

# PARSONS DANCE STUDY GUIDE

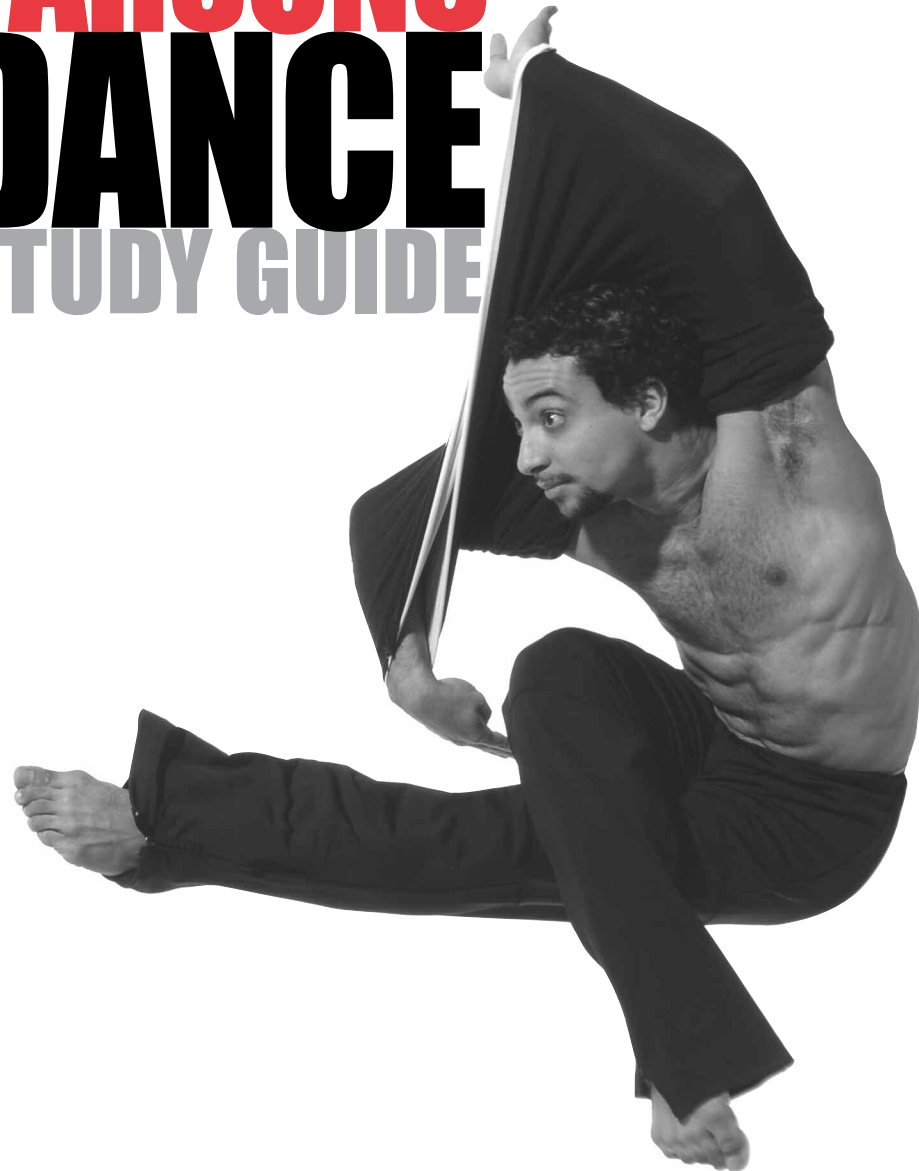


photo by David Parsons

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## INTRODUCTION FOR TEACHERS

Welcome to the **Parsons Dance Study Guide!**

The Parsons Dance Study Guide is a starting point to connect standard-based curriculum such as dance, physical education and science to an exciting hands-on learning event. Students will gain new insights into contemporary dance while experiencing choreography from the diverse repertoire of Parsons Dance.

