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Is Ballet Really Number 1?

Ballet is often pushed as a technique superior to others, and subconsciously this is what I had always believed—until I was taught otherwise.

By Claire Desenberg

“Ballet is the foundation of all dance.” This is what I heard throughout my dance training. As a young dancer, primarily trained in classical ballet, I believed it, no questions asked. In my training, there has always been a pattern of a perpetuated hierarchy of dance techniques, with ballet always ranking number one followed by modern and jazz dance.

What I found out as a dance major at the University of California, Irvine is that the Dance Department was originally created with three equal techniques in mind; ballet, jazz, and modern—but somehow, the equal treatment of those techniques has been lost. In my formative years of training and even now, five days of ballet classes are offered, while only 2-3 days of modern and jazz dance are offered.

In my youth I was only required to take one day of jazz or modern compared to the five or six days of required ballet. Ballet class was valued far more than modern and jazz, which seem to be seen as “secondary techniques.” This mentality of ballet being the most important technique and the foundation of all dance hindered my technical development in other dance forms, which I began exploring when I was six years old. I would have jazz and tap classes in the summer in addition to my required

ballet classes, but only in the summertime. I only began to have “specialty technique” requirements year-round in my curriculum when I joined my studio’s company at age 13. It never crossed my mind to question why techniques such as jazz, modern, tap, or hip hop were considered to be “specialty techniques” and seen as secondary to ballet.

In ballet class I was always told that “ballet is the foundation for all dance,” and with strong ballet technique you would be able to master any other dance form with ease. There is only an ounce of truth to this. Ballet reflects the Western European culture where it developed, but it in no way reflects the African diaspora, which includes techniques and styles such as hip hop, jazz, and tap. You can’t go into a jazz class and approach the movement thinking ballet is the foundation because it’s not. Jazz dance and ballet reflect different cultures and they are not the same.

I didn’t learn that movement reflects the culture where it developed until the dance classes I took in college. The jazz and modern classes I took in my pre-college training never properly addressed the roots of these forms, and teachers never talked about their lineages the way they did in ballet class. In my ballet class my teachers often shared where they had studied and the style of ballet they taught. In addition, we would talk about the culture ballet reflected and how our dancing showcased these elements. Ballet comes from the royal

European courts and reflects very regal manners and customs. I became very confident in my knowledge of ballet in history and lineage, not realizing I did not carry the same knowledge of other techniques I was taking. There was just not time in a once-a-week 75-minute jazz or modern dance class to fully cover history and lineage, so a lot was missing from my jazz and modern training.

In an Italian education journal, there's an essay called "Rare and contemporary dance as cultural mediators within a b-learning mode: the fuzzy logic perspective," where the authors say that, "Ideally, dance should represent an expressive synthesis of multiple dimensions that include the cognitive, the physical, the emotional, the cultural, and the sociopolitical understanding." In other words, to truly embody the technique correctly you have to have some level of understanding of where it came from. In higher education it is an essential part of the curriculum, but why only in higher education? This information of cultural significance and roots is essential to the movement and should be taught from the beginning.

In my youth because these important elements weren't covered in jazz class, there was a large disconnect in how I approached and executed movement. I often found myself feeling conflicted or confused in jazz class, because my studio seemed to preach this idea of ballet being the foundation, yet the principles taught in jazz class did not reflect this. In hindsight, this mental conflict affected the way I moved.

I was approaching jazz dance with a ballet mind-set focusing on ballet principles. This caused my jazz technique to mimic balletic

qualities. I didn't understand how to not approach dance with a ballet mentality. Dancing in parallel felt wrong and the grounded movement felt unnatural. With my strong ballet technique, I didn't understand why I was struggling so hard in jazz class. Wasn't I doing everything right?

No, I wasn't, in fact I was doing everything wrong.

It wasn't until I found out more about dance history that I started to connect the dots in how to bridge the gap between techniques. In ballet class, principles of modern would be mentioned and in modern, balletic qualities would be discussed. The boundaries that separated these ideas in my head were blurring and becoming one.

In college, a whole new world of modern and jazz dance was revealed to me. I was learning about the culture of jazz dance and how the movement was connected. It very quickly became clear to me that ballet was not "the foundation of all dance," it was only the foundation for Western theatrical dance. How I approached movement as a whole began to shift as I learned about the history of each style. Then began the process of unlearning the habit of approaching all movement with ballet technique. Instead, I tried to approach all movement as a dancer not tied to a label.

When dancers are put into a stereotypical box of "ballet bunhead" or "jazz baby," it limits opportunities for technical growth. They should be taught to simply be dancers and to be artists, not chained to a specific style of dance. Studying multiple styles only enhances and grows your technique and mindset in how you approach movement as a whole. Susan Foster writes in *Reading*

Dancing Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance that, “dancing is the activity of being present in and consciously aware of one’s own movement as a part of ...flux”. Flux, for Foster, is the act of flowing and being in constant motion. She describes the aesthetic and ideas of a choreographer like Deborah Hay as being physically and literally in a constant motion or flux, the way trees are always in motion.

As I’ve begun to make these connections in my dancing, it’s made me more present and aware of how my dancing benefits from not only studying a variety of dance techniques, but actually using those skills in all of my classes. In bridging the gap between the various types of dance I study, I have

become stronger in all of my techniques and have gained a new perspective. I used to only see myself as a ballet dancer, and that’s how everyone viewed me. This mentality limited my abilities as a mover.

A teacher once told me dancers shouldn’t restrict themselves to only one technique or one label. We are not limited to being a specific kind of dancer but are movers and artists who benefit from a diverse training, with one technique influencing another. In this new perspective I found clarity in the intentions of my movement and a greater appreciation for dance as a whole. I no longer view myself as just a bunhead, but as a dancer who is not controlled by the boxes she’s too often put in.



Claire Desenberg is a fourth year BFA Dance Performance Major with a minor in Literary Journalism who graduated in Spring of 2021. Post-graduation, she looks forward to pursuing a professional dance career and continuing to do freelance writing for a variety of publications.

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