



Jazz Dance from Every Angle

Leslie Pamela Walden takes a multidisciplinary approach to jazz at Illinois State University.

BY KATIE ROLNICK

In the Centennial building at Illinois State University, the dance students in Assistant Professor Leslie Pamela Walden's Intermediate Jazz Technique class aren't, surprisingly, dancing. They're sitting in front of a television screen watching an excerpt from the classic dance musical *West Side Story*. It isn't until later—after they've soaked in the Latin beats of songs like "America"—that they'll begin to move across the floor to a syncopated clave rhythm, their shoulders and hips jutting in different directions.

The class is part of the new syllabus Walden implemented last year, which organizes the semester around the dance styles that have shaped and influenced jazz dance—everything from ragtime to blues, from Latin to hip hop. Walden teaches the characteristics of these jazz forms alongside the music and cultural trends that helped create them. Her goal is to place movement within a context, to orient each class by setting it in a moment of American history.

Walden began dancing at age 3 and as a young adult dreamed of being on Broadway. "But I was only 5'3" and couldn't sing," she says. Instead, she made dance an academic endeavor. As a dance student at Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Virginia, she first heard the unrestrained beats of Miles Davis. She wrote a master's thesis on German modern dance choreographer Pina Bausch, and she received a doctorate in dance education from Temple University.

When she later moved to New York, a friend took her to the Village Vanguard, a mainstay for live jazz. "I knew I was in the heart of jazz history," she says. "There was no doubt in my mind that I was walking on sacred ground."

Walden fills each of her classes with this passion for jazz music. Intermediate Jazz Technique is open to any Illinois State student with permission from Walden or the department, and it meets twice a week for 90 minutes, with each jazz dance form getting about two weeks of class time. Typically Walden uses a

film—like *West Side Story*—to introduce the style. After about 20 minutes, the students begin the movement portion of class. Walden prefers to evoke the flavor of a period rather than replicate its most popular steps. In the ragtime unit, for example, she doesn't teach students the Charleston. Instead, her across-the-floor exercises use pieces of that trademark dance while also focusing on strong syncopation and frequent change of direction, "to reflect the frantic zaniness of the '20s," Walden says. And of course, her students dance to ragtime music—pieces by Scott Joplin, for example. "I want the students to absorb these sounds," she says.

Walden's syllabus spans the course of 20th-century jazz, all the way up to its most recent incarnation: hip hop. By the time she gets to this final unit, the students have already studied the lindy hop, the style made popular by African Americans at the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem, NY, in the 1930s and '40s. Walden explains to her students that, like the lindy hop, hip hop is a vernacular



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form, a movement style that sprang from the streets. And just like the dance competitions that took place at the Savoy, hip-hop battles help to generate new movement as each dancer challenges the other to be more creative, more innovative.

At the end of the semester, the students complete a final project. In addition to writing a paper, each pair of students selects one of the jazz dance forms and choreographs a three-minute dance in the style. Although Walden focuses her curriculum on certain jazz techniques, her students are encouraged to explore other ways of moving in their choreography—and their discoveries can be surprising. “For the blues, I emphasize the dropping of weight,” she says. “But I had a student who did something related to call and response—the way blues music does. She found that on her own.”

Walden sets a high bar for her students. She wants them to be accountable for their own education—not just to improve their technique, but also to leave class and listen to music and read and talk about what they’ve learned. And while that might seem like a lot to ask, the students welcome the challenge. Lindsey Miller, a 22-year-old graduating senior whose main focus is ballet and modern, enjoyed the course’s variety, but also felt that it influenced her overall approach to dance. “I think that it made me more aware of how you can dance in the music as opposed to dancing with the music,” she says. **DT**

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The Walden Syllabus in Your Studio

Walden believes that students of any age or technique level can benefit from a more comprehensive teaching approach. “We owe it to our students to awaken them to the richness and history of the culture surrounding dance,” she says. She suggests that teachers play music in the waiting areas of their studios, mixing pieces that cover the spectrum of dance history. A good playlist for a jazz-oriented studio might include contemporary artists influenced by jazz, like Diana Krall, as well as classic artists like Benny Goodman.

Educational books and films can also be incorporated into your studio’s public spaces. Leave a copy of *A Century of Dance: A Hundred Years of Musical Movement, from Waltz to Hip Hop*, by Ian Driver, on your lobby coffee table for students and parents to browse through. Or play excerpts from movies like *Jazz: A Film by Ken Burns* (a PBS series that Walden considers an important supplement for any jazz class) in your dressing rooms.

But most importantly, use the resources available within your community. Invite local performers and educators from other disciplines to come in and speak with your students. “Don’t be afraid to call a university or see what’s going on in the music scene,” Walden says. “Encourage the students to be aware of and participate in a broader artistic world.”