## DOWNLOAD THE PARSONS DANCE STUDY GUIDE

For your convenience, the **Parsons Dance Study Guide** is available for download at [parsonsdance.org](http://parsonsdance.org). Please feel free to download and copy the **Parsons Dance Study Guide**, compliments of Parsons Dance and the Ferst Center for the Performing Arts.

## INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES

### YOUR STUDENTS WILL:

- be required to observe and repeat an action;
- discover and create movement patterns that express information about the basic systems, organs and processes of the human body;
- work alone, in pairs, and/or in small groups to make movement choices that communicate scientific concepts in creative movement.

### REMEMBER TO TELL YOUR STUDENTS:

- dance is both a visual and a physical activity;
- they must learn to *see and do* in order to dance;
- to observe how the body makes straight lines, curves and other shapes;
- they should watch and listen closely so they can follow/repeat steps.

## EARLY PIONEERS OF CONTEMPORARY DANCE

Contemporary dance is an art form developed in the 1900s when a few dancers in Europe started to rebel against the rigid constraints of classical ballet. Shedding classical ballet technique, costumes and shoes, these early contemporary dance pioneers practiced “free dance.” In America Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor and Alvin Ailey developed their own styles of free dance and laid the foundations of American dance with their choreography and teaching.



**ISADORA DUNCAN** (May 26, 1877–Sept. 14, 1927) is considered by many to be the Mother of Modern Dance.



**MARTHA GRAHAM** (May 11, 1894–April 1, 1991), an American dancer and choreographer who was also known as one of the foremost pioneers of Modern dance. Not until the age of 22 did she pursue her interest professionally by enrolling at Denishawn School of Dancing and Related Arts. Graham founded her own company, the Martha Graham Dance Company, in 1926. Her unique movement style is widely recognized for its principle of contraction and release and imagery.



**DORIS BATCHELLER HUMPHREY** (Oct. 17, 1895–Dec. 29, 1958) was a dancer of the early twentieth century. She both studied and taught dance, opening her own dance school in 1913 at the age of 18. In 1917, she entered the Denishawn School of Dancing and Related Arts, where she studied, performed, taught classes, and learned choreography. Her creations from this era, *Valse Caprice* (*Scarf Dance*), *Soaring* and *Scherzo Waltz* (*Hoop Dance*) are all still performed today. In 1928, she and fellow dancer Charles Weidman separated from the Denishawn School and moved to New York, to become key figures in the Modern dance movement.



**MERCE CUNNINGHAM** (April 16, 1919–present) born in Centralia, Washington, Merce received his first formal dance and theater training at the Cornish School (now Cornish College of the Arts) in Seattle. Later he moved to New York and studied at the American School of Ballet. After five years as a soloist in the company of Martha Graham, he began choreographing independently, first in solo concerts, then in 1953 he formed his own company, whose fiftieth anniversary was celebrated in 2003.



**PAUL TAYLOR** (July 29, 1930–present) trained as an artist before he received scholarships to study dance. In 1953 he made his debut with the Merce Cunningham company and performed his first dance composition. From 1955 to 1961 he won acclaim both as a leading soloist with the Martha Graham company and as the creator of witty and innovative avant-garde dances for his own company, which he had formed in 1954. He has choreographed more than 100 works. **David Parsons was a member of the Paul Taylor Dance Company for nine years before founding Parsons Dance.**



**ALVIN AILEY** (Jan. 5, 1931–Dec. 1, 1989) was a modern dancer and choreographer who founded the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1958 featuring primarily African American dancers. He integrated his dance company in 1963. The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater popularized contemporary dance around the world through his international tours which were sponsored by the U.S. State Department.



photo by David Parsons

## LEARN MORE ONLINE AT THESE SUGGESTED DANCE WEBSITES:

[parsonsdance.org](http://parsonsdance.org)

[danceusa.org](http://danceusa.org)

