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By Gina Sawyer with Elaine Armfield Guffey

## Ballet Training for Dancers

Evolving in practice for hundreds of years, ballet provides all dancers with a solid foundation in which to train. Ballet instruction offers the dancer a consistent system of training in which to experience greater technical accuracy. Elaine Armfield Guffey, adjunct ballet instructor at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, offers thoughtful and informative advice for the dancer by answering a few of the most commonly asked questions for those interested in ballet training. For example, how will a student benefit from a ballet class? Which method of ballet training is the best? What is the importance of a plié, tendu, and frappé? This interview is about guiding the student to become more informed about the reasons for training in the genre of ballet.

Gina: What is the importance of a student training in ballet?

Elaine: Every dancer, no matter what his/her performance style, should take ballet class because ballet is the underlying technical basis for jazz, modern, character pointe, pas de deux, etc . . . . Ballet barre not only serves as a safe and thorough warm-up for the muscles and mind, but it also builds correct alignment, posture, and placement, all of which are necessary if a dancer is to look “good” while moving in any dance style.

The dance fundamentals of ballet provide all other dance forms with body placement and technique for leaps, spotting for turns, and carriage of the arms, head, and upper body (epaulement) for all dance moves. A technical, correctly taught ballet class also builds body strength and muscle memory as well as helping the brain to memorize dance combinations more rapidly. Learning to work in a corps de ballet builds teamwork, cooperation, musicality, and a realization of the dance space around each and every dancer. All of these dance concepts are vital to any dance form: drill, ballet, jazz, modern, or whatever.

Gina: One of the most common movements that a dancer can benefit from is the plié. What is the purpose for the plié and other ballet movements?

Elaine: Pliés warm the leg muscles and align the body (if done correctly with turn-out originating from the hip sockets and the knees directly over the toes.) Battement tendus stretch the feet, teach pointing of the foot, strengthen the foot muscles, and build articulate, strong, beautiful feet which can point in even less than flexible footwear such as jazz sneakers or pointe shoes. Battement frappés are done for foot strength as well as to build speed for beats. All of these concepts are important for dancers so they should be included in each and every class.

Gina: With so many dance studios advertising different methods of training, how do you know which method of ballet instruction is for you?

Elaine: First of all, there are five training methods: French, Italian/Checchetti, Russian/Vagonova, English/Royal Academy of Dance, and Danish/Bournonville are taught in their respective countries and schools leading into those companies as well as being taught in other countries. Dancers performing in those specific companies present their classical ballets overlaid with that particular style. There are some authorities that say the Balanchine technique should be considered a sixth school of ballet style.

Gina: What is the difference between all these styles of training?

Elaine: Each school of ballet style has unique qualities. The French are known for extension and lovely epaulement; the Italians have incredible speed and turns; the Russians are noted (and one of the most popular trends now in the U.S. with the influx of Russian dancers migrating here) for perfect turn-out, extension, and leaps; the English are famous for clean execution of the corps de ballet; while the Danes are admired for their ballonne and quick batterie. Among the five school styles, there are both small and large differences. A few of the differences include: ballet terminology used in class (for example battement jeté, battement degages, or battement glissés), head and arm positions, the number of arabesques, and other areas.

Gina: How do students know which method is best for them?

Elaine: As with any training program, there are pros and cons of each school. An individual dancer would have to study carefully to determine which style best suits her/his individual ballet style presentation, keeping in mind any physical limitations and/or weaknesses. A ballet dancer planning to enter a specific company should train in the style of that specific company, while, in my opinion, a serious ballet dancer should opt for clean, correct technique that has been trained in several different schools of style so that the ballet dancer can dance any style on stage as the choreography demands.

For most dance students, learning correct ballet technique should be more important than learning a specific school of ballet style. In order to achieve this, it is of utmost importance that a student finds a teacher who is a correctly trained dancer/ex-dancer with good teaching skills and teaching experience. These can be found in any of the schools of ballet style, or even outside all of the schools. Above all, students should make sure that they find good teachers.

*Elaine Armfield Guffey graduated as valedictorian of her class in Maryville, Tennessee, and attended Butler University where she majored in dance. Elaine has been appointed "Outstanding Educator of the Year" by the governor of Tennessee, and she has choreographed over one-hundred full length ballets and musicals. Well-traveled, she takes her company, the Armfield dancers, across the world to perform.*

