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# Ingredients

## (How Dance Movements Get Named)

By Jae Gruenke

Let's play a simple game. Try the following movements out for yourself at home and see if you can guess their sources:

*flying angel, five arm swings around the hips, reach hand, step, tilt, back leg extension, bend.*

Answer: Limon repertory, Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A*, Lance Gries's *Dear Guardian*, *Farewell Grace*, Sarah Skaggs's *Paradise*, Cunningham technique, Graham technique, and ballet (in translation).

When I looked for what terminology had developed to describe pedestrian movement in dance, all I kept hearing was names of body parts and/or actions, with the occasional colorful image. Then for contrast I checked styles I thought of as very *unpedestrian*, and I found... exactly the same thing. Apparently, from a terminology perspective, dance has *always* been pedestrian.

My first clue about why came from Steve Paxton. He wrote about Aikido crescent rolls, which he called "the croissants, to honor the French terminology which we have inherited from ballet." I could feel from this what a croissant roll might be like, and saw in his unfamiliar example how dance terminology records the feeling of a complex action so it can be repeated. So I started looking for the equivalent of croissants in other vocabularies.

At first it seemed every technique I examined was croissant-impoverished. But when I imagined how different the Cunningham instruction "leg side high," the ballet command "extend leg front, close, bend," and Lance Gries's phrase, "hands, arms, drop, leg floats," would look, I saw that they too were croissants. The terse vocabulary masked the complexity and distinctiveness of these movements.

Not all movements in codified techniques are named. If you're a choreographer with a swelling oeuvre, you've named only what you're going to repeat – the things that seem absolutely basic, such as a movement of a body part, an action, or an emotional expression. The names you use reflect this; they're simple because the movements feel simple to you. But ironically, these seemingly basic movements are all croissants full of detail and complexity and distinctiveness. This is what defines a style: what gets baked into the croissants. I think it's as true of pedestrian movement as of any other kind, which is why it's interesting to watch.

The corollary of this rule is that the units you name become a limit to what you're able to perceive in movement. In other words, once you've baked a croissant it's very hard to break it back down to flour and butter. I think this is why a lot of choreographers, for better or worse, don't name movement. Again I quote Steve Paxton, who improvises: "Lots of names for phrases and movements have been made up, but the language seems not set up for naming relationship[s] between parts of the body in fluid improvisational relationships... I became discouraged when I discovered that there was no name for the shift of weight from one leg to the other. I figured if something that basic and intrinsic to human locomotion was nameless, what was the use of English?"

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