[teachers.net](http://teachers.net)

[dancemagazine.com](http://dancemagazine.com)

[artsedge.kennedy-center.org](http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org)

[wikipedia.org/wiki/Modern\\_dance](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Modern_dance)

[infoplease.com](http://infoplease.com)

[www.danceranddrummer.com](http://www.danceranddrummer.com)

## PARSONS DANCE OUTREACH

- Parsons Dance excels at performing a wide variety of residency and community outreach activities across the nation and around the world each season. Parsons Dance positively impacts children, students and communities through the following activities:
- Master classes in modern, ballet, jazz and technique are offered at the beginning, intermediate and advanced levels for pre-professional, professional and recreational dancers.
- Parsons Dance lectures-demonstrations are suitable for all ages (K–12, post-secondary and adult) and include demonstration of repertory and/or elements of production.
- Parsons Dance workshops and seminars focus on a variety of topics that include nutrition, fitness and the art of dance.
- Post-show discussions provide audience members an opportunity to ask questions about Parsons Dance and its repertory.
- A complimentary Parsons Dance Study Guide, designed in collaboration with the Ferst Center for the Arts, serves as an educational dance resource for teachers and students.
- The New York City Summer Intensive Dance Workshop for pre-professional and professional dancers provides participants a unique opportunity to work and interact with Parsons Dancers while taking classes in contemporary dance, ballet technique and Parsons repertory.

## MISSION

Parsons Dance is an internationally renowned contemporary dance company under the artistic direction of choreographer David Parsons. Parsons Dance creates and performs contemporary American dance of extraordinary artistry that is entertaining and enriching to diverse audiences.

### IT IS THE VISION OF PARSONS DANCE TO:

**FOSTER** the creative development and facilitate the choreographic expression of David Parsons, one of the most successful and enduring American dance artists working today;

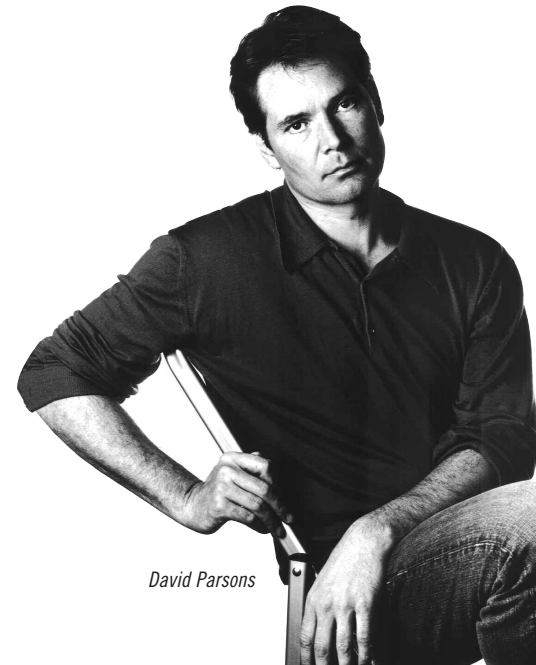
**DELIVER** positive, affirming and life-enriching experiences to audiences worldwide, through the medium of dance/movement;

**DEVELOP** new dance fans by creating American works of extraordinary artistry that engage and motivate audiences;

**PROVIDE** education and outreach programs for patrons at all levels of artistic experience, through post-show discussions, master classes, open rehearsals, studio showcases and more, including an annual summer dance study program for professional and pre-professional dancers;

and

**COLLABORATE** with other internationally renowned artists to commission musical scores, lighting designs, costumes and more in support of vibrant and multi-dimensional dance productions.



David Parsons

## DAVID PARSONS

(Artistic Director/Founder) has enjoyed a remarkable career as a performer, choreographer, teacher, director and producer of dance. Mr. Parsons was born in Chicago and raised in Kansas City. He was a leading dancer with The Paul Taylor Dance Company, where Mr. Taylor created many roles for him in works such as *Arden Court*, *Last Look* and *Roses*. He is a recipient of the 2000 Dance Magazine Award, as well as the 2001 American Choreography Award, for his work as a co-producer of *AEROS*, a production featuring the Romanian Gymnastic Federation that was featured on Bravo.

