more momentum driven. This little experiment raises a question: what is the difference or boundary between Modern and Jazz? I don’t know the right answer — especially given that I am from a culture that is totally different from the one where Jazz dance rooted. Thus following are plainly what I think.

Take this combo for example. How would a Jazz choreographer approach it using the same elements? Less magnitude, more hip movements, less momentum transferred from one movement to the other, more rhythmic.

Let’s examine the Modern version of this piece. The first phrase, the circling was initiated by weight shifting. The momentum from one phrase initializes the following one. The controlled hand standing, including the little foot twist and jump landing on the top of the feet. For the phrase where we lean on the foot top, then the shank, again the weight shift to the supporting leg is emphasized.

We can ask a more general question: how can we borrow elements from other dance form in modern dance? How can those well-developed dance forms affect / nurture Modern dance?

March 24, 2004

In today's rehearsal, Collette designed a small duet for Gale and I. It is interesting to work close with a choreographer throughout the creation of a piece. You got to see the development of ideas: how space is used, how dancers are grouped, how phrases are used in different variations, how transit and how movements are utilized to achieve certain purpose etc..

This duet has a contrast of still and dynamic, up and down. It started as a sketch. First the space was defined: diagonal → down stage → upstage. Then the schema of the partners' part was devised, followed by refinement. For the first walking part, some swift steps were added to make it more interesting. For the part where I sit on Gale's thigh, I was asked to lean on Gale for a moment before sliding down. This is one example to make contrast of still and dynamic.

For partners work, we were also required to only move when getting the momentum from partners. This is an important element that makes partners work interesting. The first time Gale and I practised the duet, because we were not familiar with the work yet, unconsciously we were using this rule: only move when you are made to — your partner's push/pull arrived before you realize what to do next. So we actually had good effect the first try. However, after several times, we were both very clear about the sequence, then it happens we moved according to each own count, and the push/pull reduced to a gesture. The third stage was that we waited consciously for the partner's cue. Compared to the first two stages, now our movements have the quality of smoothness and interaction with each other.

March 25, 2004

Today Ruth Solomon taught at the “Anatomy as a Master Image” workshop. Her exercises mainly focused on the following ideas. First, the use of vocalization as assistance to movements. Second, the use of pelvis to initialize movements. Third, the use of the hip socket of the supporting leg to provide stability. Following I will inspect each of them in detail.

Ruth advocates using sound during exercises for several reasons. It helps 1) to concentrate on the movement; 2) on the continuation of the movement; 3) on the awareness of the body; and 4) a sense of the whole class as a single unit. My understanding is that Ruth wants the dancers to vocalize exhaling. We know breathing is important in initiating movements. Such vocalization amplifies its functionality. Sometimes I ignore breathing, the consequence is a partially fulfilled movement. With the sound on exhaling, it is easier to avoid this. The sound of your neighbors also makes you aware what and how your classmates are doing. One can adjust herself / himself accordingly.

We tried several floor exercises that are initiated by the pelvis. As the gravity center or close to the gravity center of the body, pelvis is crucial in providing strong support for the body. Also, it is more efficient if a movement is initialized by abdominal muscle.

In her exercises, Ruth also emphasizes the stability of the supporting leg, even when we are lying on our back. The floor serves as a support of our body, similar to the use of barres in Ballet. It helps to find the body alignment. Thus, it is important to keep the “supporting” leg’s hip socket aligned even we don’t really use it as this position. Otherwise, the exercises lose their purpose. The stability provided by the alignment of the hip sockets allows a dancer to move efficiently. Further, the continuation of a movement can contribute as the momentum of the next one. By using such kind of momentum, efficiency again can be achieved.

March 25, 2004

The lecture “Are Dancers Born or Made?” given by Gigi Berardi was part of the Somatic Arts Festival. It was both interesting and enlightening. As one of the pioneers that study how kinesiology and Dance Medicine can help to advance dancers, Gigi has her original thoughts on finding balance between science and art. Her talk focused on three topics, as follows.

Firstly, the science of dance informs the art. She argued that the science has been much advanced compared to ten or twenty years ago. Using the example of Stuart McGill, she showed that how the discovery in science helped him to develop exercises to build abdominal musculature. Compared to those traditional methods, the new set of exercises reduces the risk for injury in lower back.

