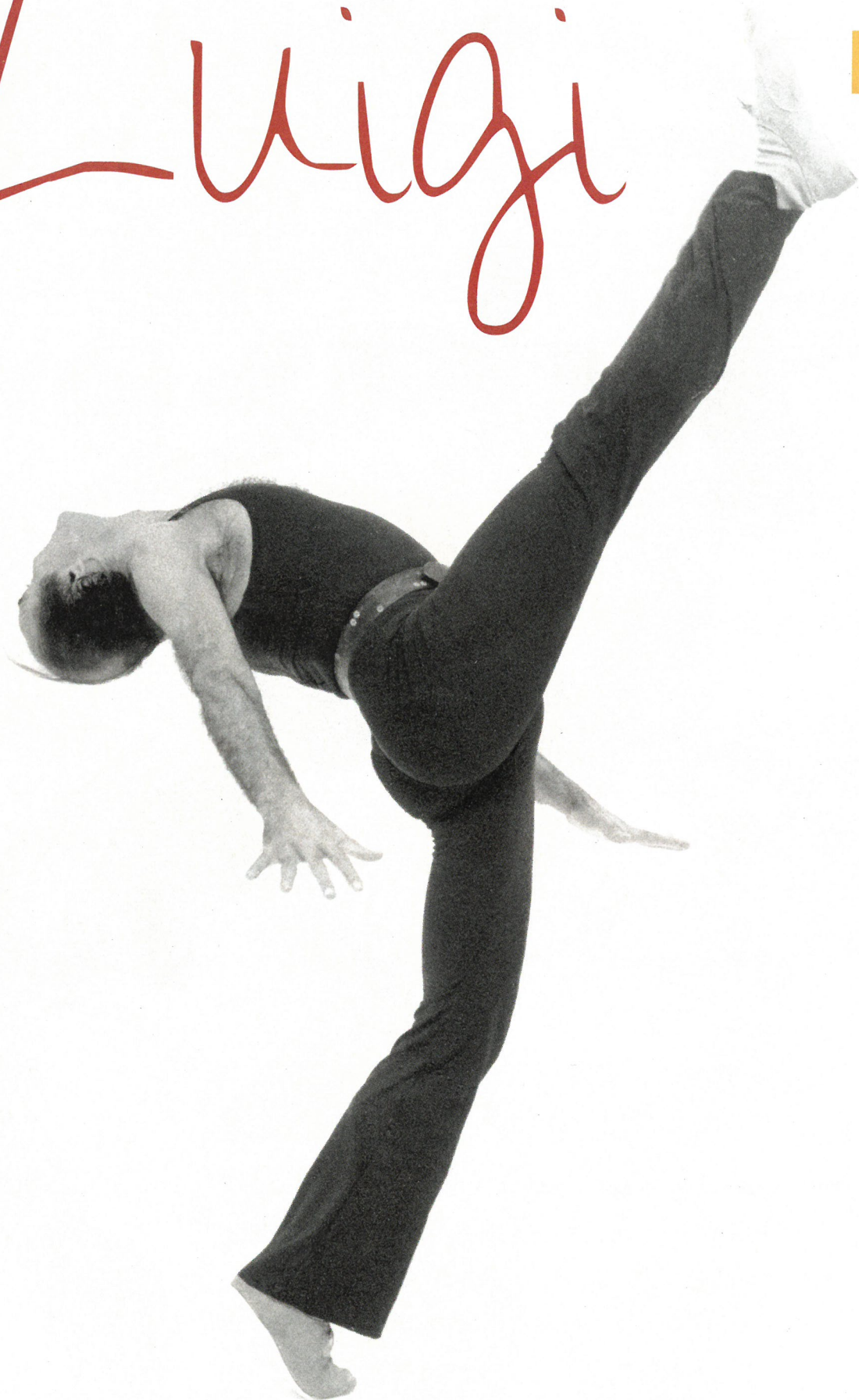


Luigi



A dance legend and his game-changing style are still jazzing up dancers' lives

By Joshua Bartlett

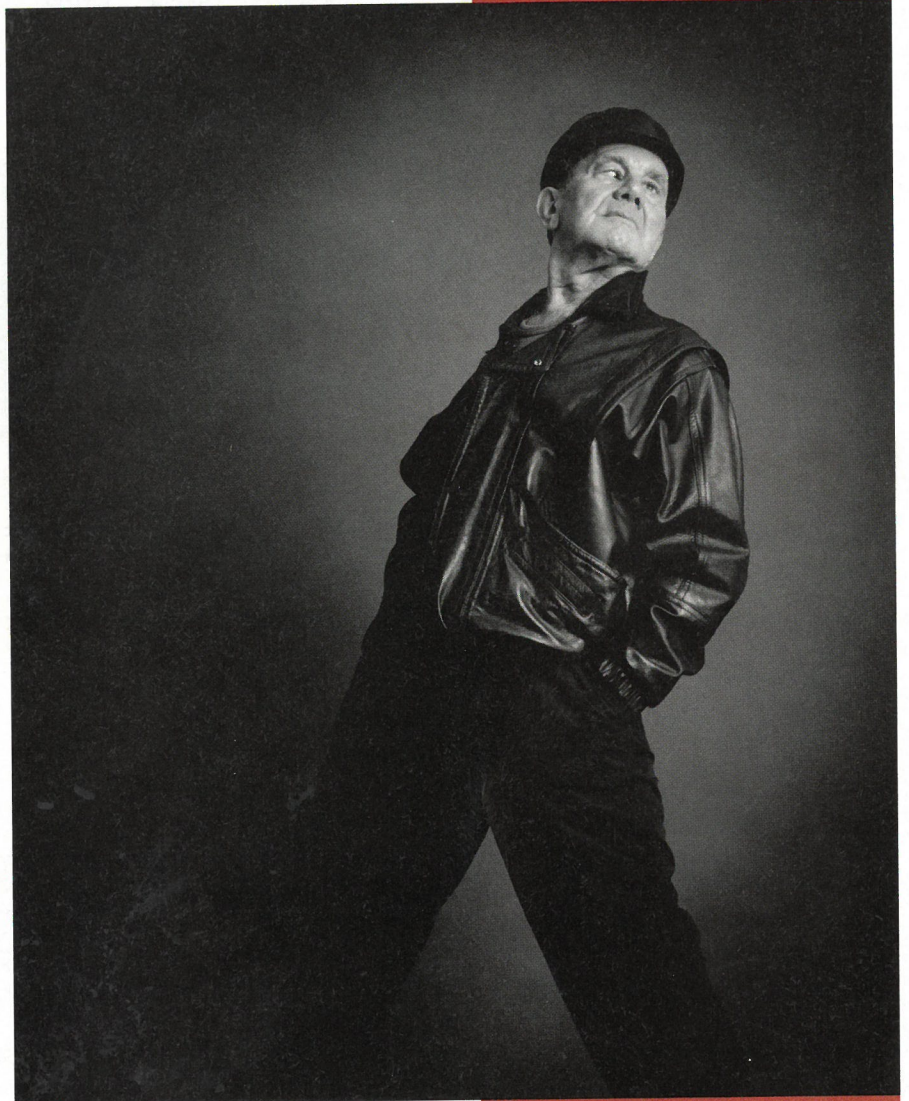
LUIGI.

No name denotes the love of, dedication to, or healing powers of jazz dancing quite like Luigi's. He's one of the few living legends of his generation who remains steadily—and joyfully—active in dance. At Luigi's Jazz Centre—The First World Jazz Centre, housed at Studio Maestro on Manhattan's Upper West Side, the 87-year-old Luigi still instructs his regular 11am class. And if you've ever taken a jazz class in New York, you've very likely experienced Luigi's magic. Even jazz dancers who haven't studied with him have indirectly been touched by his classic jazz style.

