

## More than skin deep: the enduring practice of ballet in universities

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With the growing importance of ballet training in university dance curricula in the United States and abroad, students are often presented with a duality of training – modern dance vs. ballet – that can be difficult for them to marry, both in their minds and bodies. Traditional concepts of ballet training are explored with the goal of presenting a method that allows for a closer integration with contemporary dance techniques. Professional dancers today are often called upon to collaborate spontaneously in the studio with choreographers, and whether performing in the genres of modern dance, ballet, or within the fusion that is contemporary dance, training in ballet can contribute to this artistic dialogue.

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As a former professional dancer with the San Francisco Ballet and the American Ballet Theatre (ABT), I was exposed to contemporary dance when rehearsing in the studio with choreographers, rather than in my formative years of training. Beginning ballet lessons at the age of 11 and training daily in a private ballet conservatory, ballet was my focus through my teenage years. Though I had supplementary training in modern dance along the way (primarily Graham technique), conservatory classes emphasised ballet technique, partnering, and classical repertory as the means to attain my goal of joining a national American ballet company. Later, as an adult, when working professionally with such contemporary choreographers as Twyla Tharp, Ulysses Dove, or Lynn Taylor-Corbett, I was required quickly to absorb and interpret movement that extended far beyond my ballet training and which, at times, even seemed counter to my schooling. In other words, as a professional dancer in a ballet company I learned to assimilate contemporary dance movement through practical experimentation in rehearsal – sink or swim, as is generally the case in the professional world of dance. As I reflect on those years it strikes me that, as a relatively young dancer, I never considered ballet training to be superfluous to what I was

being asked to explore in the studio. Rather, as was largely my experience with colleagues in ABT and other ballet companies, I welcomed the opportunity to invest myself in uncharted movement territory. Challenges were abundant, of course, including the varied sense of weight and the subtle articulation of the torso, but my training in ballet served as a springboard to add greater texture to how my body could move expressively through space. Now that I teach studio classes in ballet technique to university students who have equal exposure to ballet and contemporary/modern dance,<sup>1</sup> I question how they grapple with this dichotomy as they prepare for careers as contemporary dancers.

In *The Body Eclectic: Evolving Practices in Dance Training*, Melanie Bales suggests that many university dance programmes today can be seen as structures that are parallel to the traditional ballet academy in terms of preparing future dancers for modern dance companies. Bales notes that in the United States the educational emphasis is moving away from a broad liberal arts education in favour of direct professional preparation. Within the expanding curriculum of American university dance programmes, Bales and Netti-Fiol (2008, pp. 7, 15) observe that ballet continues as a sought-after adjunct technique for the training of modern dancers, just as alternative movement practices, such as somatics and yoga, seem to be increasing. According to her, ballet is presented as a deconstructive<sup>2</sup> tool within an eclectic training environment, rather than as an end in and of itself.

This paradigm shift raises important questions regarding university dance training in the United States, particularly in terms of the role ballet should occupy. Most dance programmes in America offer at least supplementary training in ballet for students majoring in dance, and many have a concentration on modern or contemporary dance at the heart of their curricula. Examining a sample size of approximately 100 university dance programme websites in the United States reveals that nearly all programmes provide training in ballet technique, though very few (around 10 percent) are structured upon the model of a ballet conservatory (for example, the Department of Ballet in the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University, Bloomington).

Though Melanie Bales examines shifts occurring in American university dance programmes, similar curricular models can be found in European higher education. In the UK, for example, training in ballet is similarly incorporated as a foundational technique to be studied alongside other genres within degree programmes that emphasise pedagogical, theoretical, or creative performance-related educational goals. Though some European programmes emphasise classical ballet as part of their curricula, such as the Trinity Laban Conservatoire at the Laban Institute in London, and a few programmes entirely exclude ballet from their curricula (such as De Montfort University), the majority of higher education dance courses in the UK include ballet technique as a component of teaching modules that emphasise contemporary dance performance and choreography.<sup>3</sup>

In the United States, students pursuing degrees in dance are receiving college degrees in greater numbers each year in order to move into the increasingly competitive field of professional dance. In the Department of Dance at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), where the curriculum emphasises a fusion of modern dance and ballet, approximately

1. American universities tend to use the designation modern dance for courses, while in the UK contemporary dance is more prevalent. According to Dr. Sanders (2008, pp. 17–18), this may be due to the fact that modern dance was primarily influential in the UK after 1966 (after being presented by Ballet Rambert) and as such contains a stronger sense of lyricism and inclusion of a balletic aesthetic.
2. Bales does not use deconstructive in a Derridean or Foucauldian sense, but rather in terms of investigating technical problems and habits in order to decrease muscular tension and increase movement efficiency.
3. This information was gathered by an online survey of the following colleges and universities in the UK: Anniesland College, Laban Institute, University of Leeds, Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts, Roehampton University, University of Chichester, and the University of Surrey.