Mr. Parsons has created more than 70 works for Parsons Dance. He has received commissions over the years from The American Ballet Theatre, New York City Ballet, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, the American Dance Festival, Jacob's Pillow, the Spoleto Festival and Het Muziektheater in Amsterdam, to name a few. His work has been performed by Paris Opera Ballet, Joffrey Ballet, Nederlands Danse Theatre, National Ballet of Canada, Hubbard Street Dance and BatSheva Dance Company of Israel, among many others.

In June 2007, Mr. Parsons was honored to be the very first contemporary choreographer ever to stage work at the centuries-old Arena di Verona, in Verona Italy, where he choreographed Verdi's *Aida*. The Arena is one of Italy's most respected operatic venues. In September 2007, he directed and choreographed Gotham Chamber Opera's production of *Maria de Buenos Aires*, which made its world premiere at a sold-out engagement in New York, at NYU's Skirball Center for the Arts.

In the July 27, 2007 edition of *The New York Times*, Jennifer Dunning called David Parsons "one of the great movers of modern dance."

## ABOUT PARSONS DANCE

**PARSONS DANCE** is committed to building new audiences for contemporary dance by creating American works of extraordinary artistry that are engaging and uplifting to audiences throughout the world. The company tours nationally and internationally, including an annual season in New York.

In addition to choreography and performance, Parsons Dance positively impacts children, students, and communities through student performances, lecture-demonstrations, master classes, post-show discussions and more.

Parsons Dance has a company of ten full-time dancers and maintains a repertory of more than 70 works choreographed by David Parsons, twenty of which feature originally commissioned scores by leading composers and musicians, including Dave Matthews, Michael Gordon and Milton Nascimento. Parsons Dance has collaborated with many other leading artists, including Julie Taymor, William Ivey Long, Annie Leibovitz, Donna Karan, Alex Katz and Lois Greenfield.

## PARSONS DANCE HISTORY

Since 1985, Parsons Dance has toured an average of 32 weeks per year, to a total of more than 235 cities, 30 countries, six continents and millions of audience members.

Many others have seen Parsons Dance on PBS, Bravo, A&E Network and the Discovery Channel. Millions watched Parsons Dance perform live in Times Square as part of the internationally broadcast, 24-hour Millennium New Year's Eve celebration.

The most prestigious theaters, festivals and presenters the world over engage Parsons Dance, hoping to tap its audience power. Among them: Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (Washington, D.C.), Maison de la Danse (Lyon, France), Teatro La Fenice (Venice, Italy) and Teatro Municipal (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil).

In New York City, Parsons Dance has been featured at The Joyce Theater, City Center, New Victory Theater, Central Park Summerstage, The Guggenheim Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art and The World Trade Center.

Parsons Dance is the only dance company in history to perform at all three Spoleto Festivals — Italy, Australia, U.S.A. — in a single season.

