

Dancing with Heart

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Time passes fast. I still remember the first class, where I couldn't feel the weight of my head. And all of a sudden, it is already the final week. During the past semester, we, the class as a whole, have learned so much from this class and from Collette. I could witness the change in my fellow classmates as time went by. We are more confident about our movements, and we dance more — not simply repeating the combination, but really dancing, following the basic techniques, yet adding our own interpretations. We enjoy it more!

Usually the teachers of our technique classes are dancers themselves. They took a similar path to the one we now are on. They have more training and more experience. It is really great that when you take a technique class, you don't only learn concrete techniques, but get to know the style of the teacher as an artist. You get to know his / her own artistic perspectives, since every dancer / artist has his / her own interpretation about dance. The more you learn, the more comprehensively you understand dance. Collette is a unique dancer and artist, her movements are highly branded by her philosophy about movements. Throughout this semester, I have learned a lot, and my body feels great improvements. It is not possible to enumerate them all, here I will only list some important ones.

First, body alignment. A big part of this class focused on body alignment and I benefited greatly from it. Different from some teachers, Collette emphasizes natural body alignment. Instead of forcing your body to a locked position, she suggests we should keep soft, creating more range of motion. It is the center of the body — the abdomen that

should give strong support to the movements. An over-stretched body loses stability and freedom to move. This is very true. Trained in classical Chinese dance when I was young, which emphasizes being “straight”, I had a bad alignment: lifted rib cage and tailbone and locked knees. This even becomes a habit — if I walk for long, my spine starts hurting because it is not in the neutral position! After all these classes, I feel a much better alignment of my body. I am aware of my center more, am more grounded and stabilized.

Second, suspension and momentum. Sharp contrast is one important characteristic of Collette’s movements. She uses suspension for transition, to create momentum, thus making the movements interesting. From the very first class, we were introduced to this type of movements. It is in every combo we learned. While it looks easy, it really is a hard technique. It is about control vs. letting it go, and the timing of the two. Sometimes I got it, and then I really enjoyed the sequences, because they became natural and fluent. Sometimes I was stuck in some detail, and then it blocked the momentum, making the movement awkward. I noticed that my head was rather rigid. It tended to keep tight. The head weight shifting exercises help. Now I can really feel the weight of the head, and the momentum created by shifting such weight. Although in combos, focusing on other details, once in a while I realized that my head became tight again.

Third, plie, plie, and plie. How to reach higher? Plie lower. How to jump higher? Plie lower. How to lift the hip over on the hand-standing? Big plie. One can never emphasize plie too much! We practiced plie every class. Yet, when doing the sequences, we didn’t make enough use of it. We tended not to plie enough. Sometimes in order to keep up with the tempo, I made smaller movements, including the plies. But to the contrary, a deep plie actually helps to speed up the movements, since it provides momentum, making the

movements easier. One of my experiences on this was the hand-standing. Originally, I had great trouble to lift both legs together. In one class, Collette told us to plie more. I tried it during the cross-floor exercise. Amazingly, I almost flipped over — I totally lifted the hip with the legs! Big plie creates suspensions, adding quality to the movements. Sometimes I feel my knees are somehow too weak to support me on deep plie position. I cannot go very low on second position grand plie. We are taught to allow the tail to lift a bit, to create some range of motion. This helps me. By doing that, I could squat lower.

Barbara Grubel once mentioned that cross-training is important for a dancer. This cannot be truer in Collette's class. Being a long-time practitioner of Pilates (and perhaps other exercises as well), Collette has very strong upper arms and abdomen. This gives her more dimensions to move in. She can lift her body up by one arm, suspend on hand-standing forever, glide lightly on the floor, and roll at will. Those are the tough movements, requiring both technique and strength. Having mastered the techniques, practiced hard, we could also achieve most of the movements, with less magnitude. But still, there are some things I cannot do, for example, the gliding from one leg to the other, or the standing on one hand. I think the reason is lack of strength. The good thing is, with more and more exercises, I get more strength. We did the “hand, hand, foot, foot” hand-standing exercise cross-floor last class. I could do it with good suspension quality. It felt easy. However, back one month or two ago, when we first did this exercise, I couldn't get any suspension. It was lift and then drop.

Last but not least, effortless movements. There is a balance between control and effortlessness. Being trained as a dancer, many of us tend to control their bodies too much. For example, straight legs, tight upper body and pretty pose. The consequence is,

although the movements look pretty, they don't have life — you are doing the movements, but not dancing. The effortless movements emphasize momentums and following your body. Sometimes if we don't master the “effortlessness” well, the movements might look sloppy, yet it is worthwhile to gain the feeling. I think there are two ways to approach the perfect movements. One is to strictly follow the sequence, then once you are familiar with it, you do it more effortlessly. The other is to first find the right feelings about the momentums even if it looks sloppy; once you get it you refine the movements. The second meaning of “effortless” is to initiate the movements from the center of the body, thus freeing the limbs and the torso—they just need to follow! I found it is really hard to relax. Sometimes when I just “dance” randomly, I feel good, since my body is free. But when I follow a sequence, especially a new one, I tend to struggle hard for the details, and tightening up my body.

This class was very challenging in techniques, strength and stamina, each class fully loaded. I almost always felt exhausted towards the end. But Collette's demo was consistently full of energy and inspiring. Following her demo, I could stick to the end with all the strength I could gather. I didn't waste time. Although my movements, technique-wise or strength-wise, are still far from perfect, I can proudly say that I tried my best and I feel the huge improvements. Thanks to Collette's patience and hard work in teaching, I learned so many techniques. Thanks to Collette's passion for dancing, I gained deeper understanding about it: in Collette, I see a spirit, a dancer dancing with her heart and soul.