4. This statistic can be found online at the CSULB Institutional Research and Assessment website: [http://daf.csulb.edu/offices/univ\\_svcs/institutionalresearch/ondemand/index.php?college=ta&dept=75](http://daf.csulb.edu/offices/univ_svcs/institutionalresearch/ondemand/index.php?college=ta&dept=75)
5. Surveys mailed to approximately 30 US university dance educators revealed growing class sizes by as much as five times over the past 10 years.
6. Personal communication with Clinton Lockett, currently ballet master for American Ballet Theatre.
7. Mr. Edgerton reports that his current roster of dancers includes graduates from: Juilliard, Fordham/Ailey, University of Notre Dame, and University of Nevada, Las Vegas.
8. By conservatory, I am referring to an emphasis on practice-based classes (such as daily classes in ballet and modern dance technique), rather than theory classes.

130 undergraduate students are currently earning a BA or a BFA in dance. During my tutorial advice sessions with undergraduate students, few state that their post-graduation goals are to join professional ballet companies, though many aspire to work in regional modern or contemporary dance companies. In the Dance Department at CSULB, the graduation rate of students with BA dance degrees has almost doubled since 1990, and the number of students applying for acceptance into the Dance Department has increased over tenfold since 1990.<sup>4</sup> Many of my colleagues who teach technique in universities throughout the United States report similar findings, with growth rates of incoming undergraduates measured at rates comparable to CSULB.<sup>5</sup> This increase does not appear isolated to US universities. Julia Gleich, faculty at the Laban Institute in London, reports that attendance at university dance programmes in the UK is also on the upswing, despite a recent decrease in government subsidies toward undergraduate education (personal communication, 9 November 2010).

While ballet companies requiring expertise in classical pointe technique are less impacted by rising graduation rates of dance majors (for example, in ABT, which recruits almost entirely now from its second company, ABT II<sup>6</sup>), one finds increasingly among smaller contemporary companies a greater influx of dancers with degrees in dance. For example, Glenn Edgerton, Artistic Director of Hubbard Street Dance Chicago (HSDC), recently reported that over one-third of the current roster of dancers for HSDC were recipients of an undergraduate degree in dance (personal communication, 2 November 2010).<sup>7</sup> This development also has its reflexive opposite, with an upturn amongst dance professionals in the field working concurrently in academia. It would appear that the worlds of professional dance practitioners and dance scholars are merging closer and closer each year, and it is not at all unusual today to find 'dance celebrities' on faculties of major research universities (for instance, Yvonne Rainer joining the faculty of the University of California, Irvine in 2005).

Students pursuing undergraduate degrees in dance are often introduced to their formal training in ballet at an age that is late, according to the conventions of a typical ballet conservatory<sup>8</sup> (in early adulthood rather than early adolescence). In some cases, prior ballet training that is superficial in its approach can cause biases that remain throughout a student's university years. Some of the more negative associations along these lines might be that ballet is rigid and offers little chance for individual expression, is based on an anachronistic aesthetic, and is unsuitable as a basis for use in compositional work with its limited vocabulary. In contrast, it can be argued that modern or contemporary dance classes encourage a more individualised approach, whereby ideas of movement initiation, integration, and sequencing lend an opportunity for exploration that may be less evident in ballet class. University students studying ballet are faced with swimming in a sea of endless ballet terminology, all with very specific rules of execution. In addition, if we note the particular strains on the body induced by a turned-out stance, especially if forced beyond an individual's natural abilities, then the challenges of studying ballet can seem to outweigh the benefits for some students.