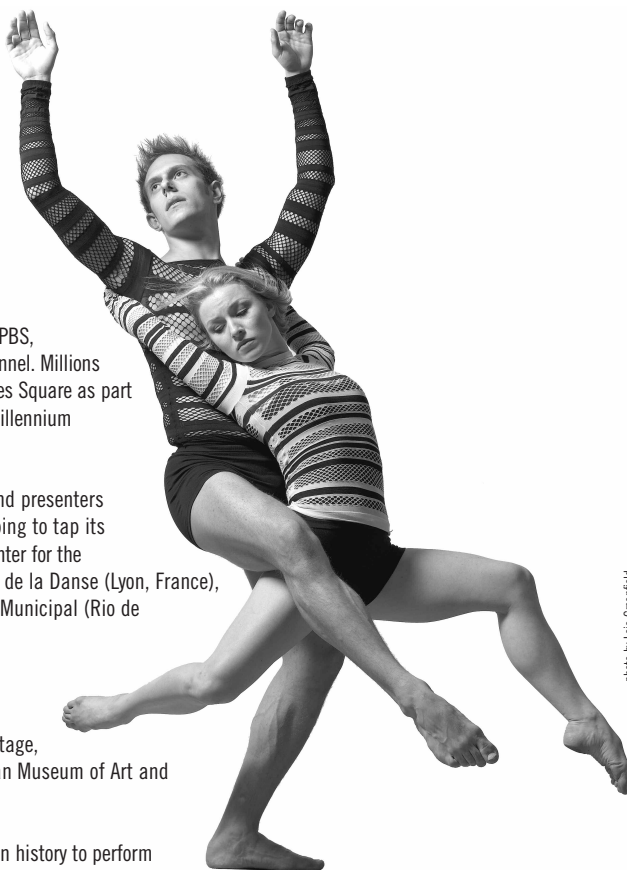


photo by Lois Greenfield

## SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES SYSTEMS OF THE BODY MOVEMENT AND CHOREOGRAPHY

Skeletal muscles only pull in one direction. For this reason they always come in pairs. When one muscle in a pair contracts (to bend a joint for example), its counterpart then contracts and pulls in the opposite direction to once again straighten the same joint. Without this arrangement, human beings would not be able to straighten their legs when they walk or bend their fingers to grip something. When the bicep muscle in the upper arm contracts, it pulls the lower arm in toward the shoulder. However, when it relaxes, the bicep cannot push the arm back out. To do this, the tricep muscle, on the underside of the upper arm, contracts and straightens the arm. If the tricep muscle wasn't there, the arm would be unable to straighten again.

In the two activities below, students will create movement patterns that express information about the muscular-skeletal systems of the human body. These activities also reflect the neurological science of hand-eye coordination and balance. Students will work in pairs to make movement choices that communicate scientific concepts in creative movements. Have your students use action words such as inhale, balance, freeze, stretch, bend and wobble.

### MIRRORED ACTIONS:

Divide students into pairs. Ask the partners to face one another, with one serving as the leader and the other as the follower. Give them one action word at a time. Ask the leader to perform the action. As the leader does so, ask the follower to attempt to "mirror" the leader's image. Alternate who leads as you call out different words.

### COMPLEMENTARY ACTIONS:

Still keeping the partners facing each other, repeat the words you used in the first activity. This time, ask the leader to move freely as the responder attempts to move in a complementary fashion. Example: the leader chews at a high level, and the responder does a similar action at a low level. Discuss the activity with your students after each partner has had a chance to lead and respond.

## QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION WITH PARSONS DANCE

Members of the Parsons Dance company, including dancers and production, artistic and administrative professionals, may be available to speak to your students in person, or via web or telephone conferencing.

## ADDITIONAL LEARNING ACTIVITIES

You are welcome to use the Parsons Dance Study Guide as the basis to invent your own learning activities, customized to the educational needs of your students. Parsons Dance is also happy to assist you in developing additional learning tools. Please feel free to contact Parsons Dance regarding your questions and ideas.



photo by David Parsons

## SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

### CREATE A DANCE

Now that your students are familiar with the elements of dance, they can choreograph a dance using these elements. Before they begin, students should take off their shoes and feel what it is like to dance in their stocking feet. Give them the opportunity to create a dance on their own and then as a group. At the end of this activity, ask them to verbally express the difficulties and challenges they had during the creative process. Do they prefer working as a group or on their own? Do they feel that they were successful in conveying their ideas and emotions through movement?

### INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY

Ask your students to choose one locomotor movement (i.e., walk, run, leap, jump, hop, skip, slide or gallop). This will be the primary movement for their dance. They should start with a frozen pose that shows a facial expression, which they should hold for approximately four counts. Instruct them to choose a direction (forward, backward, sideways, diagonal or turning) and then move, using their primary movement, for twelve counts. Then they can return to their original frozen pose for four final counts.

