



ARCHITECTS OF THE BODY AND SOUL

Teaching modern dance in college

BY MARY SEIDMAN

“Technique is a way to facilitate, in the simplest sense, how to move,” said Merce Cunningham, who, besides his world-class reputation as a choreographer, was also a master teacher and mentor. His daily classes at the WestBeth studio in New York City trained some of the most brilliant and gifted dancers of all time. As early as 1967, Cunningham determined, “My work is, or at least, what I attempt to do, is to take each person for what they are, both in the teaching and in the making of dances, and to try to find out what it is they are as dancers, and make that come out.”

Like Merce, college-level modern dance teachers are responsible for the training and formation of young students who will become performers with stage careers or professionals in other fields. As part of her work in the Hollins University/American Dance Festival MFA program, choreographer Mary Seidman conducted interviews with teachers in the college setting. The five featured on the next few pages have developed exemplary approaches in their studio classrooms and share a common mission: to create expressive performers and sensitive human beings, as well as virtuoso technicians.



BRENDA DANIELS

**Assistant Dean and Professor of Dance
University of North Carolina School of the Arts
Winston Salem, North Carolina**

On faculty at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts since 1995 (and assistant dean of contemporary dance since 2004), Brenda Daniels is also a popular and well-respected teacher at the American Dance Festival held at Duke University in Durham, NC. She has taught at the Cunningham Studio in NYC and directed the Brenda Daniels Dance Company from 1985 to 1995. She holds a BFA in dance from Purchase College and an MFA in dance from Hollins University/American Dance Festival.

“ I love teaching the Cunningham technique class and creating an environment where, for an hour and a half each day, students can have the sacred time in their busy schedules to just concentrate on themselves and feel complete. I encourage my students to discover that there are new things to learn each day, and I work hard to create a positive, neutral environment, where I am patient but have high expectations of each student. I love using humor to enliven the class so that students feel dance as a joyful experience.

“I see technique as the ability to take the body and be able to express more, to become more versatile in an anatomically correct way. Pelvic placement is the key to good technique, so I stress anatomical alignment and awareness.

“I tailor class to the appropriate level so that students can feel successful. I like developing a class where the daily format is the same each day, much like the progression of a ballet class, where there is a predictable warm-up but a variety of phrases and tempos from day to day. This allows the student to feel comfortable mentally, knowing what to expect, and then they can really concentrate physically on executing the movements within each part of the warm-up.

The pace of the class must always be flowing, not too much talking and correcting, so that by the end of class, you have not run out of time and the dancers can really dig in to the movement, repeating it several times so that they can become more extravagant with how they dance and develop the phrase.

“After 25 years as a teacher, I have become quite efficient in teaching combinations. I try to blend ways of showing/describing the combination, using all of these tools at once: I will demonstrate a movement with my own body, teach the phrase using counts and describe the phrase, either with the names of the steps, or through imagery.

“For our first-year students who might be slow at learning combinations, I offer them the same class two days in a row, asking them to work on the phrases with a friend as homework

after the first class, and then come to class the second day knowing the phrases better and feeling more successful.

“One of my early teachers made me feel very special as a dancer and therefore confident. In conjunction with this quiet good will, he had the best concrete technical information I’ve ever known. I work to achieve this with my students and try my best to give some form of response to each dancer every day and to offer praise when it is due.”

“Whether the students continue to dance or go on to become successful in other professions, I have given them a skill set to become confident individuals and problem solvers for the rest of their lives.” —Brenda Daniels



“I encourage dancers to get out of their tiny kinespheres—to dance big and to make big mistakes.” —Megan Williams

MEGAN WILLIAMS

Lecturer and Teacher
Purchase College, SUNY
Purchase, New York

Megan Williams danced with the Mark Morris Dance Group for 10 years and remains affiliated with the company as a guest performer, rehearsal director and teacher. She holds a BFA from the Juilliard School. A member of the Conservatory of Dance faculty since 1999, Williams has choreographed the “Arabian” and “Mother Ginger” divertissements for the Purchase *Nutcracker*, numerous senior project solos, *Carnival* (2003) and *Canto del Tucuman* (2008) for the Purchase Dance Corps.

“Ballet teacher Alfredo Corvino taught me to see that things happen from the inside out. He made learning seem like a magical puzzle to solve through geometry, physics and mechanics. He made me think more three-dimensionally about the body and to be intelligent about this complicated instrument, long before I had a deeper anatomical knowledge.

“Over the years, I’ve become more intuitive about my students, so I teach less intellectually from a plan. My own conservatory training, my work with Laura Glenn, Mark Morris and later with Irene Dowd and Peggy Baker have influenced my approach in teaching modern dance.

nership with my accompanist in a kinesthetic/musical alliance that energizes the students and keeps them alert. I teach phrasing by emphasizing weight shifts and feeling the music in their bodies. I encourage them to trust themselves, what they know and what they don’t know. I enjoy helping students discover what habits are practical and what habits are hindering them, and then I encourage them to ‘not use it anymore!’

“I see daily technique class as a nourishing meditation where the student can practice being in the present all the time. This not only is fulfilling in the moment but sets up lifelong habits.”

“When I prepare a class, I usually plan from the end. I decide what my last phrases will be and then design what will come before them, what the warm-up will be. I decide at the beginning of the week what I will teach that week, and I base this not only on what was accomplished the week before, but also looking ahead to what I need to achieve for the semester with the particular level of class.