How, then, should university students be taught ballet technique? Through trial and error as a studio teacher of ballet in various university dance

9. The Russian pedagogue, Agrippina Vaganova (1879–1951), began teaching in 1921 and established a syllabus for classical ballet that became the basis for Soviet Russian training. Enrico Cecchetti (1850–1928), was an Italian ballet master for the Russian Imperial Theatre and founded the Cecchetti method in London in 1922. Both the Vaganova and Cecchetti methods are used internationally today.
10. Literally ‘shouldering’: providing both shading and a balance of oppositional forces in the dancer’s body.
11. Anna Paskevka’s book, *Ballet Beyond Tradition* (2000), examines in great detail the parallels between ballet and modern dance movements, including areas discussed in this paper.

programmes in the United States, I have found that classes in ballet provide the most benefit for dance majors when they are centred on individual exploration, encouraging the student to be the agent and self-author of their movements. Interestingly, I have not found it necessary to diverge from a traditional approach to the structure, vocabulary, and progression of a ballet class (I still follow the Vaganova syllabus as far as class progression of exercises and use both Vaganova and Cecchetti terminology<sup>9</sup> during instruction). However, I have found that the following areas of ballet technique warrant careful reconsideration: self-authorship of movement within the aesthetic of ballet; body alignment and use of excessive muscular tension; use of weight and gravity; use of plié as an organic connector of movement; and upper body positions and épaulement<sup>10</sup> as dynamic opposition.

Moving now from the theoretical to the practical, I will explore these four areas (identified immediately above) in depth, noting that this partial list is only the beginning of a longer discourse which might engage with an innovative approach to the teaching of ballet. There are many current sources that explore movement parallels between ballet and modern dance more comprehensively, such as Eric Franklin’s *Dance Imagery for Technique and Performance* (1996), and Anna Paskevka’s *Ballet Beyond Tradition* (2000).<sup>11</sup> However, I write from the experience of a dance practitioner – a studio teacher whose knowledge of technique is embedded in countless hours of movement investigation alongside personal observation and reflection. It is also worthwhile noting that the choreographic landscape of the twenty-first century will continue to require greater versatility amongst dancers in professional companies and universities alike, who must, for example, be able to shift seamlessly from a Petipa variation to modern floor work and beyond. Improvisatory abilities and dancer/choreographer collaborations are today the norm, and as Sherrie Barr (2005, pp. 5–6) notes in her article, ‘Reconstructing Contemporary Dance’, contemporary choreography results ‘as much from how the dancer invests in the dance-making process as from how the choreographer frames the dance’. The investigation of ballet as a movement language that merges easily with contemporary movement practices may benefit students in educational institutions as well as in dance conservatories.

At the heart of my research is an interest in cultivating individual movement exploration and in empowering students to be the agent and self-author of how they move through space. Until students understand their role in class as creative artists responsible for cultivating a self-made environment of their own learning, corrections from teachers will usually endure a relatively short shelf life. It is vital to encourage responses from students to the movement vocabulary of ballet which can be generated as *choices* rather than as mimicked responses. While this statement may evoke from readers the promise of a somatic approach to ballet class, I would like openly to admit to that I am not a trained practitioner of somatic techniques such as Bartenieff Fundamentals, Alexander Technique, Body–Mind Centering, or Feldenkrais. However, I believe that my goals in the teaching of ballet closely parallel those of somatic practices, including engendering a greater sense of bodily connection, an increase in creativity, confidence and enjoyment, and the development of an individual critical

understanding of movement. Rebecca Weber (2009, pp. 239–241), in her article ‘Integrating semi-structured somatic practices and contemporary dance technique training’, delineates between open or semi-structured somatic frameworks, stating that the goals of a semi-structured framework include encouraging experiential insight and individual choice within a specified technique:

Too often, dancers are stuck within learned (mimicked) movement patterns which are unnatural, detrimental to their bodies or inefficient and have no way of altering these set patterns. Body therapies, whether codified or open, offer methods for dancers to become more aware, more embodied and provide avenues for positive change toward well-being in movement.

I would argue that the approach outlined in the remainder of this article incorporates a semi-structured framework of modalities based on my own observations and practical experiences in the classroom in order to achieve a more experiential approach to ballet technique. It is my hope that by bringing newfound awareness to the study of ballet students see themselves singularly as ‘dancers’ rather than remaining entrenched in an aesthetic battle between ballet and modern dance.

