

# Ballet Basics

An Educational Booklet  
for  
Teachers and Students

Prepared by

**DANCECHANCE**  
PACIFIC NORTHWEST BALLET SCHOOL

# BALLET BASICS

## BALLET HISTORY

Ballet began in Italy and France 400 years ago. The “Sun King”, King Louis XIV of France, began the first school of dance. This is why the official language of ballet is French.

## WHO DOES BALLET?

In the beginning, ballet was only performed by royalty in the courts of kings and queens. Now, people of all ages and backgrounds learn ballet. Boys and girls around the world take ballet classes and dream of becoming famous dancers.



DanceChance Level II students in the 33<sup>rd</sup> Annual School Performance



Former PNB dancers Kaori Nakamura and Lucien Postelwaite in Kent Stowell's *Swan Lake*

It takes ten years or more to become a professional dancer. Most dancers start training when they are seven or eight years old. Dancers typically start auditioning for jobs in ballet companies when they graduate from high school or college.

# BALLET AND SPORTS

There are many similarities between ballet and sports. Both dance and sports require strength, speed, balance, flexibility, and endurance.



Lesley Rausch and Karel Cruz with PNB Company dancers and PNB School students in Ronald Hynd's *The Sleeping Beauty*

Male dancers have to be strong to lift women above their head and do big jumps and turns.



PNB Company dancers in Jerome Robbins' *Glass Pieces*



PNB Principal dancer Lindsy Dec

Women must have strong ankles and feet to wear pointe shoes. Often, dancers use exercise machines and lift weights to build their strength and endurance.

# BALLET VOCABULARY



Rachel Foster and Kiyon Gaines in Twyla Tharp's *Opus 111*

In ballet, one of the most common movements is called a **plié** [plee-AY]. Plié means “to bend”.

Many athletes also use plié.

Speed skaters plié to increase the push of their legs and skate faster.



Basketball players must do a plié before making a jump shot and while on defense.



Angelica Generosa in Susan Stroman's  
*TAKE FIVE...More or Less*

Another common step that dancers do is called **grand jeté** [grahn zhuh-TAY], which means “big throw”.



PNB Company dancers in Christopher Wheeldon's *Polyphonia*



Track and field athletes do a similar type of jump. Hurdlers jeté to leap over the hurdle on their course.

In ballet, **grand battement** [grahn bat-MAHN] means “large beating” of the leg. It is a big kick with a straight leg and pointed foot. Grand battement is very similar to the kick a football player does to punt the ball for a field goal. Many professional football players take ballet to help increase their flexibility and coordination.



Lesley Rausch in George Balanchine's *Agon*  
©The George Balanchine Trust



Seattle Seahawks punter Jon Ryan

Do you think that you could do a grand battement like these dancers are doing?



Jerome Tisserand, Lindsai Dec, and Andrew Bartee in Ronald Hynd's *The Sleeping Beauty*

## BALLET IS AN ART

Ballet and sports have many similarities. However, unlike sports, ballet is an art form. Dancers are able to tell a story, play a character, and communicate emotions with their dancing. Can you tell what the dancers are trying to communicate in the pictures below? Do their costumes give you any clues?



Carla Körbes and Ezra Thomson in George Balanchine's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ©The George Balanchine Trust



PNB Company dancer with PNB School student in *George Balanchine's The Nutcracker*®, choreography by George Balanchine © The Balanchine Trust

## A TYPICAL BALLET CLASS

All dancers, including professionals, attend classes to strengthen, stretch, and practice technique. Each class follows the same format. Class begins with the dancers holding onto a ballet barre, which gives them extra balance. The instructor will demonstrate and explain each exercise or combination, and the dancers will repeat it, accompanied by music.



DanceChance Level I girls at the barre



DanceChance Level I boys balance on one leg at the barre

After barre, class then moves to the center of the room where students practice turns and jumps.

First-year students will generally spend one hour in class, two times per week. As a dance student improves and develops a stronger body, the number of classes required per week will increase.

Barre exercises start slowly with the dancer standing on both legs. As barre progresses and the dancers' bodies get warmer, the movements become faster and more difficult, often including balances on one leg.



DanceChance Level I students practice jumps and turns in center



# **BALLET BASICS QUIZ**

**Answer the following questions True or False.**

- 1) \_\_\_ Professional dancers only train for 5 years.
- 2) \_\_\_ Ballet is an art form, not just a sport.
- 3) \_\_\_ Plié means “to jump”.
- 4) \_\_\_ Speed skaters do plié when they skate.
- 5) \_\_\_ Grand jeté means “big throw”.
- 6) \_\_\_ The official language of ballet is Russian.
- 7) \_\_\_ Hurdle jumpers do grand jeté.
- 8) \_\_\_ The “Sun King” of France began the first school of dance.
- 9) \_\_\_ Grand Battement means “to bend”.
- 10) \_\_\_ Men have to lift weights to be strong enough to lift other dancers.