The man who coined the intro phrase, "a-5, 6, 7, 8 . . ." is an icon. That fact remains indisputable. But to say that Luigi's faculties haven't diminished would be misleading. After suffering a stroke in the fall of 2010, he walks with a cane and needs someone else's steady hand to stabilize his balance and offset his tenuous proprioception. Although his famous warm-ups are conducted barre-free in the center, Luigi paradoxically now holds on to a barre when he teaches.

When the music starts—a recording of his younger self, with his mellifluous, seductive voice giving instructions—he counts along with the tape with impeccable accuracy and quickly slides into his teaching zone. He knows exactly where he is. His longtime assistant, Francis J. Roach, demonstrates the warm-up in front of the class of 17 dancers who range from teenagers to septuagenarians, aspiring novices to retired gypsies. "Less arms," Luigi softly stresses. "More body, more feeling."

Even though his speech occasionally falters, his I-don't-miss-a-thing eye



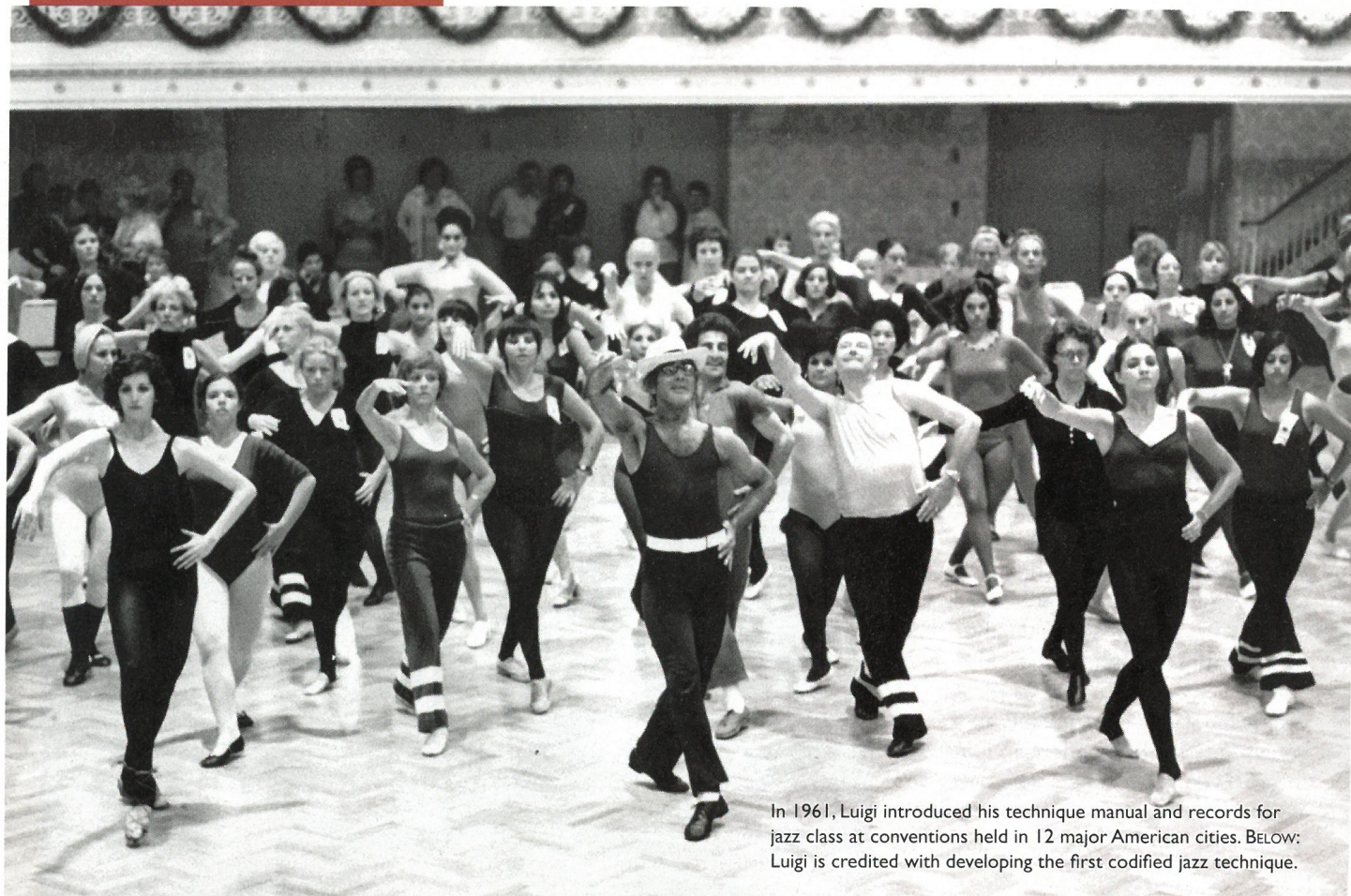
is still saber sharp. Fully evident, too, is his sweet demeanor and his devotion to his students, qualities he has embraced throughout a long career that could easily provide rich material for a heartfelt, uplifting biopic.