### **Self-authorship in ballet**

As a method of study, ballet presents a codified system that simplifies the pathway of choices to follow, but its ‘rules’ do not dictate how movements are to be explored. Though the pathways of the body appear more standardised in ballet class than in some contemporary dance classes (for example, in comparison with a release-based modern class), individual choices are plentifully available to students, especially when encouraged to examine their responses to movement vocabulary from a first-person perspective (in contrast to the spectator, or third-person, perspective). Antonio Damasio (1999, p. 149), in *The Feeling of What Happens*, uses the term *somatosensory* to describe not only kinaesthetic responses of muscles and joints, but also in terms of the signals carried from the body to the central nervous system, including the processes of neurons and chemical substances in the bloodstream. Although Damasio is concerned primarily with the physical processes that lead to human consciousness, his work is fascinating to consider in terms of the individual agency of a dancer. Damasio (1999, pp. 10–11) defines consciousness as ‘the unified mental pattern that brings together the object and the self’, explaining that ‘the presence of you is the feeling of what happens when your being is modified by the acts of apprehending something’. Images play a pivotal role in Damasio’s (1999, p. 9) concept of self apprehending object, defined by him as ‘the images of an object’ which may convey information received by sound, touch, an emotional reaction, and so on. Ballet vocabulary, as a system of signs designating movement mechanics, direction and qualities, can be apprehended and explored individually in a manner that is separate from a spectator, or ‘idealised’ notion, of the ballet aesthetic.

The quest for technical control through repetition, or measuring one's progress by how consistently one accomplishes certain benchmarks from class to class, is an elusive and unproductive goal. According to Karen Studd (1983, pp. 5–6), studies focusing on the performance of dance techniques from an external observer's view rather than from an internal perspective tend to support the view that the latter, or first person orientation, allows for more optimal performance. In the article 'My dance and the ideal body: looking at ballet practice from the inside out', Jennifer Jackson (2005, p. 28) notes that the vocabulary of ballet 'is a code or sign for movement ideas or concepts and of itself does not embody balletic ideals'. Jackson (2005, p. 30) warns of the implications of approaching training in ballet from a purely third-person perspective (including notions of ideal body types), making a convincing case for the underdevelopment of artists in ballet class whereby there exists an 'absence of self' in the approach to the movement vocabulary. Anna Paskevka, in *Ballet Beyond Tradition*, also discusses the terminology of ballet as a system of symbols that facilitates a dialogue between dancer and spectator, noting that there can be a disconnect in a dancer's communicative abilities if the physical gesture becomes separate from the origin of its meaning. Paskevka (2005, p. 5) states that '[c]oncepts are sign posts. They point the way back to the source of movement and provide dancers with the means to address the forces underlying specific movements'.

Though the standardised vocabulary of ballet can mislead students into thinking that automatic repetition is the goal, *awareness of self* while seeking to gain mastery over a set language of movement may be the more important lesson. This, too, falls in line with a more practical approach to mastering the 'process' of dance technique, as ballet is often evaluated on the 'way' in which an outcome is arrived at, rather than simply achieving a set outcome. Karen Clippinger (2007, p. 499) offers the example of executing a pirouette in ballet class to illustrate this point, where while a quantitative approach (repetitive rotations on balance) may be considered a skill, this must also be balanced with the qualitative approach to the preparation that precedes the turn. Even from a purely anatomical and scientific viewpoint, Clippinger (2007, p. 499) notes that no two dancers will approach movement in exactly the same way due to variances in 'body type, lever length, muscle fiber type, strength and power in key muscles, flexibility in key joint ranges of motion, and other neuromuscular factors'. Eric Franklin (2004, p. 17) summarises this idea elegantly in terms of a dancer's progress in daily technique classes:

These daily solutions can only be found with an awareness of the body from moment to moment, noticing its responses to the images and thoughts in the mind and finding the subtle shifts and changes that are necessary to master the steps. By habitually putting consciousness before control, you make controlling the body's movement more flexible and alive, ready to respond to the realities of the moment.