### GROUP ACTIVITY

Using the same concept of the individual activity, the students will be divided into small groups to create a group dance. Once the groups have had time to create their dances, each group will perform for the others. After all the dances have been performed, ask each group to describe the feelings and ideas that they felt the various dances expressed. Also ask the students if any of the elements of dance are used in everyday activities.

### A FEW MORE ACTION WORDS:

skip, leap, slide, quiver, tremble, wiggle, extend, spread, collapse and balance.

### FUN FACT

There are more than 100 jumps performed in 6 minutes during David Parsons' signature piece, *Caught?*

## EIGHT FUNDAMENTALS OF DANCE

1. **CENTERING** is fundamental to a dancer's ability to perform well. "Centering" means to maintain a sense of the body's center of gravity that holds a dancer together as he/she moves. It allows a dancer to move gracefully and freely. The natural base is approximately just below the navel. If a dancer is centered, he/she can eventually learn how to do anything. Learning to move from the center will also make movements easier to control. Muscles feel better when they are used. Once a dancer is familiar with moving them, the whole body will respond by working in harmony with itself.

2. **GRAVITY** is the force that holds a person to the earth. It is a force a dancer must master because it constantly inhibits movement. Dancers must be aware of the gravitational pulls in their own body. They must learn which points of the body feel the most weight.

3. **BALANCE** is concerned with more than, for example, balancing on one leg. A dancer's goal is to achieve and constantly maintain an inner balance of the whole body. It is the tension of mutual support among all parts of the body that brings the whole body together in a new way. It is not something that is achieved once in awhile; it is constant. A sense of balance is necessary whether a dancer is moving or standing.

4. **GESTURE** is how the dancer uses his or her body as an expressive instrument to communicate feelings and ideas in patterns of movement. With subtle gestures and postural attitudes, a dancer can show cooperation, express confidence or display aggression. Arms crossed over the chest create a protective wall. Hands on hips mean "show me." Placing fists on hips is even more challenging. Anger patterns are depicted very differently from joy or sadness. Raised shoulders are a gesture of not knowing or caring. Shoulders forward express pain. Tapping a foot signals boredom. It is important for students to recognize what the body is saying.

5. **RHYTHM** is something everybody possesses, though some people are more aware of it and/or sensitive to it. Discovering rhythm is largely a matter of paying attention to the music of the body as well as to any musical accompaniment. Everyone's heart beats to a rhythm; one's lungs breathe to another. Rhythm is essential for a dancer. A dancer has to anticipate musical beats. They must feel as if they are making the beat with their body, as well as hearing it. It is the rhythm and the beat of the dance that forms the "threads" of the dance. These threads allow dancers to memorize the structure of the dance.

6. **MOVING in SPACE** requires a dancer to be aware of more than just his or her own body and movement. Dancers have to move with care and awareness, gauging the space that surrounds them. Space is not just empty air but a tangible element that dancers move through. Advanced dancers consciously go through space. Each movement through space can be thought of as an accomplishment. Dancers feel accomplished as their bodies journey through space, expressing thoughts and emotions.

7. **POSTURE** is achieved when dancers change their perception of the body. There is often a wide discrepancy between what feels right and what looks right. It is important for everyone to learn how to stand properly. Dancers work all their lives to develop their posture, also called alignment. It is the key to balance and movement. Posture reveals feelings. Good posture actually makes a person feel brighter and more aware.

8. **BREATHING** is crucial to dance. Not only does it bring oxygen to the body but it also creates movement that is fluid and harmonious. It is an expressive tool. Calm, slow breathing suggests a certain degree of self-control. A movement with breath has a controlled extension of time and a clear beginning and end, no matter how fast or slow the phrase. A phrase without breath looks stiff and mechanical. A phrase with breath creates a more emotional, organic look. A dancer must learn to breathe deeply, expanding the ribs at the back of the body rather than from the front.