"Luigi's been such a constant here in the Big Apple," says Roach. "He's been giving classes in New York continually since 1956. I don't know of anyone else who can say that."

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ABOVE: Luigi's signature style has been emulated and admired by countless jazz dance students over the past 50 years.

OPPOSITE: Luigi, in a layout, demonstrates the concept of utilizing the body in opposition, a core tenet of his technique.



In 1961, Luigi introduced his technique manual and records for jazz class at conventions held in 12 major American cities. BELOW: Luigi is credited with developing the first codified jazz technique.

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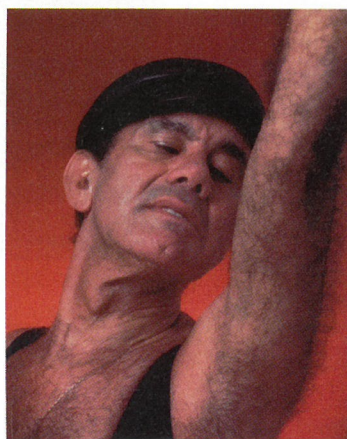
—Luigi

The roots of the technique

Luigi’s technique, which he developed in the 1940s to help him rehabilitate after an accident, has been taught for decades and has inspired dancers from around the globe. One of them is David Wynen, a dance professor at the University of Ballarat near Melbourne, Australia, who learned Luigi’s technique at local Australian schools as a boy and studied with Luigi in New York on an EJ Barker Fellowship from 2009 through 2011.

“Luigi’s technique starts with a concept—it’s sort of like Graham technique—about moving from the inside out instead of the outside in,” says Wynen, who healed a seri-

ous hamstring injury partly through utilizing Luigi’s technique. “It’s about using what’s strong within you to help what’s weak.”



The arc of Luigi’s life and career forms an illustrious chapter in dance history. Born Eugene Louis Faccuito in Steubenville, Ohio, in 1925, he became an accomplished child performer. After serving in the navy during World War II, he moved to Hollywood. There, on a grant from the G.I. Bill he studied ballet with Bronislava Nijinska and trained at the Falcon Studios with Edith Jane, Michel Fokine, Carmelita Maracci, and Eugene Loring.

When he was in his 20s, a near-fatal car collision left him partially

Luigi, on far right, danced in many MGM musicals, including *On the Town* with Vera-Ellen.