Secondly, all dancers have to learn to work with limitations. Gigi pointed out that a dancer’s best teacher is himself/herself. Although, dancers might not know the mechanics from a scientist’s perspective, they find themselves through trainings, errors, and observing others. Instead of overhauling his / her body, a dancer should find the type of dance or company that is suited for his / her body condition.

Last but not least, the dancer is a lifelong learner. In Gigi’s opinion, dance is multidiscipline in nature. Thus, to achieve a higher level, a dancer should try a variety of approaches.

This talk clarifies several concepts to me. Firstly, Somatic Discipline deals with advancing dance with a variety of approaches. Before, I practise different things: aerobic classes, abs, Yoga and workout, bearing the thought that different types of exercise build strength on different body parts; dance requires all. This was very naïve thought. Gigi told us, “Goods` methods converge”. Although from different perspectives, there are connections between them. By exposing oneself to different methods, a dancer can get a more comprehensive understanding of the art of dance.

Secondly, it is important to find the balance between what your body can do and what cannot. I think this is hard to recognize. There are certain things that only take time and training to achieve. And there are also certain things that one’s body cannot handle. I

guess what we should do is to work with our body conditions. We should be clear of the objectives of an exercise, and try to achieve it with our limitations. A good example is that at every stage, one has his / her own first position. Overturning the feet cause one to lose control on the rotation.

Thirdly, Somatic Discipline helps dancers to identify areas of neuromuscular tenseness and efficient movements because of poor alignments. This is done through practice, no other way around. To repeat what we know is one part; another important part is to try new movements, which does not have to be perfect. This procedure teaches us more everyday, making us a lifelong learner.

March 30th, 2004

Andrea gave a class today. The focus was pelvis stability and to initiate movements from the center. During the warm-up part, there was one exercise where the dancer lie on her/his back, and twist the waist to turn on her tummy. She explained that the muscle in the waist area initiates the turn. When she demonstrated, the turn looked effortless. But when I tried it out, I couldn't turn over without the help of other muscles: from the legs, even arms. Was this because my abdominal muscle doesn't have the required strength?

Andrea pointed out to me that when I bend my upper body, I tended to let go too much that I ended up bend from my waist. Collette also corrected me several times for the same problem. I can correct this in a superficial way: just bend less. However, I am still not quite clear about the reasoning behind this. Why do we choose to do the less bent version instead of the bent from the waist version? Is this purely for choreographical reason? Or the former provide us more support and stability? If so, why? Or ask from another perspective, what is the purpose of this exercise?

April 4th, 2004

Collette's friend A watched us for the rehearsal today. We made quite some progress. This was the first time that an outsider, specifically, a professional dancer, watched our piece, and gave us comments based on her observation. We benefited a lot from it.

First, sharpen the contrast between quite moments and dynamic ones. When it is slow, be sure to fulfill the moments. Don't wait for next movement. For the dynamic sequences, should add energy to them, making them powerful. Such contrast makes the piece interesting.

Second, pay attention of what your fellow dancers are doing. Are you doing the sequence the same way in terms of count, the placement of arms, head, back and feet etc.. In fact, after demonstrating what each of us is doing, we were able to standardize the main phrases.

Third, be precise about timing. We should count and be conscious about at what count what is supposed to happen, especially for several crucial synchronization points. For example, after the big cannon, the lift from partner part should happen together.

Fourth, make it realistic for partners' work. Don't wait for your partner: it gives the audience an expectation of what is about to happen. Be pulled / pushed when your partner pull / push you.

Fifth, pay attention to details. Be specific about the hands and feet.

Sixth, add action to the movements. Have an image about what you are doing. For example, step in the water on a beach. Such acting enriches the movements and adds quality to the movements.

This was the first rehearsal that we went over the whole piece after it got finished. Being familiar with the movements, we started to look into details. Those comments are absolutely relevant in sharpening this work.

April 6th, 2004

In today’s class, as a warm up exercise, we practiced ideokinesis. The basis idea is as follows. By visualizing the internal mechanism of the movements, and have such images in mind, one can improve movement efficiency. The reason is that such visualization signals the brain how to coordinate the movement. Furthermore, even just by concentrating on the joint, once can actually warm it up. I don’t doubt this would work. But I think it takes some training for this to work effectively.

This exercise reminds me of the practice of Qi, a branch in Chinese martial art, with its literal meaning being “the air”. When one practices Qi, he / she as well visualizes the route of Qi in the body. As a concentrated power, Qi is “driven” (by the mind) along certain route, affecting the joints, muscle, organs etc. on its way. Many long-time practitioners claim to gain much greater power in their body than otherwise.

