

Hilary Cartwright

How I Teach Yoga for Dancers

BY JENNY DALZELL

PHOTOGRAPHED BY MATTHEW MURPHY
in the Gina Gibney Dance Center studios.

“Both students and professionals dance with too much tension,” says ballet teacher and Yoga for Dancers guru Hilary Cartwright. “Dancing requires a lot of effort, but it doesn’t have to be stressful on the body.” Cartwright, a former Royal Ballet soloist and ballet mistress, learned this information the hard way. Early in her career, she experienced a debilitating back injury and was told to stop dancing—a disk in her spine had slipped and was impinging a nerve. In search of pain relief, she studied yoga with master instructor Juliu Horvath. Together they began constructing the equipment for Gyrotonic, the system Horvath has become known for, and that work eventually led Cartwright to develop Yoga for Dancers. Today, NYC dancers of all disciplines flock to her to gain a greater sense of body awareness, flexibility and coordination.

Unfortunately, young dancers don’t always realize the benefits of somatic practice—such as Gyrotonic, Pilates, The Feldenkrais Method and yoga—until they experience a sidelining injury. However, the nuances of core strength and proper alignment, which these systems help dancers cultivate, can be the linchpin in a dancer’s training that propels her technique to the next level. In a Yoga for Dancers class, Cartwright helps practitioners focus on their breath as they move through relaxed

seated, standing and lying postures. The constant motion—the fluidity of shifting positions—helps release tension in the body, while also challenging their strength and control.

If adding extra somatic classes to a teen dancer’s schedule isn’t feasible, Cartwright recommends that dance teachers introduce simple body awareness exercises into weekly classes. “Every teacher can find her own way of bringing in exercises that will help students progress,” she says. In her own ballet classes, Cartwright incorporates exercises based on what students need at the moment. “If I notice their bodies are out of place toward the end of barre, I’ll ask them to get down on the floor, do an exercise to square up and then put that directly into practice.”

When choosing exercises, Cartwright stresses the importance of balancing flexibility with muscle power. “Stretching should be mindful. Young people will say, ‘I’ve got to pull this until it hurts,’ but that’s not a good approach. There needs to be an elasticity in dancers’ muscles—stretchy and strong at the same time,” she says. Here, Cartwright and student Maiko Hisaya demonstrate two exercises that target dancers’ hamstrings, psoas muscles and lower abdominals—muscles used to create long and healthy arabesques.



A native of southern England, **Hilary Cartwright** performed as a soloist with The Royal Ballet. After suffering two spine-damaging falls, she returned to serve as their ballet mistress and répétiteur. In 1982, she co-founded White Cloud studio in New York City with yoga teacher Juliu Horvath. There, Cartwright started teaching yoga classes and developed her own method, Yoga for Dancers. She has been a ballet mistress for Joffrey Ballet, director of Nederlands Dans Theater II and the associate artistic director of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet in Canada. Though White Cloud studio closed in 2000, Cartwright continues to teach Yoga for Dancers and is a Gyrotonic master trainer at Fluid Fitness in Manhattan. She teaches for American Ballet Theatre’s summer intensive and leads ballet and yoga classes at the Gina Gibney Dance Center in NYC. Cartwright travels to teach class and set ballets internationally on professional companies, most recently for the Aspen Santa Fe Ballet in Colorado and New Mexico.

Maiko Hisaya, 16, is a student at the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School at American Ballet Theatre.

To see Hilary and Maiko demonstrate these yoga moves, visit www.dance-teacher.com.

Exercise 1: Working her deep rotator muscles, psoas and lower abdominals, this exercise helps a dancer keep her pelvis in correct alignment in arabesque. This prevents a dancer from lifting her hip incorrectly when extending her leg backward, which shortens the psoas and causes grinding in the hip socket. Cartwright gives this exercise before barre begins.



Step 1. Lie facedown on a mat with your arms under your forehead or stretched forward, shoulder distance apart. Pull your belly button back into your spine, off the mat.

Step 2. Rotate your upper thighs into a naturally turned-out position, reaching out through your toes.



Step 3. Keeping both hipbones glued to the floor, inhale and engage your abdominal muscles. Then exhaling, glide the left leg backward along the floor until only the leg (not the hip) lifts off the floor. Keep the right foot pointed.

Step 4: Hold the leg in that position for three seconds, imagining your leg rotating more and pulling farther away. Bring it back down, and release. Alternate legs and repeat three times for each leg.

Exercise 2: This exercise moves through a hamstring stretch, a penché and a backbend, helping the dancer to gain more control both going into penché and lowering her leg out of arabesque. Cartwright gives this exercise at the barre, before the adagio.



Step 1. Begin in a wider than normal second position, facing the barre. Plié.



Step 2. Straighten your knees and turn your right foot in so your body faces the left side. You should be in a crossed, parallel fourth position with your right hand on the barre.



Step 3. Make sure your right hip does not open. Put both hands on the ground and look down.



Step 4. Plié both knees. Your weight should be more on your back leg. Allow your tailbone to round, opening the sacrum.

technique



Step 5: Stretch your legs. Reach your spine and left arm forward to arch upward. Transfer your weight to your front leg and grab the barre with your right hand.



Step 6: Continue to reach your spine forward as you lift up to a standing position, keeping all of your weight on your front leg. Rotate your legs to a naturally turned-out position and point your back foot.



Step 7: Lift your back leg into a long, extended penché. Feel energy reaching out of your right foot to the ceiling. Your left arm reaches diagonally along the floor in opposition.



Step 8: Feel a connection between your right leg and left shoulder. Keeping that relationship through your pelvis and engaged abdominals, lift your torso to lower your right leg. Imagine a seesaw; your left hip joint is the fulcrum.



Step 9: In one continuous motion, bring your torso upright and close your right leg behind into fifth position. Bring your left arm overhead; engage your abdominals and cambré back. Remember to keep your hips square—your right hip aligned with the left.



Step 10: Use your stomach muscles to recover your torso. Finally, turn to face the barre, open to a wide second position and repeat the exercise in the other direction.