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A man with dark hair and a goatee, wearing a dark blue short-sleeved button-down shirt and matching trousers, is captured in a dynamic dance pose. He is leaning forward with his right leg extended and his arms in a stylized, expressive position. He is wearing gold-colored flat shoes. The background is a dark, textured studio floor.

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Blossom Leilani Crawford

Posted on February 28, 2015 by Candice Thompson

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How I teach Pilates for dancers



Crawford in her Bridge Pilates studio in Brooklyn's Dumbo neighborhood

"Kathy Grant used to say, 'Let your fingers do the walking,' like the Yellow Pages ad. I mean, do people even know what the Yellow Pages are anymore?" says Pilates teacher Blossom Leilani Crawford, as she uses two fingers to trace a student's articulating spine in the Hissing Cat exercise. Crawford, a bona fide Pilates historian and disciple of first-generation Pilates student Kathleen Stanford Grant, carries a barely bottled excitement as she teaches and lectures on the origins of the late Grant's cat exercises.

Crawford spent the early years of her teacher training tirelessly observing and later assisting Grant's early morning class in the dance department of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Grant had a quirky sense of humor and a deep love for cats. During her tenure at NYU, she developed a series of 10 "cats," quadruped exercises aimed at tempering gratuitous flexibility and runaway hypermobility in dancers and helping them develop stability and strength and warm up the spine. Her cats serve as a supplemental text to the Pilates canon. Crawford was around during the final codification of this project, and even has a cat exercise bearing her own name. In the world of

Grant, and now Crawford, the discipline of turning inward for more strength and alignment in conditioning class can allow dancers to find increased confidence in their bodies onstage and off.

Crawford's Pilates classes at Mark Morris Dance Center are tinged with Grant's practice of incorporating sound, using specific direction and creative imagery to create an environment ripe for self-discovery. "Kathy was concerned with dancers just copying forms from the outside. She wanted them to feel a shape from the inside," says Crawford. The Roll Up, a classic Pilates exercise where the spine is peeled off the mat from a supine position one bone at a time, is performed along with a recitation of 10 counts. Another abdominal exercise is given with an added whistle. The vocalizations are added to draw more awareness to the breath, to bring more focus to the work in the present moment. Likewise, Crawford shies away from repetitive demonstrations, instead choosing to give precise directions for each movement such as "tuck your chin like an angry turtle."

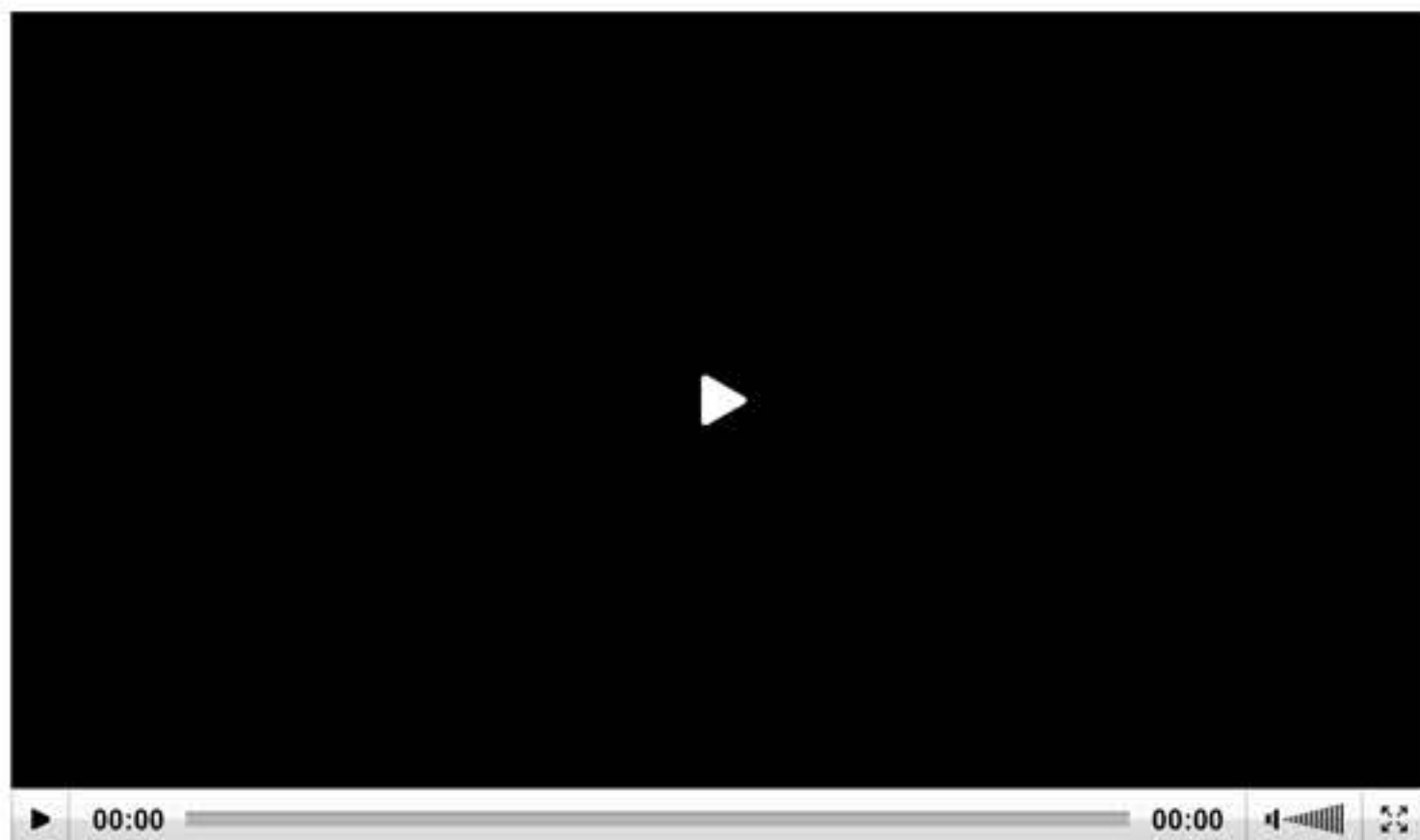


Crawford (right) with her late mentor, "cats" creator Kathleen Stanford Grant

On a Wednesday evening in October, after talking students through a particularly difficult side-kick series, she jokes, "Now that's an eyebrow lifter." Crawford's playful humor acts as a release and a reward for her demanding approach that comes out of Grant's holistic theory: "The body you have in this class is the same body you perform with, so you have to be present and meticulous. Everything applies." DT

Candice Thompson danced with the Milwaukee Ballet Company and is a writing fellow at Columbia University.

Photos (from top): by Kyle Froman, by Noboru Morikawa, courtesy of Blossom Leilani Crawford



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