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Bob Boross: How I Teach Matt Mattox Freestyle Jazz

Posted on October 1, 2016 by [Rachel Rizzuto](#) Like 33 0 Tweet Pin it

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Bob Boross surveys the group of jazz students before him who are attempting to layer a complicated port de bras on top of a foot warm-up that requires one half of the body to be in parallel and the other in turnout. "You're all thinking very hard," he says. "Relax your faces a little bit."

Boross understands his students' struggle. This is his second day teaching Matt Mattox technique to dancers taking part in an intensive in New York City (sponsored by Jazz Choreography Enterprises), and most of them have never studied Mattox's style of jazz. The technique's strong ballet foundation, tricky isolations and difficult-to-coordinate arm and leg movements make it easy for students to tense up, rather than appear relaxed, as Mattox always famously did. "It's about mastering your body," says Boross, who often teaches the elements of a Mattox warm-up exercise in layers—feet first, then port de bras. "Getting that relaxed feeling—even though you're doing strenuous things—is a very complex assignment."

His own introduction to Mattox and his style was a baptism by fire, too. A latecomer to dance—Boross didn't start until he was a teenager—he dropped in on a monthlong Mattox workshop at UCLA for the last 10 days and soon found himself working one-on-one with him. After decades of extensive study with Mattox, who passed away in 2013, Boross is now a freelance choreographer and teacher; he leads master classes throughout the U.S. and abroad. "It's not vernacular jazz dance," says Boross. "It has a lot of ballet, modern and the footwork of tap mixed together." In fact, that's why Mattox referred to it as "freestyle" (a term he borrowed from Eugene Loring)—because it encompasses several techniques.

As Boross circles the room, clapping to accent the technique's tricky rhythms or adjust a student's sacrum in a maddeningly articulate hip circle, he offers helpful imagery for the dancers to chew on. To encourage dynamics, he asks that they imagine their bodies are sports cars. "Think about how you would drive it," he says. "I want to see you working hard and still enjoying your sports car." But Mattox's codified warm-up exercises aren't all tricky tendus and isolations. A particularly strenuous one requires the dancers to begin in a first-position grand plié and double-bounce into a grand second plié. ("I need someone with young, strong legs," Boross jokes, asking a student to demonstrate as he explains.) It's that diversity of movement which draws him to Mattox's style. "It's one technique that will satisfy a dancer's needs—dancers have to do so many things these days," says Boross. "It makes dancers responsive and employable and keeps you healthy." **DT**

Bob Boross made his Broadway debut in the 1981 revival of *Can-Can*. He has an MA from the Gallatin School of New York University and has been a professor at Illinois State University, Western Kentucky University, Stephens College, Radford University, the University of California, Irvine, and Shenandoah University. He studied extensively with jazz legend Matt Mattox and wrote his master's thesis on Mattox's career. Boross' writings have been published in the anthology *Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches*.

Skye Mattox is the granddaughter of Matt Mattox and has danced in the Broadway revivals of *On the Town* (2014) and *West Side Story* (2009).

*Photos by Kyle Froman*