# ELEMENTS OF DANCE

## MOVEMENT

**Locomotor:** walk, run, leap, hop, jump, skip, slide, gallop

**Nonlocomotor:** bend, twist, stretch, swing

## TIME

**Fast/medium/slow**  
**With music/without music**

## SPACE

**Levels:** low, medium, high

**Direction:** forward, backward, sideways, diagonal, turning

**Focus:** straight/curved, open/closed

## ENERGY

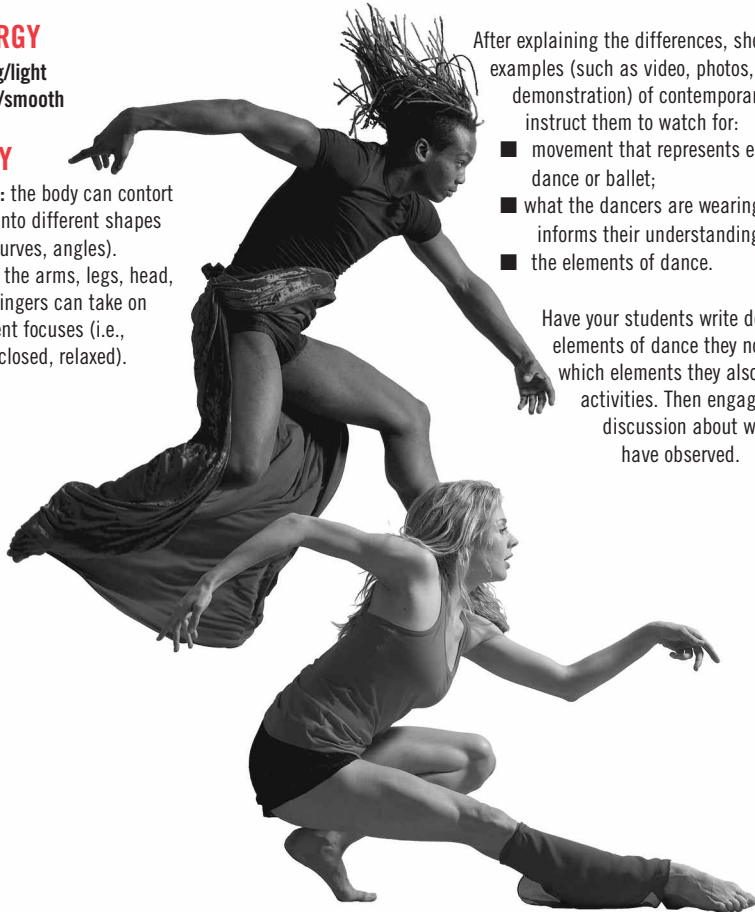
**Strong/light**  
**Sharp/smooth**

## BODY

**Shape:** the body can contort itself into different shapes (i.e., curves, angles).

**Parts:** the arms, legs, head, toes, fingers can take on different focuses (i.e., open, closed, relaxed).

photo by Lois Greenfield



## SUGGESTED ACTIVITY THE EXPERIMENT OF CONTEMPORARY DANCE

Before beginning this activity, educate your students on the elements of dance: movement, time, space, energy and body (definitions of these elements can be found on the left side column).

Then, explain the three main differences between ballet and contemporary dance to your students:

- ballet relies on an illusion of lightness and effortlessness, while contemporary dance relies on weight;
- a contemporary dancer must be able to fall and slide safely;
- contemporary dancers often fall all the way to the floor, whereas ballet dancers remain almost perfectly balanced;
- early 20th century ballet relied on ornate costumes and scenery while early contemporary dance was often performed on a bare stage in bare feet and a simple costume;
- contemporary dance began as and continues to be, an experiment in new ways of moving.

