

## Interview with Jen Littlefield, December 2009

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Fall semester 2009, Jen Littlefield taught the session before mine at Pace University, so I frequently had the opportunity to observe the last few minutes of her class. She was obviously a gifted teacher. Students took the work seriously and wanted to do well. They'd stay to ask questions, and Jen would work with them one-on-one. She was positive, upbeat and caring, yet discipline and hard work were clearly part of the deal.

Once the semester was over, Jen and I got together to talk about dance and voice and how they relate. Following are excerpts from our conversation:

**JM:** *The word placement is used differently, depending upon the discipline. What does placement mean to a dancer?*

JL: A lot of times, especially with beginners, you talk about placement as in alignment. Getting your body to match up with itself, so that nothing is over-tucked, nothing is arched, nothing is to the right, to the left; that you find the neutral place for your body. And then, once you know where that neutral place is and it's strong—because then you have to build strength in that neutral and in your center—you get to start playing with that and twisting it and moving around it because you know that it's always there.

And in the different dance disciplines, there's definitely different *proper* placement. With ballet, it comes from a very turned out place and it's a very elongated, pulled up place where you try to think that you're lighter than air and where you carry yourself in that way. When you get into modern, it's much more grounded and you're parallel; it's not necessarily heavy but it's more into the floor and you get to push and work with the floor instead of always trying to glide above it.

And then you work with tap and that's all about being as loose as possible. So if you have really great feet as a ballerina, you're most likely not going to be a good tapper, because your feet have to be so placed and so held and so controlled in

ballet. When you get to tap, it's all about having the loosest ankle you could possibly have, to just let that go to make all those sounds. So when you're a dancer trying to do multiple techniques and multiple disciplines, you have to learn how to find the different placements. But there's always a base, and you always start with that base, that central placement.

*How do you consider yourself right now in your career?*

I consider myself a teacher/choreographer, first and foremost, who still dances, but I've been focusing more behind the scenes. Right now, my student base is mostly college undergraduates. I have taught all ages, pre-school through adults. I've been choreographing a lot of musical theatre and just recently did a couple of showcases that were more concert dance, and I danced with them doing my choreography.

*How did you come to this place, pedagogically and as a performer?*

I grew up as a dancer. I danced every day. Five days a week, from three to nine, I was at the studio, mostly because I started assisting my dance teacher. I would assist her lower level classes and then take my own classes. We'd have rehearsals and we'd have these professional choreographers come in from LA to set dances and give us weekend workshops. I really wanted to be a dancer. And then through assisting, I started to love teaching, and my studio owner gave me my own classes my senior year of high school.

I moved to LA to dance and then...

*You started out in Colorado, then you moved to LA.*

I moved to LA for two years and I trained a lot. I moved there with basically no money, so I had to have a full-time job, but I love taking class so much and that's really where I got rid of all of my rigidness and bad habits and started to dance. Then I went to school at the University of Chicago, and since they didn't have an actual theatre department, everything was pretty much extra curricular. I taught my own classes, we directed and choreographed our own shows. I realized that I could do choreography well and was teaching again and I really enjoyed teaching.

So, after school I moved to New York, and it took a while, but then I started assisting and that's how I fell into Pace. I just realized that I have a way of

helping people who don't necessarily understand dance. Especially working with actors, I have a way of making them feel like they can move and dance, and then they start feeling what it's like to actually be a dancer.

*Yes, you can feel their excitement...*

I think another good thing is that I can create a really safe space to let them explore, and to let them fall, and not get it perfect but to know that it's still okay, and that doesn't happen a lot. But they need that, especially in school. That's where you get to fail, that's where you get to try things.

I shifted my focus a little bit. It's not about the tricks anymore; it's not necessarily about the pizzazz, although that can be in there. But it's about what will serve the story and what will serve the singers while they're singing but still not be boring. I can still give you a *dance*, if you want one, but I've gotten a lot better at figuring out what needs to happen so they can sing as well as dance, and still get the acting in there.

*Will you say a bit about basic positions in dance for the sake of singing teachers and acting teachers who may be unfamiliar with those?*

There are basic positions, both in jazz and ballet, like feet positions—first, second, third, fourth and fifth—and basic arm positions [Figure 1]. And then, everyone does chaîné turns, whether you do them in plié, whether you do them in relevé. Everybody does pirouettes, whether they're turned out or turned in. Those are the basic moving positions, the basic movements, chaînés, chassés, in jazz, modern, and ballet. All have these basic starting positions, plié, relevé [Figure 2], and then finding your alignment in terms of when your body is upright, versus when you can bend over. Everyone has a basic leap, a jeté [Figure 3], whether you can bend the knee through, whether you lift the leg straight.

