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What's the Pointe?

Everything is beautiful at the ballet -- and may be useful as everyday exercise

September 07, 2011 - Elyse Glickman, Jewish Exponent Feature

Even if Mother Nature and her cousin Gene (i.e., genetics) have made other plans for our bodies, it is no surprise that so many of us covet a dancer's form.

Besides the fact that it does look great in fashionable clothing, what else is not to love -- ballet offers sharper balance, graceful movements, lean muscle, speed and endurance.

Though most of us are not built to be dancers, and many of us may not be into the social element of dancing, there is no denying you can see classical ballet's influence in existing exercise programs (such as Pilates) and in innovative new programs such as the Dailey Method, the Bar Method and Ballet Beautiful that take that art form even more literally -- even if following them does not guarantee a future with the Pennsylvania Ballet.



Photo by Paul Kolnik/Pennsylvania Ballet Co.

However, like any other new exercise plan, you should approach it with caution, even if you are in good shape.

Women's health expert Dr. Sara Gottfried notes one should "look before you leap" by not only realistically assessing your fitness needs but also your time constraints, classes, instructor competence and use of different types of equipment involved.

"I've been to over 100 ballet barre classes over the past five years, and I cringe when I hear a new instructor give uneven guidance," says the Harvard-trained, board-certified Gottfried, whose book on The Hormone Cure comes out this fall.

"Go to the most experienced teachers when you are first starting out," implores Gottfried. "At my local Dailey Method studio, the co-owner is a nurse and truly understands the female body. Her cues and adjustments are spot on. When my knee feels tweaky, I call her over, and she corrects my alignment.

"Secondly, avoid crowded classes, as you will have less individualized attention, which puts you at greater risk for injury."

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How to prevent injuries? By having "optimized alignment, which means it's best to have the instructor spot you. If a busy schedule prompts you to rely on a home DVD, try to go to at least 10 classes so you can be familiar with the proper alignment and get the most out of your DVD investment."

Mary Helen Bowers, a former dancer with the New York City Ballet and Natalie Portman's ballet trainer for the movie *Black Swan*, created Ballet Beautiful (www.balletbeautiful.com) around the notion that a world-class ballerina's body shape can be accessible to everyone.

While Ballet Beautiful's method is built around professional ballet training, it is modified to provide non-dancers with the techniques to quickly build and maintain a ballerina's stamina and lean muscle.

"Ballet Beautiful comes out of my recovery from an injury I suffered when dancing with the New York City Ballet," Bowers recalls. "I was only 16 when I joined the company and did not know about the right ways to take care of my body or the benefits of something like cross-training."

She adds, "When I got this particular injury, I ended up joining a health club to rehabilitate. I realized when trying out new sports like kick boxing, that in ballet, you use a different set of muscles than in other kinds of fitness programs, which also explains why ballerinas have a different kind of body shape than other athletes."

This later led Bowers to develop stretches and exercises that, like cross training, work a variety of different muscle groups. However, they also strengthen and improve tendons and joints.

"What gives a dancer that slender shape and gracefulness is that they use muscles that are not targeted or used in other fitness programs or sports."

Bowers observes that those who follow the workout regularly feel empowered because they are attaining greater fine motor control over their bodies.

Balletone, another program introduced in the last decade, evolved from single dance-based workouts into a family of programs spanning several genres and accommodating a wide audience of people.

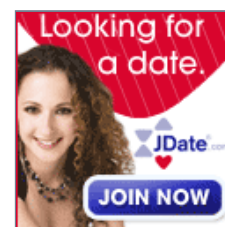
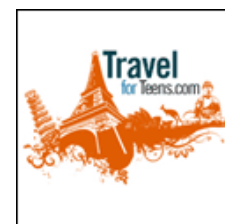
The workouts featured in the DVD series are designed to simultaneously improve strength, flexibility and cardio.

"We focus on the function of dancer's conditioning, and the by-product is the dancer's body," says Balletone instructor Shannon Fable.

Though many people are familiar with Pilates, they may not be aware that its own roots lie in classical ballet. "The connection is that Joe Pilates came to New York City in the 1930s and started visiting a variety of Ballet studios," details Kara Wiley, a Los Angeles-based Pilates instructor (www.karawilypilates.com).

Though Wiley has produced several DVDs that bring her expertise to people around the country, she takes a step further toward accessibility and portability through her Tesseract Beginner Mat Pilates card deck, offering the 15 most essential Pilates poses.

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