

Date: April 26

Circulation: 167,040



Dance

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Battle it out Dancers dig into Cole's movement.

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Jack Cole

The choreographer is reborn thanks to a new show by Chet Walker.
By Gia Kourlas

Like so many who grew up watching old movies, Chet Walker knew Jack Cole's dances before he even knew who Jack Cole was. Recognized as the father of American jazz—a dance form that, let's face it, has been horribly maligned—Cole drew on a wealth of styles, including those from East India, Africa and the Caribbean, to transform theatrical dance. (Just before his death in 1974, he was researching Cambodian dance.) Cole's magic touch is immortalized in cinematic performances by leading ladies like Marilyn Monroe, Ann Miller, Rita Hayworth and Betty Grable, and also lives on in the work of the choreographers he inspired, from Jerome Robbins and Alvin Ailey to Bob Fosse. In *Heat Wave: The Jack Cole Project*, which opens on May 3 at Queens Theatre in the Park, Walker—a Fosse protégé himself—re-creates Cole's works from film to the stage. He spoke about the process.

On the origins of the show:
“Through all of my work with Gwen Verdon and Bob Fosse, Jack Cole was

always part of the conversations. I wanted to get the technique on record—not the original, because that's something that's been kind of lost—but what he was using in the 1970s before his passing. So we have reconstructed and codified his warm-up and technique.”

On excavating Jack Cole:
“I decided that

we would do workshops and residencies to see what kind of information we could unveil. The show is an homage to Jack Cole, because I've taken scenes from movies and constructed numbers. It's like movie numbers made for theater to look like movies. It's not an easy feat. I'm not sure everyone understood what was going on in the films; that was my main reason for wanting to see it on the stage.”

On the rehearsal process:
“I had a group of dancers from my company. We call them the core four, and we have been working for 12 weeks in different residencies or workshops. When you find out how this man took East Indian dance,

Afro-Cuban dance and the Lindy [Hop] and put that all together to create his formation of a technique? For a lot of choreographers, we don't have a technique. We have styles that we work in, but Mr. Cole had an amazing technique and for that technique, you could then do many styles. It's fascinating. He had the largest collection of dance memorabilia of anyone in the world. This person just kept collecting ideas and possibilities.”

On Cole's technique:

“Your core needs to be so strong that you can move in any moment to any side—up or down, and you've got it.

It's interesting to look at a lot of this, because I've realized it has so much to do with Pilates. Joe Pilates was around at the same time. Jack Cole talked about a plié with your arms. And you go, ‘Plié with your arms? Really?’ It's about landing on the floor and using your arms as a cushion, like you would in a plié if you were to jump. It's not about muscle, but having that strength.”

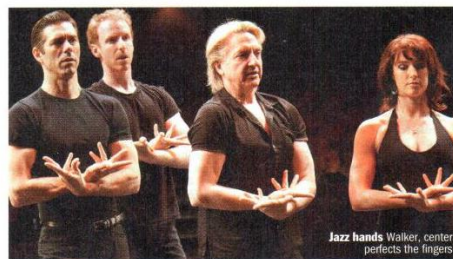
On the challenges today's dancers face in grasping the choreography:

“I think it's more of a mind-set. We are very humbled by the work. We're not afraid that we're not going to get it—we know we're not there yet. We keep going. The work that we're doing isn't a completion; it is the beginning. With Mr. Fosse's work, I never felt that we ever got it, but that it was always a work-in-progress. Like good theater, or good writing. Do you ever *get* Shakespeare? Ibsen? Chekhov? Is ballet ever perfect? There's something about the living arts: I get one more chance. I think that's rewarding, because isn't that what art is about? The continuation, the exploration? That's how I feel. It is a constant discovery.”

On his aspirations for the show:

“I want it to be seen by as many people as possible so that they can be inspired by the possibilities. I will also take the knowledge and go on an educational route—lecturing at universities. There are not a lot of books written about Mr. Cole, but there are a lot of visual aids. I would love for the show to have a life outside of this with more money and more people so that we could do more; because there is more, but a big part of why I do this is that I want to get his name out there. It's not really known by lots of people. I love what Julie Newmar once said when she was asked why a lot of people didn't know Mr. Cole's name: ‘All the important people know.’ More people need to be the important people. The people in the know know, but I want the club to get a little bigger.”

Heat Wave: The Jack Cole Project is at Queens Theatre in the Park May 3–20.



Jazz hands Walker, center, perfects the fingers.