Self-authorship of movement, the ability spontaneously to 'interpret' a vocabulary (a way of moving), involves an experiential relationship of subject to object in which, according to Damasio (1999, p. 145), 'ownership and agency are ... entirely related to a body at a particular instant and in a particular space'. An awareness of imagery by students and teachers may be

the key to unlocking this relationship during ballet class, in order to develop an individual approach to 'dealing with' rather than 'reproducing' the vocabulary and shapes associated with ballet technique. Summer Lee Rhatigan, director of the San Francisco Conservatory of Dance, recently expressed to students during a master class at California State University, Long Beach that 'a dancer must constantly bring their own ideas to their work. A dancer's ability to engage a spectator is often not the result of the best idea, or even the strongest technical interpretation, but rather the fact that ideas are being explored in the first place' (personal communication, 14 February 2008). Rhatigan encouraged students in her technique class to use imagery that naturally provided energy and inspiration to their dancing, and stressed that they need not even be profound. Students laughed when she explained that an image as whimsical as 'bouncing pink tennis balls' during an allegro may provide the necessary individual inspiration to bring intent to the dancer's movement. While it is enormously helpful if teachers can find imagery to guide students in understanding the nuances of class work, whether in relation to movement dynamics, spatial awareness, alignment, or in sequencing extended *enchainment* (the list is endless!), even more helpful is tapping into a student's own sense of creativity.

Teachers can offer cues to help students discover their own imagery and movement intent (these go hand in hand) by encouraging them to explore the *space surrounding them*, a multi-dimensional canvas upon which every dancer interacts or discovers repose within (Figure 1: CSULB dance majors explore spatial elements of an exercise. Photo by Lisa Johnson). Certainly, ballet has a very specific frontal orientation in terms of theatrical space, but the 'lived body' of each dancer has its own unique relationship to space of which only certain surfaces are viewable by an observer. And though, as Eric Franklin (1996, p. 6) notes, classical ballet is based on a geometric relationship of the central axis toward the surrounding space, the space itself is three-dimensional and allows for a great amount of exploration, circular and otherwise, as students become more aware of the directional facings surrounding them. When students explore how their bodies can envelope, carve, penetrate, shape, and interact with the space around them, they immediately fill each movement with the immediacy of their own discoveries. Awareness of one's body writing on a self-imagined canvas instigates a sense of exploration and, correspondingly, a freshness and responsiveness to each exercise. Indeed, in the student's mind movement is being created, or authored, for the first time.

### **Body alignment and excessive tension**

One of the most common misunderstandings plaguing students in the university setting is the assumption that the 'lifted look' of a ballet dancer is created through the excessive holding of the muscles in order to support the skeletal structure and maintain balance. Similar to the freedom many university students discover while moving in contemporary dance classes, the perception of one's centre of balance in ballet class can be an energising, liberating sensation which enables mobility. I occasionally conduct entire classes dedicated to exploring tension release, and encourage students to explore the dynamic interplay of their placement in terms of being poised for



**Figure 1** CSULB dance majors explore spatial elements of an exercise. Photo by Lisa Johnson, 22 March 2011.

action, rather than held, so that the concept of their 'centre' is a physical reference point for them to move and breathe from, rather than a static place in time and space. Paskevskaja (2005, pp. 35–36, 64) defines the balletic posture as 'pliable verticality', and points out that even when holding a pose in ballet there are always internal movements that radiate within a body that is 'engaged', rather than overly 'relaxed' or 'stressed'. It is perhaps the idea of 'holding' a position, a common cue from teachers to indicate a moment of stillness in an exercise that is most detrimental. A more useful approach may be to examine exactly *where the effort is* in maintaining a particular shape of the body, and often (in both ballet and modern dance) this requires a greater awareness of one's bones (skeletal structure) rather than individual muscles. I often hear myself encouraging students to 'create shapes in ballet that they like' in order to move beyond a superficial understanding of a pose.

Efficiency and tension release are certainly not new concepts in terms of ballet training in the twentieth century. Consider, for example, the advice of renowned pedagogue of the Royal Academy of Dance, Joan Lawson (1980, p. 14), who concludes a long list of physical cues dedicated to assisting basic alignment by stating that 'the eyes must look outwards. Breathing should be deep and steady. *No tension should be felt anywhere*' (emphasis added). Mabel Todd, a major contributor to the understanding of neuromuscular coordination in the early twentieth century and author of the influential 1937 treatise *The Thinking Body*, explained that a 'human being is a composite of balanced forces. To maintain his structural support with the least strain ... is a problem of bodily adjustment to external forces, primarily mechanical' (Todd 1937, p. 7). Maggie Black, a seminal figure in ballet training in New York in the 1980s, attracted both ballet and modern dancers to her classes due to their accessibility and focus on placement and movement efficiency. Jessica Zeller (2009, p. 70), who both studied under Black and carefully observed her teaching methods for her research, notes that 'Black absolutely never used the commonly heard directive pull up'. In contrast, Zeller (2009, p. 70) states that Black encouraged whole body coordination of her students rather than muscular tension to create momentum in space.