After explaining the differences, show your students examples (such as video, photos, or live demonstration) of contemporary dance and instruct them to watch for:

- movement that represents either contemporary dance or ballet;
- what the dancers are wearing and how it informs their understanding of the movement;
- the elements of dance.

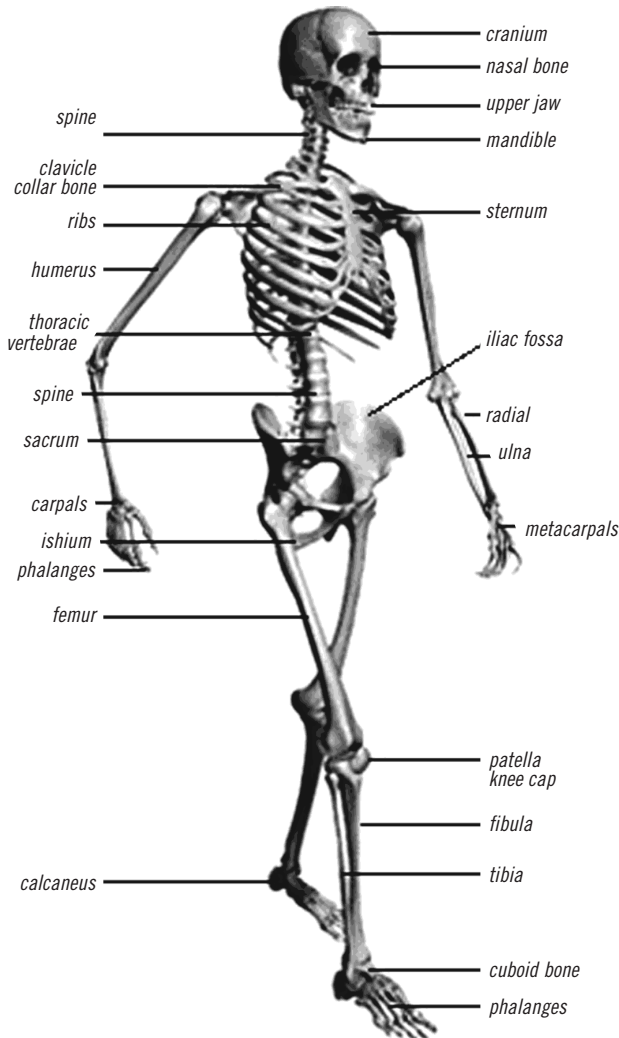
Have your students write down the different elements of dance they noticed and specify which elements they also see in everyday activities. Then engage them in a discussion about what they have observed.

## SUGGESTED ACTIVITY FUN BONES DANCE

It is important to educate young dancers on the correct terminology of the body. It is also essential for dancers to maintain a healthy mind and body. By doing so, they will reduce the risk of injury while dancing, as well as in daily life.

**EXAMPLE:** This activity is based on the song *Hokey Pokey*. Using the diagram below, the students can sing the song while they point to each body part as it is identified in the song.

“You put your cranium in, you put your cranium out, you put your cranium in and you shake it all about. You do the fun bone dance and you turn yourself around — that’s what it’s all about”



## TERMS TO KNOW

**Repertoire**—all the dances performed by a company.

**Choreographer**—person who creates dances.

**Commissioned**—hired to create new work.

**Isolations**—an exercise to see how parts of the body move differently.

**Aerobics**—exercises to build strength and endurance for the heart and lungs.

**Stretches**—exercises for flexibility.

**Phrasing**—the fitting of dance figures to the rhythm and/or melody of the music.

**Opposition**—A movement or position of the arms in opposite direction to a movement or position of the legs.

**Flexed foot**—A position of the foot in which the ankle is bent and toes pulled back towards the knee.

**Duo**—Movements involving two people.

**Improvisation**—Dancing or acting without having sets or steps or a script and with little advance preparation. Improvisation is used to explore different ways of expressing ideas in movement.