

The Coordination Equation

After spending so much time focused on the details of technique, how do you bring everything together?

By Kate Lydon

Have you ever seen a dancer stand in arabesque looking like a prima, then have difficulty stringing together a pas de bourrée? What she's missing is coordination. It may seem simple, but without the ability to move all parts of your body together efficiently, grace and clarity will be impossible to achieve.

"For me," says Peter Boal, artistic director of Pacific Northwest Ballet, "the essence of coordination is catching momentum, whether that be the torque of your back, the rejection of the floor or the speed you have launching into a jump." Coordination is key to finding that essential flow that makes dancing seamless.

FOCUS ON THE BIG PICTURE

"The most natural form of coordination is opposition," says Raymond Lukens, artistic associate at American Ballet Theatre's ABT/NYU Masters Program. "It's a motor skill humans learn by crawling and walking." However, ballet requires so much form—pointed feet, turned-out legs—that when dancers focus too much on the details they lose the freedom to be coordinated, taking away what nature provided. Dancers can get back in touch with their opposition by incorporating *épaulement*, which connects the two sides of the body through the use of the back, head and shoulders.

Putting broad strokes of movement into the body first and then refining the details can also help. In PNB company class, Boal gives



Peter Boal leads company class at PNB

Jerry Davis

"a tremendous amount of exercises that have the dancers launch away from the barre." This forces them to shift their weight, and focus on moving the body as a whole from the start of class.

ABT's curriculum builds coordination with a simple rule: Students must move their arms and legs together. Mannerisms like letting the arm trail behind the legs when closing to fifth can actually make the body less coordinated. "Opening and closing the arms and legs together ensures that when you're in a neutral place, your arms are in a neutral place," says Lukens. Think of grand jeté: If the arms are late to close before taking off, the port de bras will work against the thrust of the movement, and the jump won't achieve its full height.

Sometimes when dancers go from student to professional their coordination can seem stilted, but often this is just due to the process of maturity. "The body-brain connection, on average, isn't complete until age 15," says Lukens. "Somebody who is 18 is still developing." Franco De Vita, principal of ABT's Jacqueline



Kirov students now learn an updated version of Vaganova technique

The New Kirov Academy

The Kirov Academy of Ballet of Washington, DC, has gotten a makeover. After its principal benefactor withdrew financial support last year due to economic difficulties, the school named Martin Fredmann artistic director. He hired new teachers and introduced a more current version of Vaganova technique, including nuances such as rolling up and down from pointe rather than springing. "I want the students to be fully integrated into the ballet world of now," he says. Instead of only performing Petipa variations, the dancers learn full acts of ballets as well as neoclassical pieces. "Dancers need to be prepared to enter a corps," he explains. Also new is a two-year program for preprofessionals ages 18–22. In addition, the school launched a studio company of advanced students, which performs at local schools and other events. "The heritage of this school will not change," Fredmann assures. "We're just bringing it up to date."

Paolo Galli

Kennedy Onassis School, adds, "Also, when dancers first get into a company there can be apprehension. A tense person can't move so easily."

MASTER MUSICALITY

Dancers who have difficulty with coordination often have difficulty with musicality, too, says De Vita. Jill Johnson, director of Harvard University's dance program, says musicality can provide an inner, driving metronome that helps a dancer find coordination.

Make musicality a priority in class: Instead of allowing yourself to lag behind the beat to squeeze in a longer balance, a higher jump or a few extra turns, force yourself to stay on the note to train your body to move musically. "Dancing musically is anticipating which way your body weight needs to go—never being on balance, but always carrying the momentum so that you arrive at the next position on the note," Boal says. "Your mind has to be at least half a count ahead of your body." If the musicality of a certain phrase has complex syncopations, clap it out or listen to the music without dancing.

PLAY BRAIN GAMES

Coordination is also about the mind. One of Johnson's mentors, choreographer William Forsythe, gives dancers a series of coordination exercises created by Dr. Paul Dennison. "The theory is that your right side is governed by the left side of your brain and vice versa," Johnson says, "so if you cross your right hand to your left knee, by crossing the midline of the body you're coordinating the neural synapses since both sides of the brain are being used."

Johnson also works students' brains by asking them to reverse combinations from front to back. "My teacher Erik Bruhn's famous phrase was, 'Now reverse it.' Coordination has a lot to do with being able to think on the spot," she says. "And sometimes allowing yourself to feel completely disorganized can help you learn about how your own coordination works."

At times, improving coordination is just about teaching your body how to *move*. Learning jazz, character, tap, Spanish dancing and other styles can be beneficial. "When I taught at Ailey, I sometimes observed Horton class," De Vita says. "I remember seeing my students doing double pirouettes in attitude finishing with the legs in a split. I couldn't believe it—just yesterday it was impossible to do double pirouette in attitude in ballet class. They'd say, 'Oh, but in ballet it's not a free movement.' I say, 'What do you mean?' " Letting go of your quest for better turnout, better feet, better extension can bring your focus back to the essentials of simply dancing. **P**

High Schools Unite

Auditioning for colleges can be overwhelming—even before the quest for financial aid. Wish you could try for dozens of scholarships in one fell swoop? Check out the National High School Dance Festival. This yearly performance-packed weekend showcases original choreography from high schools across the country. Last year, almost 40 colleges and summer programs (including Juilliard, Texas Christian University, Mercyhurst and others) attended—and offered scholarships to the students performing. "NHSDF gives students an extended audition for these higher education programs," says executive director Kathryn Kearns. The 2012 festival will be held at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, March 8–11. Applications are due January 13. Selected schools will be invited to showcase their pieces in one of the six gala or concert performances over the course of the festival weekend. See nhsdf.org.

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YOUR TRAINING

California To China

If you dream of dancing abroad this summer, check out Long Beach Ballet. Its six-week program begins with a three-week training intensive in Long Beach, followed by a week-long residency with the National Ballet of China, Guangzhou, and then a two-week tour to other Chinese cities where the students perform, sightsee and take class with local dancers. The program is open to students ages 13 to 20, selected through a national audition tour, and costs \$4,985. See longbeachballet.com/summerChina.html.

Long Beach Ballet students perform Johnny Zhong's *Song of Peking*

Courtesy Long Beach Ballet



A Fresh Perspective

In addition to giving students rock-solid technique, Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet is now looking to foster their imaginations. This January, the school will launch a new student choreographic workshop called FirstSteps. Four choreographers will be selected from among the current CPYB student body, after interested dancers give faculty members a detailed proposal. The chosen students will then have nine days of rehearsal in the studio before presenting the finished works on January 21.

CPYB principal faculty member Laszlo Berdo, who will direct the program, says, "I want students to come into this workshop with a blank slate, to explore their creativity." However, there's also a secondary motive: to make the students better tools for choreographers. "Once you go to the other side and are in the front of the room, you start looking at dancers in a new way," says Alan Hinline, the school's resident choreographer. "You begin to understand how artistic directors or choreographers see you and what the expectations are."

Alexa Maxwell and Julian Duque in CPYB rehearsals



Marina Barnett

Technique Tip:

"Whenever you dance, think of speaking with your feet. Early in my career, Atlanta Ballet's ballet mistress Rosemary Miles gave me that correction, and it led me down a whole different path of using my feet—not only making them as articulate and supple as possible but also having strength and control." —*Milwaukee Ballet dancer Julianne Kepley*