### **Weight and gravity**

Both stability and mobility are generated through awareness of one's weight rather than in an attempt to disguise the pull of gravity. Striving to be weightless through a sense of 'lifting' (and a *denial* that gravity even exists!) often causes university students to carry excessive tension, especially in their neck and shoulders, which can cause a disjointed coordination of upper and lower body. In contemporary dance classes it is accepted as a given that awareness and responsiveness to weight and gravity will play a major role in how their technical prowess develops. This work must be equally applied to ballet, though the nuances and qualities of how the dancer's weight will be directed are different. Even in classical repertoire of the nineteenth century, such as a *divertissement* by Petipa, technical proficiency increases through the direction of weight and gravity, rather than as an automatic response towards a perceived aesthetic stylisation. By embracing the sensation of their weight into the dance floor, students can engage in the *struggle against gravity*, whether on

flat, relevé, or while jumping, constantly to regenerate gravitational opposition by pushing rather than lifting the body. Lawson (1984, p. 30) draws attention to the anatomical problems a dancer faces through their unawareness of the pressure and use of the foot, stating that the 'failure to use the floor as a spring-board, together with the stiffening of the spine usually results in a displacement of the central line of balance', and that 'there is bound to be some distortion or tension somewhere in the torso, shoulders, and/or head'. As Karen Clippinger (2007, p. 488) reminds us, 'when the foot presses against the ground during movement, the ground applies equal and opposite forces on the foot and body (Newton's third law) termed *ground reaction forces*' (author's emphasis). Many divisions between ballet and contemporary dance melt away upon this discovery, when one realises the enormous subtleties and shades entailed in how gravity may be approached – at times seeking to reject the confines of gravity, elsewhere welcoming its powerful draw. And in all of this, as the student plays with the 'fall and recovery' that is part and parcel of movement, the plié remains their greatest ally.

### The use of plié

Vaganova herself, in her book *Osnovy klassicheskogo tantsa (Basic Principles of Classical Ballet, 1934)*, writes that 'plié is inherent in all dance movements, can be found in every dance pas, and special attention must be given to it during the execution of exercises' (Vaganova 2001, p. 28; author's translation). In modern dance classes it can appear more intuitive to students that the plié is used as a type of connective tissue, fitting seamlessly into longer phrases of movement. Yet time and time again I observe that my students in the university approach their plié in ballet class as a *separate idea*, leading to a fragmented quality that undermines their natural sense of movement. Using the voice as a metaphor for my students, I describe the plié as the taking in of air before an utterance, and I have them say the word *plié* out loud so they can feel the use of their breath necessary audibly to produce the word. In terms of a movement phrase, the inhalation of breath is closer to the function of the plié than the actual word (which, following the same metaphor, can be seen as the resulting step). The plié initiates and concludes movement ideas, connecting multiple movements together in a seamless manner that is akin to the involuntary response of shock absorbers on a car, following the natural curves of the road. If a student can stay one step ahead of the movement phrase they are executing, visualising what is to come while they move, then their plié can be used as naturally and involuntary as inhaling and exhaling. Taking the student's attention away from the muscular action of the legs and instead evoking images of 'opening' within negative space (such as the diamond-shaped space that emerges between the calves, knees, and thighs) assists students in discovering an optimal use of their plié. Verbal cues employed by far too many teachers, such as imploring students to 'use their plié more' or to 'go deeper into your plié', can lead to misguided reactions amongst students of pressing down on the quadriceps in order to reach a desired depth of bend, and thus removing the involuntary 'connectedness' of the plié to its ancillary movement. Joan Lawson (1984, p. 52) dedicates several paragraphs on the chain reaction of the plié to the entire body of the

dancer in her book *Teaching Young Dancers*, emphasising both the equal attention to descent and ascent of the motion so it is a continuous process: 'A plié, no matter how small, and particularly if very deep, should never be sustained'. Perhaps the plié occurs more naturally for students in contemporary dance classes due to the perception that the movement does not require any additional ornamentation to aid a particular movement.