**We hope you had fun learning about ballet!**

(Answers on last page of packet)

## **RECOMMENDED Books, CD's and DVD's about DANCE**

### **Books**

- *A Day in the Life of a Dancer*, by Linda Hayward. London: Dorling Kindersley, 2001. 32 pages. Ages 4-9, grades preschool-4.
- *Alvin Ailey*, by Andrea Davis Pinkney. New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 1995. 32 pages. Ages 5-9.
- *Ballerina, My Story*, by Darci Kistler. New York: Minstrel, 1993. 128 pages. Ages 8-12.
- *Ballet*, by Kate Castle. New York: Kingfisher, 1996. 64 pages. Grades 4-6.
- *Ballet Shoes*, by Noel Streatfeild. New York: Random House, 1993. 256 pages. Ages 9-12.
- *Coloring Book of Great Dancers*, Santa Barbara: Bellerophon Books, 1989. Ages 9-11.
- *Dance Me a Story, Twelve Tales from the Classical Ballets*, by Jane Rosenberg. New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1985. 127 pages. Ages 6-9, grades 3-6.
- *Dancing in the Wings*, by Debbie Allen. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 2000. 40 pages. Ages 4-8.
- *Edgar Degas, Paintings that Dance*, by Kristin N. Cole. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 2001. 32 pages. Ages 4-8, grades 1-3.
- *Firebird* by Misty Copeland. Putnam Juvenile, 2014. 40 pages. Ages 5-8.
- *Katherine Dunham: Pioneer of Black Dance*, by Barbara O'Connor. Carolrhoda Books, 2000. 104 pages. Grades 5-8.
- *Kids Dance, The Students of Ballet Tech*, by Jim Varriale. New York: Dutton Children's Books, 1999. 32 pages. Grades 3-6.
- *My First Ballet Book*, by Kate Castle. Kingfisher, 2006. 48 pages. Ages 4-8.
- *Not Just Tutus*, by Rachel Isadora. Putnam Juvenile, 2003. 40 pages. Ages 4-8, Grades K-4.
- *Of Swans, Sugarplums and Satin Slippers, Ballet Stories for Children*, by Violette Verdy. New York: Scholastic Inc., 1996. 80 pages. Ages 4-11.
- *Pacific Northwest Ballet Presents Nutcracker*, by Pacific Northwest Ballet Association. Sasquatch Books, 2005. 96 pages. Ages 3 & up.

- *Sleepless Beauty*, by Frances Minters. Puffin, 1999. 32 pages. Ages 3–8.
- *Stories from the Classical Ballet*, by Belinda Hollyer. Pan Macmillan, 1996. 128 pages.
- *Swan Lake*, by Lisbeth Zwerger. North South Books, 2002. 32 pages. Grades 2-6.
- *The Tale of the Firebird*, by Gennady Spirin. Philomel, 2002. 32 pages. Ages 4-9, grades 2-5.
- *The Young Person's Guide to the Ballet: With Music from The Nutcracker, Swan Lake, and The Sleeping Beauty* (Book & CD), by Anita Ganeri. London: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1998. 64 pages. Ages 9-12, grades 3-6.

### **CDs & Music**

- *Tchaikovsky: Nutcracker (Favorite Excerpts from the Original Soundtrack Recording)*. London Symphony Orchestra-Charles Mackerras, Conductor. Telarc, 1990.
- *Nutcracker: Complete Score*. London Symphony Orchestra-Charles Mackerras, Conductor. Telarc, 1990.
- *Tchaikovsky: Swan Lake*, Montreal Symphony-Charles Dutoit, Conductor. Decca, 1994
- *Tchaikovsky Complete Tone Poems including Romeo & Juliet*

### **DVDs & Videos**

- *PNB's A Midsummer Night's Dream*, taped at Sadler's Wells Theatre, London, 1999.
- *Sleeping Beauty: Royal Ballet*

### **Online Resources**

- DanceChance information and videos  
<http://www.pnb.org/PNBSchool/Classes/DanceChance/>
- Teacher Resources from PNB's Community Education Programs  
<http://www.pnb.org/Community/Teacher/>

ANSWER KEY to Ballet Basics Quiz:

1)F 2)T 3)F 4)T 5)T 6)F 7)T 8)T 9)F 10)T