So in the warm-up, you start by finding your full turn-in, your full turnout, how low can you plié, doing a lunge to stretch out your hamstrings while keeping your front shin straight up and down, and pulling through your heel and stretching your back leg. And then when you stretch it up where you make a triangle with your lower body, having your hips in place, so that one hip is not lifted and that both your feet are pointing to the same wall and that your shoulders are straight over and one shoulder's not lifted. It's about finding all of these positions and thinking, "Okay your hip is lifted now, push it back." You're sitting on the floor and your legs are out in second position, don't turn your

knees in, turn your knees and your feet out and lift up and out. Don't hunch over, because you're not stretching anything if you don't lift out of your body to stretch. So it's all these little basic...

*But essential...*

Yes, essential because if you just go through the motions, you're never going to actually stretch anything. So you have to know what it feels like to lift up and over, and to stretch with your body so that you get a full side stretch and so that you know your butt's not tucked under when you're sitting in a second position, which means you're not even stretching your hamstrings. Does that make any sense?

*Oh, it makes perfect sense!*

And I think even more than the moving aspect of dance, even just the idea of the warm-up and what you have to start thinking about in order to move your body to hit the warm-up positions, is something that could be really helpful for singers. That's another way that you could promote awareness of the muscles away from singing. It takes the—I don't know if anxiety's the right word—but when you just start to feel like, I have to do everything right when I'm singing and I have to think about this and about this...whereas if you just learned how to use those muscles in a different setting, where it was more relaxed, then when you came back to singing you'd be like, "Oh, I feel where that is and..."

*I think you've hit on something very important.*

*What do you expect to observe in a dancer who is well trained or in a performer who moves well, with or without training?*

I think the biggest thing is that you expect it to look effortless. You expect it to just be there.

*Wow! I proposed the same question to teachers of singing and they said, "I expect it to sound effortless."*

It's the same thing, because once you've figured out everything that's there, it should just happen. I shouldn't see tension in your shoulders because you're trying so hard to hold on to your pirouette or your leg going up. I should see the music. Your movement should make me hear the music differently than I

probably would, because your movement is accenting that music. So I might be thinking, "How did you just do that?" But not "Oh, well your leg could have been turned out more." It should look like nothing, like you were just made to do it, and I guess that's what you hope to see in a great performance. I think that's what you should always aspire to. It's so funny, because something that you put so much effort into and so much training, you then want to look like, "Oh, I can just do it." And I think that's the ultimate goal that everyone strives for.

*Granted the journey is different from one person and one genre to another, but do you have any suggestions for someone who wants to be a dancer?*

It depends on how far you want to go. A lot of the ones I train right now are singers who want to get through a dance call so then they can wow them with their singing, because they're singers first. But they want enough of a foundation and enough technique and enough ability to get through that dance call. So for them, it all boils down to repetition. You just have to keep taking dance classes. You have to take as many classes as you can. It's never going to come because you will it to; you have to keep putting the effort into it. It's how you focus your time in those classes.

*Terrific!*

*I'd like to ask you to comment on six major elements of voice training: alignment (which you've addressed already), breathing, range, resonance, articulation, and connection, or the acting dimension. Are there are comparable components in dance training and, if so, how are they different from voice?*

*Breathing* is interesting with dancing.

*Yes, that's where singers and singing teachers often find contradictions.*

It's funny because a lot of times we forget to breathe, because we get so into the moment that we just kind of lose that. But then on the other side, there are so many dance techniques, especially modern, that are based solely on the breath. I've danced in numbers where we created a movement and then put it to the music afterwards. There were never really any counts or any musical cues to follow and so you only followed the breath. And so, it's interesting because it's different. But I don't think it's unhelpful for singers to be able to work on their breathing while moving.

*Not at all...*

And something we always tell dancers, especially beginning dancers, is, "Remember your breath." If you hold your breath, it tenses everything up when you're dancing. If you don't have a continual flow, then you're too tense and you can't be relaxed. And so, there is a component of breath [in dance]; it's just a different one.

I think *Range* is probably close to *flexibility*, in the sense that your foot can be on the floor or your foot can be up by your head. And that is something that you can build over time, but it sure as heck helps if you're just born with it! And the people that are born with that nice flexibility always have a much easier time, and then, for them it's about building strength to maintain that flexibility, because you don't want to just be this gummy that can throw your leg out and above your head, but you can't bring it back.

*In voice work, what usually comes to mind is a wide variety of vocal pitches, and that, too, is about flexibility and about being able to manage it all so that it makes sense.*

I think that would correspond to finding the level of intensity...like when do you dance really slow and easy and when do you full-on power through everything and thrash it out? Finding that point where you can be spinning around in circles and then you stop on a dime. So, for us, that's called *control*. It's going beyond where you think you can, not letting it go so far that you fall, but you bring it straight back on that center, back in that placement.