### **The aesthetics of ballet**

Eric Franklin (1996, p. 69) remarks on the parallels required within ballet and modern dance in stating that 'the vocabularies of both ballet and modern dance styles require similar strength, coordination and flexibility. Whether you are in a modern dance or a ballet class you use the same muscles when extending your leg. The precise shapes are determined by aesthetics, as are the movement initiations, qualities and metaphors to be expressed'. The aesthetic particulars of ballet, however, whether perceived associatively by students or promoted by their teachers, appear to be a major roadblock in the individual exploration of the qualities that Franklin describes. University dance majors are keenly aware in ballet class when positions of the body feel 'decorative' or stylistically based, and resistance is created when they perceive that they are forcing their body into a position that feels artificially contrived rather than kinaesthetically sound. Unfortunately, this can result in the student approaching textural elements of the technique in a half-hearted manner, whereby the turn of the head, twist of the upper body, or lengthening of limbs does not reach its full potential.

Jackson (2005, p. 31) advocates an approach to training in ballet that incorporates somatic techniques in order to complement training with work centred on the 'optimal functioning of the body/mind', but also remarks on the importance of the dancer 'looking outside herself to the principles' of the tradition of ballet in order to build their performance style. Bales and Netti-Fiol (2008, pp. 72–73), following Jackson, also encourages dancers to consider their approach to such formalised vocabularies within a dialectical relationship, whereby through historical inquiry students can discover the intricacies of a technique that may otherwise be off-putting to them. Whereas Bales may encourage students to embrace the aesthetic style of ballet fully in order to discover the potential within the technique, I would rather find a way for students to explore functional aspects of ballet (a 'function makes form' approach in the spirit of Mabel Todd) and in so doing create their own aesthetic choices; a pathway of study that does not require them to 'buy into' associations of a particular style. Anna Paskevaska (2005, p. xi) concisely summarises the difference between technique and style by stating that *technique* includes levels of competence, while *style* is the decision to use that competence in specific ways.

### **Upper body positions**

Positions of the upper body in ballet class are fertile ground to begin this discussion, as 'head positions' in ballet can so easily appear to students as

impositions rather than as suggested routes of movement range. In classes I ask my university students to explore whether or not the turn and slight tilt of the head helps the stability and kinesthetic connectedness of their body, or whether this seems to be an added aesthetic touch that has lost its relevance today (Figure 2: Lorin Johnson cues CSULB dance majors on functional aspects of head/arm position. Photo by Lisa Johnson.). Students can be guided in class to experiment with mobilising their head and neck in such a way as to counter the 'pushes and pulls' of different body positions (working leg behind, working leg in front, and so on), and more often than not they seem to stumble upon aspects of upper body work that complement the spiralling forces they encounter in their contemporary work.



**Figure 2** Lorin Johnson cues CSULB dance majors on functional aspects of head/arm coordination. Photo by Lisa Johnson, 22 March 2011.

Dancers proficient in contemporary dance can actually more easily understand the spiralling force of *épaulement*, as they have the ability to manipulate their torsos to such a degree that they can enhance the physicality of twisting that is contained more internally in balletic positions (Figure 3: CSULB dance majors explore *épaulement* within a somatic group exercise. Photo by Lisa Johnson.). *Épaulement* can thus be understood as a *movement idea*, rather than a static position. A productive place in class to begin this exploration is in the fifth position at barre or centre, where the turn of the head towards the foot in front creates a pull of opposition on the other side of the body, which in turn invites other oppositional forces to occur (shoulder, rib cage, hip, etc.). While little actual twisting is occurring, students are able to feel how this oppositional work results in a dynamic balancing of forces, contributing to stability and a poised sense of nascent mobility. Many positions in ballet class can be explored in terms of this dynamic oppositional quality – an arm in second position against a leg in attitude *derrière*, for example – whereby the equilibrium created through a multitude of counter pulls regenerates a sense of stability. This is the foundation of the activation of *épaulement* in every ballet class – the beginning and ending of each exercise (arms en bas, head turned away from the barre) is a ready-made reminder of the oppositional forces that *contain* a dancer's sense of placement. Paskevka (2005, p. 56) describes opposition as 'another way of connecting the whole to the parts', and states that 'balance should not be perceived as holding on to a position, but rather as a continuous and imperceptible to the eye adjustment of opposing forces'. In its most simple form, *épaulement* is the third of Mabel Todd's (1937, p. 47) 'five mechanical stresses' necessary in maintaining the integrity of a structure, in that a twisting force must be met with an equal twist in the opposite direction.