Advanced as it is today, modern science understands little about “the mind” and its functionality. Anatomy cannot find the existence of “mind”. However, in practice, many forms of exercises rooted in old cultures, such as Yoga and Qi, are focus on the use of it.

For me, who seldom practice meditation, the hard part is the concentration. It is easy to have an image, but it is very difficult to keep my mind on the images.

===== Second handin =====

April 13th, 2004

Today we learned an exciting sequence. It is exciting, since we “fly” — there are one jump after another throughout the sequence. Exactly because there are so many jumps, it is hard. How can you keep the quality of each jump cross the floor? How can you control the landing such that you won’t miss the next movement?

It was not easy for me. Quite often, I found myself stuck after the first jump. I couldn’t find the momentum for the next jump except using the swing of the arms. Yet it didn’t give enough momentum needed. It was easier to connect the second and the third one because they are essentially two sautés.

What is the secret trick? —Plie. As plain as it might sound, it can never be emphasized too much in movements. How can one jump high? —Plie low. How can one land stably? —Use plie. How to transit from one jump to the next? —Still, plie! Plie provides a strong momentum for jumps, and transition between big movements. Plie creates contrasts and dynamics: low and high, still and motion. It naturally transfers the momentum from one movement to the next and keeps the energy high.

This rule can be used in various places, such as handstand and suspension. For the former I still cannot lift my butt with both legs. However, when I try it with a big plie, I get higher. The rest is practice. For the latter, in Collette’s piece, definitely plie helps to create suspension.

April 18th, 2004

Today was the tech for Collette's piece, where we saw her solo part the first time. It was amazing! She uses quite some movements she taught us in class. Yet when she performs, it seems so different.

I saw a great deal of passion, suspension, and power. The whole sequence is challenging. It requires great strength from the abdomen and upper arms. However, Collette is able to do it in an "effortless" way. The movements seem just natural to her! Hand stands, leaps, sliding, flipping..., throughout which there are plenty of suspension, which gives quality to the movements.

Collette's solo is inspiring. When we continued the piece after her solo, I felt I danced differently—I consciously tried more to "magnify" the movements, and to inject more passion. In fact, I was not the only one who felt the same way. Gale expressed similar feelings.

Definitely I learned many technique detail from watching her, for example, the use of breathing, to let the head go, to initiate movements from the abdomen etc. However, the differences between Collette's performance and ours are still mysteries and shocking to me. Some questions come to my mind. What make the difference? Can we ever dance like her? This goes back to the question raised in a lecture I went to: is a dancer born or made? Or let us examine Collette's growing trace. Had she ever danced like us?

April 22th, 2004

Today's class was interesting. Collette wanted us to consciously differentiate two types of movements: movements initiated from the muscle and movements initiated from the bones. This concept is a bit weird to me. I don't quite understand what is to move from bones.

Movements can be initiated from different parts of the body, for example, from the fingertips, or from the abdomen. If you initiate from the center, you pay less effort and get better support from the body (thus can be more stabilized). But, what does it mean to initiate the movements from the bones?

Collette asked the class to cross the floor with each of the two types movements. When they were trying the "bone movements", their movements seemed relaxed, and the only parts in the body to make effort were the joints and pelvis cage. But even this type of movements is driven by muscles — muscles that are close to the joints and pelvis. Bones by themselves cannot move. Or am I wrong?

In contrast, when we did the "muscle movements", people tried to make their movements rigid and disconnected. Is that what this term means in this context?

The new combo we learned today made a lot use of the floor and it was challenging. Well, not all the parts were hard. To me, the leg switch, sweep thing was really hard. I couldn't glide at all. In the class, Collette was the only one who could glide. I thought we didn't really master the technique to do it.

April 22-24, 2004

Finally, this weekend we performed at the Spring Concert. It was a great experience. This is the first time I took part in such a professional performance. It was really interesting to participate throughout the whole process, to see how this concert evolved during the past two weeks.

Monday at the preview concert was the first time we performed our piece on the stage and it was the worst one we ever had during our rehearsal. It felt so different on the stage, space-wise and light-wise. We were not confident about the layout of the space. The strong side lights almost blinded me, making me feel timid. Even the music sounds different in such an environment. In a sudden, time flows faster! We were constantly behind the music. It felt awful!