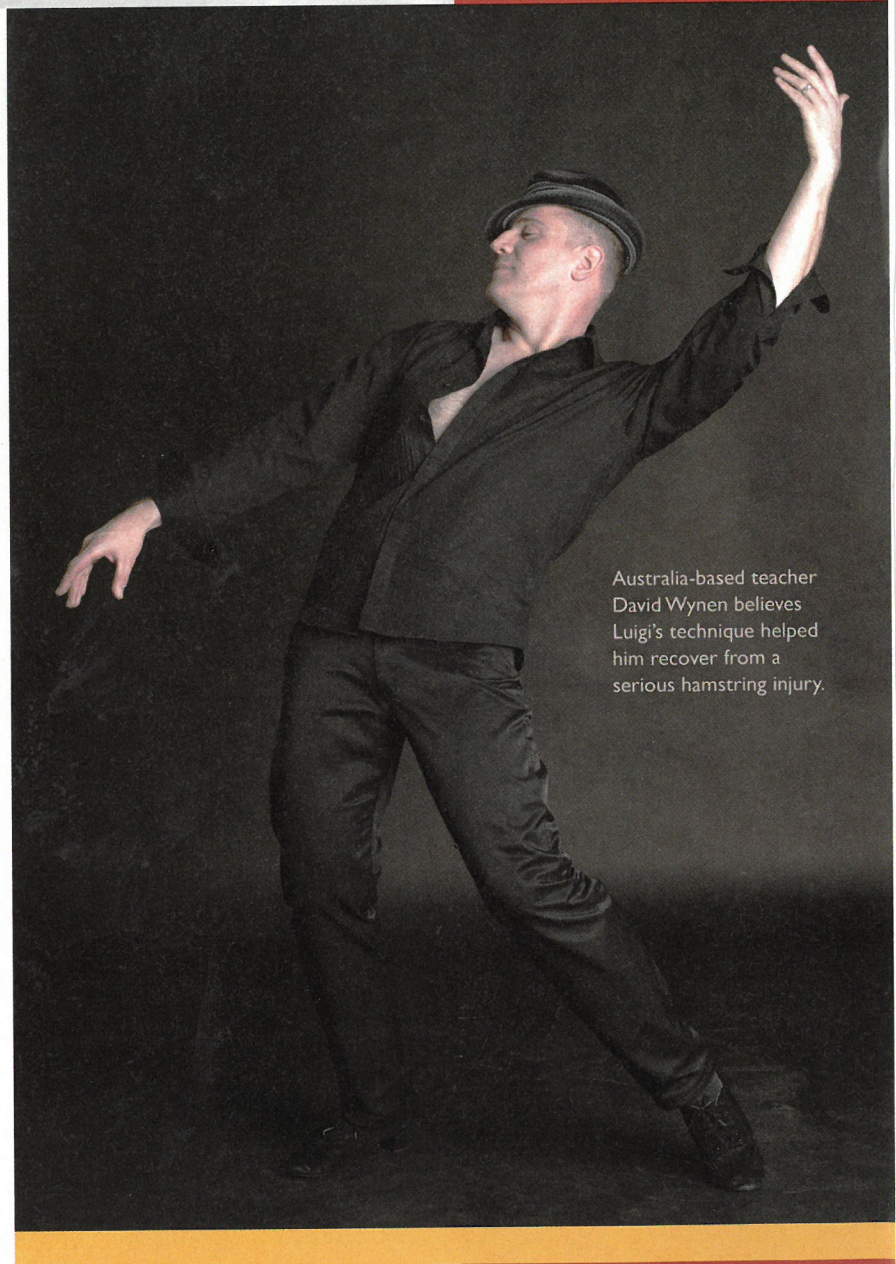


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paralyzed on one side of his body. Luigi refers to the incident that altered his life as simply “the accident.” “I had to learn to straighten my legs, how to use my body, learn to create movement with the arms,” he says.

To rehabilitate himself, Luigi doggedly practiced the 20 arm positions that the Japanese dancer Michio Ito—with whom he had studied in Hollywood—had devised based on the Dalcroze Eurhythmics method. Gradually, Luigi adapted and incorporated the exercises into his own technique, expanding them to include the 24 arm movements that he still teaches in class today. (A recent publicity photo of the Broadway musical *Memphis* shows the cast posing in a classic Luigi second-position port de bras.) An essential element of his technique included pushing down on an imaginary barre for stability and to develop the sense of opposition—pushing down to go up—which became a core part of Luigi’s signature style.

