



Ellen Weinstein

How I teach National Dance Institute's Curriculum

BY JENNY DALZELL

PHOTOGRAPHED BY MATTHEW MURPHY

In a lower Manhattan public school, more than 35 fifth-graders swarm around a piano to learn new song lyrics: "I try to make myself believe that planet Earth turns slowly." It's the end of a 45-minute National Dance Institute (NDI) class, and the first moment of stillness. Flushed, sweating and smiling from ear to ear, they've just been shimmying, hopping and kicking to a Charleston rhythm, rehearsing a

fast-moving dance about the solar system. Propelled by dance challenges, games and constructive feedback, the students stayed intensely focused when learning the new "galaxy steps." Leading the pack of supernovas, wildly demonstrating and speeding around the stage, was Ellen Weinstein, NDI's artistic director.

Weinstein, who took the reins in 1995, has solidified NDI's mission to expand the in-school dance program

and develop a teacher-training program. "Our goal is to use the arts to empower children to take control of their lives," she says. "I want to boost their confidence and make them feel they can do anything they set their minds to." Each year NDI chooses a theme—this year is Science and the Arts Play Together. "We want them to fall in love with the arts and use dance as a pathway to learn about the world," Weinstein says. "We have them doing research and looking up science topics, like DNA. We get even the most disinterested student excited and passionate about learning."

Although NDI in-class combinations aren't set, the movement vocabulary offered and the teaching artists' approaches to those steps are the same across the map. "We give dancers immediate critical feedback, and we single out individual dancers as models of excellence," Weinstein says. In teacher training, she stresses the importance of making eye contact with each student so they feel cared about and important. Teachers move at impossible speeds to keep students in action. "We're constantly turning the room around. There are four fronts, and then we split the kids in half to face each other, and that center line is a new front," she says. This tactic not only gives students ample opportunity to master the steps and lead their peers, it also allows the teachers to clearly see each dancer.

Despite a hectic schedule as artistic director, Weinstein has continued to teach in the same school where she started, over 20 years ago. Classes are organized traditionally, beginning with a fairly stationary warm-up of coordination exercises and stretches. Weinstein teaches movement fundamentals—like bending knees and lifting legs—and translates formal ballet steps into actions that can be done in sneakers on a gym floor. "For tendus, we teach them to put their legs right in front of their noses—just like in ballet," she says. While they aren't brushing their feet through the

floor or pushing their rotation, students learn concepts of moving through space in an exact rhythm.

And one way of keeping kids engaged, she says, is to use images and pedestrian actions they are familiar with; for example, “washing the table” (see the step-by-step). “We work with movements that are challenging for them, but achievable. They are high-energy, accessible to children and able to be manipulated into chore-

ography,” Weinstein says. She relishes the moments when students master challenging steps and phrases. “It’s the ‘Ah-ha!’ moment when a child says, ‘I got it!’ with energy and joy oozing out of every pore. Those moments make it all worthwhile,” she says.

Here, Weinstein’s students Wyman Huang, 11, and Tyshawn Gibson, 11, demonstrate a few basic movements from class that teach coordination and body-space awareness.

Founded by Jacques d’Amboise in 1976, National Dance Institute is an in-school dance program serving elementary and middle school children, as well as offering programs for those mentally and physically disabled. Upstate New York native **Ellen Weinstein** met d’Amboise in the late ’70s as a dance major at SUNY Purchase, when he was dean of the department. After eight years of performing professionally with regional ballet companies, Weinstein reconnected with d’Amboise, and, in 1985, joined NDI as a teaching artist. By analyzing and codifying d’Amboise’s teaching methods, Weinstein aided in the creation of NDI’s teacher-training program (established in 1998) and has helped NDI grow to the size it is today—teaching dance to more than 4,000 NYC students each year. She was also vital in the development of Associates of National Dance Institute, NDI’s affiliate programs that bring dance to more than 30,000 students across the United States.

WASH THE TABLE: This fast triplet rhythm followed by a “hold” is repeated for a total of eight counts.



Hands on the Table (preparation): This position physically and mentally prepares students for takeoff. Stand with feet in parallel with bent knees. Hold your arms in front of your belly button, elbows bent, palms facing down, like they are resting on a table.



count 1, From “Hands on the Table,” move your arms to the right (hands still facing down like you’re wiping the table), at the same time swiveling your hips in the same direction. Move your feet together in opposition of your hands and hips.



count 2, Sweep your hands and hips to the left, feet to the right.



count 3, Sweep your hands and hips to the right, feet to the left.

count 4 Freeze and make a picture.

counts 5, 6, 7, 8 Repeat the same movements, but begin sweeping your hands and hips to the left side first—the phrase finishes with weight to the left.

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NDI TENDUS (To the front with high arms): Begin with your feet together in parallel, arms down by your sides.



count 1, Extend your right foot forward, in line with your nose, at the same time reaching both arms to the ceiling. Keep your weight on your back leg.
count 2, Bring your right foot back to meet the other, and move your arms back to your sides.

counts 3, 4, Repeat the sequence using your left leg, reaching your arms up.

THE "MATRIX" MOVE



Weinstein demonstrating the "Matrix" move

This freestyle movement helps students reach to their back space. Try to keep both feet on the floor as you extend your arms and lean in all directions—especially backwards—floating your torso and arms freely.

Go to www.dance-teacher.com to see clips from Weinstein's class and watch Tyshawn and Wyman demonstrate the moves.