

Robin Nasatir

How I teach modern for older movers

BY RACHEL CALDWELL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTIAN PEACOCK

On a sunny Thursday morning in Berkeley, California, Robin Nasatir leads her modern class through a classic seated floor warm-up full of luscious curves and tilts to the soothing grooves of Bobby McFerrin. Though her modern style is rooted in traditional José Limón and Erick Hawkins techniques, the makeup of her class is far from conventional. Her students range in age from 30 all the way to early 80s.

As an active dancer and performer at 60, Nasatir felt that there was a real gap in what classes were available to her. “As an older dancer, there are just certain things that I need that I don’t get in other classes.” Talking with other dancers her age, she realized she wasn’t alone. Many of her peers were struggling to keep up both mentally and physically with the fast-paced, inversion-heavy modern classes that have become so popular.

With Modern for Older Movers and Returning Dancers, Nasatir has helped women returning from pregnancy, dancers returning from injury and older men and women looking for an enjoyable activity to rediscover their love of modern dance.

Though the majority of her students are in their 50s and 60s, Nasatir doesn’t shy away from teaching a technically rich and mentally challenging class. Central to her approach is the offering of multiple versions of each exercise. “First we have the vanilla ice cream cone, and then we add the sprinkles,” she says. “I create a class that could be done holding on to the barre—something that could be done slow and simply, but is still expressive and dancy, not just steps. Then I start adding complexity and range.” This could manifest in an added turn, a more complex foot pattern or an extra balance. She leaves it

up to the dancer to choose which version they prefer. “Anyone having balance or memory issues could accomplish the class,” she says.

A thorough and mindful warm-up is especially important for this demographic. She takes the first few minutes of class to have students tune in and bring awareness to their bodies. “It takes longer to warm up an older body,” she says, noting that many of her older students have foot and ankle issues, so extra attention there is required. “Some of the pads on the balls of the feet have worn down, so it’s painful to be barefoot or go on relevé. Connective tissue is dryer and not as supple, so it takes longer to work into a plié,” she explains. Dancers can wear any footwear they desire in her class.

Even more challenging than the physical precautions are the mental concerns about learning and retaining movement. “Memory ends up being an even bigger thing than ‘I’m worried about my back or my hips or my feet,’” says Nasatir. To alleviate these concerns, she makes combinations short and simple, repeats them many times, dances along with her students and provides real-time verbal cues.

“The goal in this class is to find joy in moving today,” she tells her class. “If you don’t remember the combination, join the club! Perfection is not our goal.” The dancers look relieved as they continue an across-the-floor pattern full of under and over curves, spirals of the spine, a ball-change and an enveloppé.

Perhaps the most rewarding outcome has been the sense of community the class has fostered. “She’s hit on something really necessary in the modern dance world,” says April C. Taylor, a fellow modern dance teacher in her late 40s. Vicki Gunter, a former studio owner in her late 60s echoes the sentiment: “This class has given me the opportunity to keep dancing. It’s a gift.”

Nasatir hopes that others may bring the class to their own communities, giving dancers of all ages the opportunity to be seen. “As an older dancer, and especially as an older woman, you often become invisible,” says Nasatir. “I think there’s real value in offering a class where dancers feel seen and valued, and can connect with others and be a part of a community rather than just being the older person in the back of the room.” **DT**

Rachel Caldwell is a dance teacher and writer based in Berkeley, California.



ROBIN NASATIR'S TOP 10 TIPS FOR TEACHING OLDER DANCERS

- ✓ Ease dancers into class; start slow.
- ✓ Provide a thorough warm-up.
- ✓ Prioritize alignment.
- ✓ Offer multiple levels of challenge for each exercise.
- ✓ Let students dance at the barre or take breaks as needed.
- ✓ Avoid inversions, and if going in and out of the floor, move slowly and with care.
- ✓ Give gentle and personalized hands-on corrections.
- ✓ Keep combinations short and repeat them multiple times.
- ✓ Use music that has variation and that students enjoy.
- ✓ Be positive and emphasize enjoyment, not perfection.

Robin Nasatir, 60, was a founding member of Mobius Dance Company and performed as a freelance dancer in New York City and the San Francisco Bay Area. She has been a company member with Dana Lawton Dances since 2010, and in recent years has collaborated with Nina Haft, Kate Mitchell, Risa Jaroslow and AXIS Dance Company. In addition to her class for older movers and returning dancers, she teaches Introduction to Modern at Shawl-Anderson Dance Center in Berkeley, California.

Peter Brown, 69, is a sculptor and a retired machine technology professor at Laney College in Oakland.

Vicki Gunter, 69, is a massage therapist and ceramic sculptor based in the East Bay.

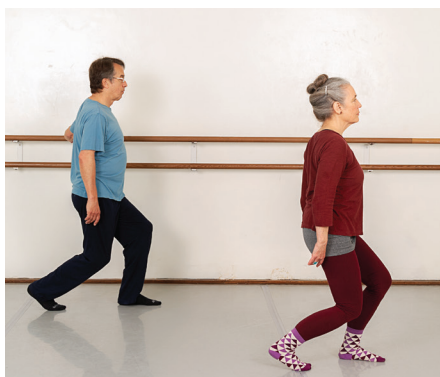
technique

Step-by-Step: Spiral curve into an arabesque with optional turn

Robin Nasatir offers this sequence midway through class to draw students' attention to the shape and alignment of the spine and pelvis during a classic modern spiral curve. She will introduce the phrase at the barre at the start of class and revisit it in the center. Students then have the additional choice to do the "vanilla" version with an arabesque or add "sprinkles" by doing an arabesque turn. —RC



Begin standing in first position facing left.



Count 1: Step forward with the left foot, under-curving the pelvis as you shift your weight to the left leg.



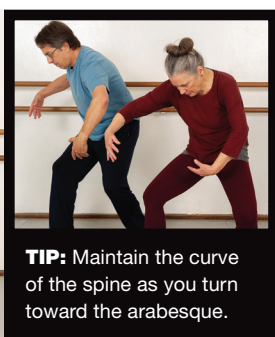
Count 2: Curve and twist over the left leg, rounding your arms around the torso. Legs in parallel fourth position, plié.



TIP: Pay special attention to the position of the pelvis and spine. Don't stick your hips out in back. Curve through the lower back and drop the pelvis toward the floor.



Count 3: Maintaining the curve in your torso, begin to pivot and spiral around toward your right side, passing through a second-position plié.



TIP: Maintain the curve of the spine as you turn toward the arabesque.



Count 4: Extend into a low arabesque with the left leg back and left arm reaching up on a high diagonal forward.



Count 5: Sweep the left leg through first position and step forward with an under curve, bringing the right foot to coupé back. As you step forward, circle the left arm up, back and down to your side.



Count 6: Step back with the right foot.



Count 7: Close the left foot to first position facing the right side.

Count 8: Hold.

Repeat the phrase on the second side.