

Beginners Ballet for Adults



Brendan McCarthy reports on the increasing popularity of ballet classes for adults

Diane Coyle is an economist with her own consultancy. Most weeks, she will try, if she can, to get to five ballet classes. I'm not completely sure she's joking when she wonders if she has chosen self-employment because of the freedom to dovetail her work with her dancing. "There is an element of addiction. Like any exercise you crave the adrenalin and the endorphins", she told me. "But there is also an undoubted spiritual dimension; in class I can rid my mind of all of life's clutter." Kate Newey, Birmingham University's professor of drama, agrees. "Ballet helps keep me sane", she explains. "My job is very stressful, but in a dance class I have no responsibility other than to myself. Once you start the pliés, the sense of ritual – of being in the present – is intrinsically calming."

There are many others like them – adult ballet students, who often did not have a chance to dance when young, and are now making up for lost time. In London, the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD), English National Ballet (ENB), and various adult education colleges, run ballet classes for adults to

meet the growing demand. The RAD's classes attract over 100 students, with similar numbers at ENB. The Academy has introduced an extra class this term, while ENB's Natalie Brown has to turn away up to 20 people per course because she has no more studio space. Private teachers such as Brian Loftus and Donna Schoenherr have also added classes in

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Above, adult ballet classes at English National Ballet. Photograph courtesy of English National Ballet.

response to the demand (particularly great, students say, at weekends, when people have most free time).

The adult ballet movement began in the US. In New York during the 1980s, David Howard's studio (where Schoenherr taught as a student) offered classes for dance fans keen to know more about the art. In Britain, until the 1990s, teaching for adult learners (as distinct from open classes in London's major dance studios) scarcely existed. The former Royal Ballet principal Marguerite Porter was one of the pioneers.

Her Balletcise video drew students to her classes in Richmond, which are now taught by Brian Loftus. An added impetus was the aerobics boom with its accent on life-long fitness. In Kate Newey's words, "Gyms began to be places where everyone went. I had danced when I was younger and aerobic/dance/keep-fit classes became my route back to ballet."

Ballet teachers I interviewed said they enjoyed working with adult learners. Sandra Doling runs her own school, while also teaching aspirant professionals at Arts Educational, along with two adult classes at the RAD. Adult learners pose a specific creative challenge, she agrees, but there is a real sense of

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achievement. "I do get a high. Adults want to be there. They enjoy it and I enjoy it." Doling adapts her approach for adult bodies. "I always look for exercises that make people feel like they're dancing, balancés, for instance, but that also challenge them. If I tried to put batterie in, that would stretch most people. A pirouette in attitude is hard but most people can give it a go. People like the sense that they are performing."

But managing expectations can be challenging, Natalie Brown at ENB sometimes finds. "While most people are intelligent about it, an occasional student is unrealistic about what can be achieved. I had to explain to one woman that she could not move quickly from a beginner's class – that it was like learning a language and required prolonged persistence." One of Sandra Doling's students at the RAD, in contrast, was an 18-year-old boy who after a year successfully auditioned for the Rambert School.

Another of Sandra's students is Clare Bundock whose story can stand for many others. "I stopped taking lessons at 16 when I was at boarding school. Ballet was perceived almost as 'little-girly'. I regret now that I stopped then. A few years ago, I went to see *The Nutcracker*. I was very moved and realised how much I missed ballet. Now I try to fit in three classes a week. It gives me the most amazing pleasure and fulfilment – and most of all, real love, which I would never get from aerobics in a gym."

There is a flourishing internet community of adult ballet students. The websites Ballet Talk for Dancers, and Ballet.co are a source of emotional support, of advice on technique, and, intriguingly, ideas for "ballet tourism". When Diane Coyle and Kate Newey travel on business, they'll often try dance classes in the cities they visit. Newey has even met people at the barre whom she knew from

their screen names on Ballet Talk for Dancers.

For myself, I take up to five classes a week. Not many men begin ballet in mid-life: reading on the internet about those who did gave me the confidence to start. Once a week, I meet Charles Unwin in class. He started ballet seven years ago. "I wanted to do something new", he told me. I enjoyed watching dance and once you start, there is that sense of inhabiting a different world and forgetting other things." There have been inevitable injuries along the way – ankles and hamstrings – but it has helped him with posture and he enjoys the contrast with his other sports, skating and cricket.

But most men tend not to stay long, and usually I'm the only male in class. Initially it was a test of nerve, but not now. I had always wanted to dance and did not have the opportunity when young. Inevitably, I struggle. But small triumphs have an enormous emotional impact and if I can manage fleeting moments of grace, I'm thrilled. There is the deep pleasure of absorbed attention, along with other pleasures – listening to Marguerite Porter explaining a frappé ("Rudolf used to say it was like striking a match"), or Suzie Raymond,

also formerly of The Royal Ballet, breaking off from her class in Teddington to remember how Ashton encouraged dancers to improvise when he was making *The Tales of Beatrix Potter*.

I asked Donna Schoenherr if the compromises involved in teaching adults were such that the experience became slightly unreal. There was not a lowering of standards, she replied, but it did mean a change of perspective. As a former ballet mistress, she was used to rapid results from professional dancers. While it was challenging to help adult students in ways that didn't frustrate them, she said, the potential benefits were great. "Dance is very healing for some people – to see someone's self-esteem improve in class is immensely rewarding." ENB's Natalie Brown is similarly alive to dance's therapeutic possibilities – for several winters she has taught ballet classes for homeless people.

For many adult ballet students, going to class can be a triumph of hope over experience. In Diane Coyle's words, "Anybody who is not completely delusional will realise they will not look like a ballet dancer. They will probably not be very good at it. But that isn't the point. The struggle to achieve beauty is what matters. There is a powerful sense of validation and self-worth from, say, doing a beautiful port-de-bras even if you will never get your leg above 45 degrees." ■

Further information about some of the adult ballet classes on offer can be found on the following websites:

► **English National Ballet:**

www.ballet.org.uk/education_westminster.htm

► **Brian Loftus: email** balletcise@hotmail.com

► **Royal Academy of Dance:**

www.rad.org.uk/14school/adultclasses.htm

► **Donna Schoenherr: www.donnaschoenherr.com**