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LUIGI – JAZZ DANCE PIONEER AND INNOVATOR: A PERSONAL REVIEW

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This paper surveys Life and Work of Eugene Louis “Luigi” Faccuito, known as developer of the “classic jazz” dance style. This article discusses his dance technique. It focuses on Luigi method of jazz training.

Key words: modern choreography, USA choreography, Luigi, classic jazz dance, method of jazz training

On April 8th, 2015, the professional dance world lost a true innovator, and master teacher, Eugene Louis “Luigi” Faccuito. Known simply as “Luigi”, he has been labeled by dancer writers and historians as “An Ambassador of Jazz”, “The Pied Piper”, “A Body Doctor”, but mostly he is remembered as an innovator. Dance historians define Luigi’s style as “classic jazz”, sophisticated, elegant, liquid fire. Coming from strict classical ballet training at the Bolshoi Ballet Academy in Moscow, it was overwhelming to see the diversity of dance training offered in the United States. Public and private dance studios, Universities, all were teaching what was mysterious at first, “jazz”. Later in my career, working with my favorite modern jazz teacher, Melissa Rector at the Koresh Dance Center, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, I was exposed to the “Luigi technique”. Rector’s modern jazz classes were always structured, comfortable, and very exciting. Curious I asked about her jazz training, how many styles of jazz there are, and where it all started. Melissa stood there quiet for a moment, and then said that the only method of jazz training she knows is Luigi.

Able to articulate about and discuss classical ballet training, I wanted to know all I could about Eugene Louis Faccuito, known to the dance world simply as “Luigi”. Born March 20th, 1925 in Steubenville, Ohio, Luigi was the 8th of 11 children born to immigrant parents. Coached by his brother Tony, Luigi grew up winning talent shows with his singing, dancing and acrobatic tricks. After serving in the Army during World War II, Luigi came back to the U.S. and wanted a career in the movies. Luigi’s strong connection to the world of classical ballet began when he took his first ballet class with Bronislava Nijinska. Sadly within two months of moving to Los Angeles, California, Luigi was in a near fatal car accident. Suffering from a basal skull fracture and paralysis on one side of his body, Luigi’s doctors gave little hope he would recover. In a deep coma, it is said that an inner voice told Luigi to “Never stop moving kid, if you stop, you’re dead....”.

Upon waking from the coma told by doctors he'd never walk again, given his tenacious, stubborn nature, Luigi said "I'm going to dance".

What started out as Luigi on his own, developing a series of ballet-based exercises for his rehabilitation (the influence of having taking ballet classes with Bronislava Nijinska present), evolved into the technique known today as "Luigi jazz". Determined to dance again, he created stretching exercises that helped him to regain control of his body, to do what Luigi called "lengthen and stretch the body without strain". He also focused on finding a way to stabilize himself, using the concept of pressing down on an invisible dance barre. After a year of rehabilitation Luigi regained strength and equilibrium and resumed dancing again. In 1949 he auditioned for the Metro-Goldwyn Mayer studio in Hollywood, California, where dancer/actor Gene Kelly became a friend and advocate. Impressed with Luigi's dancing, Kelly offered Luigi a job, despite his obvious facial paralysis. Luigi went on to have an 8 year career dancing in over 40 films, most notably "An American in Paris", "Singing in the Rain", and "White Christmas".

During long waiting periods on film sets Luigi continue to do the exercises he developed for his rehabilitation. Robert Alton, American dancer and choreographer, a major figure in dance choreography of Broadway and Hollywood musicals from the 1930s through to the early 1950's, and Gene Kelly encouraged Luigi to teach, ultimately becoming his mentors. Although Luigi's technique was developed as ballet based, the concept of epaulement was exceptionally useful for Hollywood dancers. To be an interesting dancer, one must have epaulement; it puts dancers on the right track for the next move, and contributes to making them look beautiful. For Luigi a key concept is to never stop moving even when you strike a pose, the movement for needs to go on, through the fingertips, like the most beautiful port de bras extending beyond the final pose. After teaching his jazz based classes in Los Angeles, Luigi moved to New York City where he opened his own school "The First World Jazz Center". It was at his school in New York where Luigi codified and shared his dance method, which became know as "Luigi jazz". Luigi's method of jazz became the world's first standard technique for teaching jazz and musical theater dance exercises. Honored by dance organizations around the globe, Luigi has been featured in articles on dance and health in numerous countries. The warm-up book Luigi developed has been translated into numerous languages. It was Luigi who first developed the 5,6,7,8, counting which is used universally at the start of dance combinations. "Luigi jazz" attracts dancers from both the modern dance and ballet worlds. Twyla Tharp, Margo Sappington, Janie Parker, Valentina Kozlova, John Travolta, Liza Minnelli, and Ann Reinking, among many others, continue to be devotees and proponents of Luigi's jazz technique.

Luigi's style of jazz is described as grounded like modern dance, elegant like ballet, and crisp rhythmic movement, allowing practitioners the control to learn and master any piece of choreography with grace. In a one-one interview with Luigi in August of 2014, he told this author that the most important thing for a dancer is musicality. "A dancer needs to hear, feel, and see the music. To dance put your hand on your heart and listen to the sound of your soul" [1]. Thanks to former student and Luigi Dance Company member, Dianna Folio and Luigi dance technique teacher, Francis Roach, I have priceless video of Luigi talking about his technique. A short documentary is planned that will help young students understand his history, and the evolution of his technique of jazz dance. Mr. Luigi, at the age of 90, died at home in New York, April 8th, 2015. The world lost a pioneer and true innovator, inspired by classical ballet to create a modern jazz technique that has as its

basis, being centered and lifted up. Francis Roach in an interview with Dance Magazine says “If you’re placed, centered and lifting up there’s an aliveness to the movement – a flow....Luigi’s method is powerful, elegant, and natural.” [2].

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Ключові слова: сучасна хореографія, хореографія США, Луїджи, джаз-танець, методика джазового екзерсису.