While it may seem counterintuitive to investigate folk or character dances with students who have a passion for contemporary dance, such forms are an effective way of conveying the physicality of *épaulement* to students, who can readily invest themselves in the driving rhythms and stylistic hues that seem so distant from the more 'courtly' feel of ballet. Alexander Gorsky, teacher and ballet master for the Bolshoi Ballet in the early twentieth century, used character dance as a regular part of his teaching of classical ballet. As Asaf Messerer (1975, p. 18) reminisces: 'sometimes Gorsky helped students achieve expressive execution and emotional coloration by using national folk dance themes, developing the whole class in a definite style: Russian, for instance, or Hungarian or Spanish'. The playfulness of character dance styles, combined with its safe distance aesthetically from classical ballet, allows fresh opportunities for *épaulement* 'game-playing'. I find that teaching simple port de bras to students from the Czardas, Mazurka, and Spanish folk dance is a fantastic aid in helping them understand the delicious twists of the upper body that are so integral to *épaulement* in ballet class. In order really to explore these oppositional sensations, exercises can be constructed in ballet class for students to over-exaggerate the twisting of directional points in space, taking to the extreme positions that are only implied in traditional classical work (Figure 4: A CSULB dance major explores a class exercise using improvisation. Photo by Lisa Johnson.). As I like to say to them, let's try to break a few rules this time around! And, following their investigation, it is interesting to point out to students that



**Figure 3** CSULB dance majors explore *épaulement* within a somatic group exercise. Photo by Lisa Johnson, 22 March 2011.



**Figure 4** CSULB dance major explores a class exercise using improvisation. Photo by Lisa Johnson, 22 March 2011.

their exaggerated approach to the exercise could form the basis for some of the contemporary choreography they are currently witnessing; choreographers such as William Forsythe and his numerous followers, who explore directional points in space with improvisations that push the ballet vocabulary into new territory.

### **Conclusion**

As a former professional, dancing in national American companies which required expertise in both a classical and contemporary repertory, I no doubt could have benefited from a stronger dose of modern dance training in

my early years of study. Ballet certainly did not provide me with everything necessary to fit the vision of the choreographers I worked with; but then again, it did provide me with a set of reference points that I could veer off from in order to explore different pathways. As a roadmap, ballet still holds great power in the clarity and logic of its suggested routes of travel, and as a method of study alongside modern dance techniques can be invaluable in preparing university students for professional work in the contemporary dance arena. Cultivating a creative approach to the teaching of ballet, one in which students themselves are the authors of their creative movement choices, will bridge a gap that can exist like a chasm for them between the worlds of ballet and contemporary movement styles. Perhaps for this very reason contemporary ballet pedagogy is emerging as a prevalent topic of discussion by dance academics internationally, as evidenced recently by the prominence of papers dedicated to training in ballet at the Congress on Research in Dance Special Conference in 2009 (Miller 2010, p. 125).

Evidence suggests that the study of ballet is undergoing a deeper investigation internationally, and perhaps especially among academic institutions grappling with how ballet can still be relevant in preparing contemporary dancers for the future. Despite lingering attitudes by some writers on ballet pedagogy that university study is insufficient for attaining a professional level of technique,<sup>12</sup> the changing landscape of such well-respected contemporary dance companies as Hubbard Street may soon prove these opinions outdated. In any event, there is little indication that ballet training is viewed as superfluous or outdated, judging by its incorporation into the curricula of so many fine higher education dance programmes, not to mention its increasing hybridisation in the choreographic work of many twenty-first-century artists and dance companies. As Joan Acocella (2001, p. 106) remarked almost a decade ago on ballet's tendency to mix well with other dance forms: 'Like other great forms, ballet has good digestion: you can feed it almost anything'. It would be short-sighted to assume, however, that ballet needs to make no adjustment as an ingredient for tomorrow's dancer. Can we as dance educators take a fresh look at how ballet training can help our students dance in their own skin?

12. For example, John White, who states that 'the vast majority of institutions of higher learning lack a truly professional curriculum in dance' (1996, p. 55).

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