“In class, I encourage the students to experiment with the phrases I’ve given them, to do things more than once, try again, take time to play with the phrase. I will usually mix up the arrangement of exercises from day to day to stimulate thinking and new mental patterning. Within the arc of a semester, I try to attack different conceptual ideas, like inverting the phrases, falling themes, partnering, balancing/being off-balance.

“I try to make phrases that are strongly rhythmic and strive for a part-



PAMELA PIETRO

Assistant Arts Professor

**Tisch School of the Arts, New York University
New York, New York**

Pamela Pietro received a BFA from Florida State University and an MFA from the University of Washington. She has taught at a number of universities and has been on the faculty at the American Dance Festival since 1997. She has danced with Gerri Houlihan, Mark Haim, Anthony Morgan Dance Company, Michael Foley Dance, Race Dance and bopi's black sheep/dances.

“Teaching is where I am at my very best. It is home to me. I believe technique is a way of transferring an idea or information through the body. I encourage my students to make conscious choices about how they execute movement, try to stay present with those choices and use class as a platform for performance.

“I see the same students for seven weeks, four classes a week. After these seven weeks, they will rotate to a different teacher. They arrive to my class after having a ballet class, so they come fully warmed up and already prepared for dance. This allows me to work on different themes of technical training with them in modern, since I know they have already had a strong classical ballet class.

“The best teacher I ever had told me I could do it.”

—Pamela Pietro

“Very early in the semester, I teach a set warm-up. When they arrive, they perform this warm-up on their own at their own pace until we begin a more formal class. I teach long pieces of choreography that evolve over the course of the week, so that by the last day of the week, they have learned a large chunk of movement that has developed and grown. I like them to feel like they are dancing all the time.

“At the beginning of the semester, I pass out index cards that they fill out. I ask them what their habits are, what they want to change. At the end of the semester, I pass the same cards out and ask them to write about how they have changed. We have one day at the end of the semester that is a ‘talking day.’”

STEPHEN ROOKS

Chair and Resident Choreographer

Vassar College

Poughkeepsie, New York

Stephen Rooks was a principal dancer for the Martha Graham Dance Company from 1981 to 1991. Besides his work at Vassar, he is also a regular guest instructor at the Alvin Ailey and Martha Graham schools. He has taught internationally at several dance festivals, as well as the Dallas Black Dance Theater, Ballet Nacional de Mexico, The American Academy of Ballet and the Houston Ballet.

“I see building technique as a way of working on skill sets to dance and execute movement efficiently and increase your longevity as a dancer.

“I come from a background of a set, rigorous developmental warm-up. I give variations of core exercises depending on the level of the class, but it’s a pretty standard framework so that the students know what to expect. I always give at least one combination that is new each day to challenge them from the day before. We start our warm-up on the floor with the Graham technique, then go to standing work, then across the floor. Because I have permission from the Graham Company to teach repertory, I will often teach phrases from her choreography during class, so that students can experience major work.

“I am better at teaching today than before when I was younger. I am more able to diagnose where the class is on a given day or as a whole and throw out my agenda if it is inappropriate to the class.

“I try to teach phrases that are long enough, but not too long, and to give clear images of what the phrase is. I emphasize the feelings behind the movement. I ask dancers to embody and ‘be in the material.’ I teach that timing has huge value. I vary rhythms and ask dancers to think qualitatively about what that means. Thinking about breath, imagery, weight, sounds and rhythm all teach phrasing. Ninety percent of the class is how the teacher communicates with musicians.

“Pat Thomas, one of my early teachers at The Ailey School, taught Graham technique. She encouraged me to be fearless about movement, to push my limits and move big. She had no hierarchy in the class and would push average students to dance with better students and vice versa.”



Photos by Mary Seidman, courtesy of the photographer

MARY COCHRAN
Chair and Artistic Director
Dance Department
Barnard College
New York, New York

Mary Cochran was a soloist with the Paul Taylor Dance Company from 1984 to 1996 and has been teaching in higher education for 14 years. She received her MFA from the University of Wisconsin/Milwaukee.



Photo by Eduardo Petino

“Barnard students are high achievers, so in my classes, I often encourage them to give themselves permission to ‘release.’ My approach is more intuitive now than intellectual. I try to deal more with what my students need rather than my own agenda. I talk less in class than I used to. Now, I try to put the information I want to convey into the material of the class.

“Technique is access to a range: both efficiency and expressive range. It’s having the ability to dial from 1 to 10 when you want to. I emphasize that we dance from the moment we start. I like to keep the class always moving from all the joints, as well as thinking and moving spatially. We start standing, then go to the ground for floor movement, then across the floor and in the air. It is important to warm up the core and open the hip sockets.

“I emphasize level changes, dynamics and taking weight as ways to keep focus. I ask students to create their own strategies for execution that are applicable to all styles.

“In teaching my students life skills through dance, I

emphasize something James Truitte, legendary Horton teacher, said: ‘Take your work seriously, but not yourself.’ Take away judgment, embrace the dance and make it your own.” **DT**

“A good class teaches you to see the big picture first and then fill in the details: Dance first! If the experience is enjoyable to you, that is contagious.” —Mary Cochran

Mary Seidman is artistic director of Mary Seidman and Dancers in NYC. She teaches at the Mark Morris Dance Center and The Third Street Music School in NYC, and she is a guest artist at numerous colleges and universities.