In the early 1950s, Luigi began dancing in MGM musicals, such as *An American in Paris*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Singin’ in the Rain*, *The Band Wagon*, and *White Christmas*, working with stars like Gene Kelly, Cyd Charisse, Judy Garland, Danny Kaye, and Fred Astaire. It was Kelly who nicknamed him “Luigi,” and the professional name stuck. Between takes on film sets, Luigi warmed up using



Australia-based teacher David Wynen believes Luigi’s technique helped him recover from a serious hamstring injury.

his physical regimen; soon other dancers joined him. In 1951, he began teaching classes in Los Angeles, initially at his own rented dance studio (where Jacques d'Amboise and Vera-Ellen first studied with him), and then at Falcon Studios in Hollywood.

Jazz dance in New York City

In 1956 Luigi moved to New York to perform in the Broadway show *Happy Hunting* with Ethel Merman; he also assisted Alex Romero on the choreography. Until then, no dancer had ever put together a specific jazz technique, including the great jazz stylist and choreographer Jack Cole, with whom Luigi had never studied but whom he nevertheless admired. "Gene [Kelly] and Alex [Romero] said, 'You'll do what Jack Cole should have done—put a jazz technique together,'" recalls Luigi. (He thinks Cole's incorporation of East Indian dancing into his choreography almost destroyed his pure jazz style.)

Around the mid-1950s, Matt Mattox, one of Cole's protégés, started teaching ballet-based jazz classes, which he called "freestyle dancing," in New York. Many dancers would describe Mattox's technique as strong and robust, but somewhat punishing on the body. It's also a complicated one, says Broadway veteran Tomé Cousin, who now teaches at Carnegie Mellon University. "It's pretty detailed. It's not one where you can just go into class that day and follow, which you can do with Luigi."

Shortly after the run of *Happy Hunting*, Luigi taught at June Taylor's dance studio in Manhattan for a few months and was subsequently inspired to open his school in New York. He's been teaching ever since. His students have included Liza Minnelli, Michael Bennett, Sandy Duncan, Peggy Fleming, Patricia McBride, Bette Midler, Donna McKechnie, Barbra Streisand, Ann Reinking, Ben Vereen, Christopher Walken, Maria Calegari, d'Amboise, Susan Stroman, Twyla Tharp, and John Travolta.



A successful child performer, Luigi won the Major Bowes Amateur Hour talent contest.

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—David Wynen

"[George] Balanchine loved my work," says Luigi. "A good Balanchine dancer does Luigi's work very well. They don't throw away the notes," he adds, referring to their musical sensitivity. Roach says that Alvin Ailey once told him he wouldn't have had a school if it weren't for Luigi.

A focus on teaching

One of the most valuable aspects of Luigi's technique is its adaptability to all types of students. "You can be at a beginner level and you can advance instantly; it's like an introduction to jazz," says Cousin. "For an advanced dancer there's always something to work on—you can polish your style." It also, he says, "has a rehabilitative quality at its core that others do not have. Luigi's technique is meant to strengthen. There are other techniques that are meant to enable coordination, but not necessarily strengthen."

In Luigi's warm-up, the fundamental elements of ballet vocabulary are all there: pliés, tendus, passés, battements, frappés, fluidly linked through jazz rhythms. While watching students do a center combination, danced to a recording of Artie Shaw's *Dancing in the Dark*, Luigi talks about sound: "Each step has a sound in the music," he says. "Listen to the sound of the body—hear the body, hear the movement."

Many young dancers, he feels, are "missing syncopation and phrasing. They just want to throw movement around. They miss the sound." He cites three things essential to the musicality of jazz dancing: "You've got to hear it, see it, and feel it." What bothers him most in bad jazz training? "Poor use of the body, swayed backs, bent knees," he says. "Ballet is the basis of it all. I stay with the essence of true form. If you have the form, you have the essence of the technique."