During teching, we were able to get familiar with the space and the lighting on stage. I felt much more comfortable out there on the stage. Also we were getting used to dance in the costumes. (Thanks to Collette who took trouble and time to make them fitted so well!) At the dress rehearsal, our performance improved greatly!

The whole weekend of performance was just great fun! It was time to harvest and to enjoy. Each time, when the music started at Collette's solo, watching her performance, I was always touched, my eyes got wet. It was so expressive, it was a pure monologue of the soul. Each time this solo inspired me, making me want to dance. I felt devoted when I was out there under the spotlights. Breathing, plie, suspense, roll over, jump... I forgot about the audience. I was just there, dancing, like nobody was watching.

Thanks to Collette, who gave me this opportunity, who choreographed this beautiful piece, and inspired us in each of the past rehearsals.

April 27th, 2004

Collette's solo was so cool, I once thought it would be great if we could learn it. Well, today, she indeed put part of the solo into our new combination! It was so much fun. As usual, this sequence is full of dynamics. The movements are very cute. I enjoyed a lot.

Unfortunately, I had (have) some physical problems. My right ankle hurts. If I put weight on it, I feel cracks inside it. It feels like it is not solid. This first happened in this class when we were doing second position releve. After that, it comes and goes. I tried to massage it, it does help, but still cannot stop it for good. Sometime, the pain from the ankle distracted me from concentrating on the sequence.

I don't know if bad things tend to happen altogether. But near the end of the class, after finishing one round of the practice, I had a black out — for a moment I could see nothing. The noises sounded very far away. I could hear my heart beating hard. I stopped practicing.

I always have Ballet before this class. And there are only 40min break between those two classes. I usually eat some fruits or yogurt during the break. It was fine. But the past weekend I felt exhausted. I had a cold... Might be part of the reason...

I want to have a strong body, strong enough to support me for my dream — dancing.

April 29th, 2004

Maybe because of some good rest for the past two days, and some food between my Ballet and Modern classes, I physically felt strong today. My ankle didn't bother me and I could enjoy this class. However in general, I had the feeling that the whole class was tired, less motivated compared to the beginning of the semester. It might be because it gets very close to the end of the semester, and being driven by people are overwhelmed with heavy workload.

We were taught a plie exercise. Part of the upper body swings involves some arm movements. Collette taught this for the warm up before our performance. At that time, I didn't get it. It was hard to see how her arm made those circles from behind. And it was fast. I still had a great deal of trouble to follow today. She demonstrated several times, I could follow about the directions, but I was not sure about the detail. I really wanted to ask, but I didn't ask because I didn't want to slow down the class, and seemed like nobody else was marking. To my surprise, when we did this exercise by ourselves, I found out no one (at least in front of me) could finish it! Apparently, other people didn't get it either... But they just let it go, like me!

After class, I asked Collette about it, and she explained clearly. I got it! It only took a minute. I should have asked. It is irresponsible to let it go when you don't understand the material.

May 4th, 2004

Today we tried many interesting things. At the beginning of the class, we did a partner warm up. With a partner, we explored different contact levels with improvisation. It was fun. My partner and I each led alternatively. When given a signal, for example, a different or a big movement, the other would follow the new pattern. Sometime it was obvious to follow, sometimes you just have to guess what your partner wanted. One time she put her arms around my waist, I thought she would pull me, but she lifted me. It was a surprise. There were moments we both ended up on the floor and were not sure what to do next. I would try some contact with her, and sometimes it led to next movement.

Collette talked about the locking of joints during our plie exercise. I realized that it was a problem for me. When I do tendu, plie or round de jamb, or just simply stand, I tend to lock my knees to be straight and stabilized. Contrary to the intuition, by unlocking the knees, allowing a little space between the joints, I found myself more grounded and more stable! Yet I found it was hard to keep unlocked. I have to consciously relax my knees. I think the reason is that I am too used to keep the joints lock. Plus the difference is subtle. —By unlocking the joints, it doesn't mean the knees will bend. The knees are still straight, yet unlocked.

I like the new combo we learned. The “locking” vs. “unlocking” theory can be applied to it too. In this combo, there were lots of “surprises” (as Collette put it) — rich contrast between straight and plie. Some people locked their knees when straight, which made the following plie rigid and losing the momentum of suspense. I thought that was one of the important technique for this combo. And it was hard. I consciously tried to unlock my knees, it drew my attention away from the sequence, I thought my movements were sloppy.