*Resonance* would probably be close to *style* in dancing: the difference between Fosse movement and Twyla Tharp movement and Alvin Ailey movement and Savion Glover movement (except that's tap so that kind of throws a big loop in it). But if you're just going from the same technique, so you're in this kind of jazzy modern technique, then how you posture your body and how you shape your body from Fosse to Alvin Ailey. You have to be able to take the technical shapes and positions that you know and mold them into the style that's needed. You're still going to walk, but with Fosse you're going to walk turned in and shoulders hunched, with Alvin Ailey you going to walk with your chest up and your heel first, then the toe, but it's still the same walk.

*Articulation?*

It's the little things, and being able to do things precisely and quickly. It's the finesse of the dance, those final touches.

*You referred to the acting dimension when you spoke of telling the story in a musical, but what about other material?*

I think a lot of times with dance the *connection* [acting dimension] isn't necessarily there, because the connection can be with the music and finding the musicality. When I choreograph concert-style pieces, I like songs that have so many different levels in the music itself that I have much more to play with in what I accent. So, for me, that connection is completely with the music. You might not have heard that there was a cello playing in there, but I'm going to do my movement right to that cello and make you hear that cello line.

*This seems parallel to absolute music. For example, if I'm playing a concerto or a sonata, there's seldom a story line as such; there's a musical unfolding, and there are relationships and conversations, but not a drama with words.*

Right, and I think that's true for dance. We talk a lot about musicality. You can do steps and they can be on the count, but if you're not hitting the accents in the music, if you're not getting the feeling of the music, because music always evokes a feeling—you can always go against that, but a lot of times your movement should enhance the musicality. And if the song has lyrics, if that song is already telling a good story, there's nothing wrong with enhancing that story with your movement, along with the instrumentation and the range that the voice is covering, and finding all those things at once.

In musical theatre, you do try to tell a story, but I think there are also ways to get interesting stories across that could be interpreted in a lot of ways. I feel like good dancing makes you either hear something you didn't hear, or think about something you didn't necessarily think about.

*What about phrasing? For a singer/actor, a phrase has a certain length that is directly connected to breath. Is there anything comparable in dance?*

Dancing is such an aerobic activity, especially doing pieces, doing a six-minute dance. You go, go, go, go, go, and stop. So, when you're just constantly moving, you're still breathing...

*And your body's taking care of it?*

Your body takes care of it, because you really don't have time to think about your breath and so it just is there. And then, if your choreographer's nice to you, you'll have spots where you can stop and have a breath and really get it back to normal before you go again. So, there's a different sort of breath management, in that you have to build up your ability to move for a longer period of time without consciously taking breath in and out. And then (I did talk about this) some modern stuff is definitely taken off the breath, where the movement starts with the breath.

When you're doing controlled movement, like in classes, usually your breath can help you relax your muscles, so a lot of times I find, especially if I'm in ballet classes—when I'm trying to hold my leg up there and turn it out and keep it out there—the more I breathe and the more I send—I always think of pushing with my breath and sending my breath into my leg—the more relaxed my muscles get and the easier it is. So, when you have that time to focus, I always think of sending my breath, especially with my legs, especially down, so that you're kind of tricking yourself into thinking it's more relaxed and that you're calmer.

*And your thought is actually doing something.*

Yes. My students will be sitting with their legs open in second position and I'll have them reach forward. I'll come over and use my force so they can just relax their muscles and I say, "Just breathe into it, breathe into the stretch." And it lets your muscles relax and elongate and get even more of a stretch when you're not holding them tense.

*When you're thinking the breath into the legs, is it the exhale?*

It's almost always the exhale.

*That's important to know, because the inhale is going to happen.*

Yes, the inhale will happen. Usually you inhale and hold your breath when something is hard, and so to make it easier, you have to push [the breath] out. It's about the release.

*Do you see common denominators between dance and voice?*



I think the biggest common denominator is the repetition, the kind of over and over...

*Because we are building muscle memory...*

To where practice really does make perfect; it's a very clichéd thing, but it's true. Then once you have that repetition, it's just letting it go, and I think also, believing that it's going to be there.

*Obviously, I'm trying to open things up a bit so that we don't live in entirely different worlds.*

I think another way to help with that is to bring in outside movement practices like yoga and Pilates...

*I agree.*

They can be a nice bridge. I think once a singer feels more in tune with the body as a whole, the dancing won't seem as scary. Right now, you're very focused on what muscles in your core can help with your voice, but you don't realize that the core can extend out into the rest of your body and you can have that same control there.

*Many singing teachers have the notion that dancers are required to maintain a very rigid core.*

I think it's a misconception that's come from ballet, because the idea of ballet is that you're supposed to hold everything in that perfect place and move around it. And I even think ballet is starting to come out of that, so that it's okay to see the dancer breathe, it's okay to see the dancer work through things, instead of it being position, position, position, and here we are. You have to breathe, you have to get the muscles moving, you have to get the oxygen to them, and I think modern and jazz are much more even about *showing* the breath, and taking a minute to stop and let the breath almost become a movement in itself.

*Thank you so much, Jen. This has been great!*