He's also not a fan of most "contemporary" movement. "It doesn't mean anything," he says. "It doesn't have the same technique."

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Luigi



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Luigi's technique maintains a classical sense of *contrapposto* (exemplified by a dancer stretching the right arm up and *plié*ing on the left leg, turning the hips in the opposite direction as the shoulders and head) and a close relationship to ballet through *épaulement*, which is woven throughout his technique. The head is held high, with elegance. Luigi believes that the refinement of his work allowed jazz to garner more recognition and esteem. "I think this technique did help the respect," he says. "I showed that it meant something technically, with a very elegant, sophisticated way of moving."

Luigi: past, present, future

"Luigi's technique provides a good basis and a springboard for other styles and techniques," says Cousin. He first studied with Luigi in 1971, when he was 11, and returned to train with the master at his studio in 2008; in between he studied with Luigi-trained teachers at Point Park College. "You've got the foundation of opposition and working from your back. That can be applied to any other style of choreography."

For Cousin, Luigi's vocabulary, especially the *port de bras*, has proved

Chita Rivera and Luigi lent their distinctive talents to "JUMP FOR JOY! A Dance Variety Spectacular—Career Transitions for Dancers' 27th Anniversary Jubilee," held last month at New York City Center.

invaluable. "Luigi codified the *port de bras*, like in classical ballet," he says. "You learn that there is only a certain passageway to transition from movement to movement without creating an awkward movement. Once it's in your body, you can easily figure out choreography. It makes the lines correct, so that all positions fall into place. Without them you're flopping your arms around—there's no system of going from movement to movement."

Wynen describes Luigi's jazz vocabulary as "balletically influenced but not cruelly influenced." He says his college students in Australia adore Luigi's technique: "They get an all-over body warm-up. They ask to do it every day. I think they see it as their version of Pilates."

For his students who are actors learning to dance, he plans to pull ballet from the curriculum and instead give them Luigi technique as a core dance class. "They can't respond to ballet—they feel very out-of-body with it," he says. "Luigi is danced to modern jazz music and goes through the classical positions and gives them all the rudiments like *plié*." He believes he'll get much better results teaching Luigi's technique than he

does watching 20-year-old actors in tights floundering around at the barre. "When you have actors who want to do *Mamma Mia!* in two years' time, you have to train them to dance, to really move through space and learn how to dance through a phrase."

Whether guest teaching or setting Susan Stroman's Tony Award-winning Broadway show *Contact* around the world, Cousin starts the dancers off with Luigi technique classes, just as he does with his students at Carnegie Mellon. "To me, there isn't another style that's going to teach the correct use of the back, shoulders, and arms," he says. "It's classic jazz—it's all built into it."

Cousin also knows that teachers and teaching styles need to adapt to dancers' energy and physicality in the 21st century. "I just want to continue the legacy of teaching," he says. "It's all about passing it on. Part of my main interest is finding ways to bring new and younger audiences and students to the technique in 2012. If it doesn't, it kind of sits in a 1950s, '60s, '70s world. It doesn't have to be updated, but it's about finding clever ways to bring young people to it so they can realize the value of training classically in jazz. Then it can also enhance what they are doing."

For Wynen, Luigi's style and technique bring a needed sense of balance to the dance world. "All this stuff you see here—*Dance Moms*, *So You Think You Can Dance*—is like McDonald's for dancers, like disposable junk food," he says. "I think sometimes you need to nourish yourself. There is another way, and I think Luigi is that." He urges dancers to go back to the source to understand why they're practicing dance combinations and what they're about.

At four-score-and-seven years old, Luigi forges ahead as a teacher to stay vital and energized. "Never stop moving," is his motto, and a mere stroke hasn't deterred his spirits. "Teaching keeps me engaged and active," he says. "I want to keep it going, keep myself going, keep the work going." ♦