

NOUVELLES DU BALLET

Newsletter of Champaign Urbana Ballet

Spring 2017

ON POINTE

The real story.



from the board president

Pointe shoes. Satin and ribbons, grace and beauty. A long line lending daring amounts of momentum and energy to the dancer. I wanted to get a closer look inside the rituals on "pointe" here at Champaign Urbana Ballet. Observing in the lobby, I notice: band aids, toe tape, Artistic Director Deanna Doty's dog Roscoe sniffing about looking for toe spacers to chew, laughter, stretching, re-taping, and even paper towels. I lost track of all the steps one might go through to even put on a pair of pointe shoes, much less prepare them after purchase. I needed a conversation with the dancers themselves. What's going on when you go on pointe?



Balancing on a pointe shoe is the "epitome of ballet" says company dancer Valerie Linsner. "It's what I dreamed about doing as a little girl," she recalls. Valerie would prance about her house wearing plastic drinking cups on her feet pretending to be on pointe. At the age of 11, she finally got her first pointe shoes, "It was the beginning of September and I was so excited!" Company dancer Angie Song echoes the sentiment. She adds that all of the practicing and years of training make being a dancer, "Totally worth it; I wouldn't change anything about it." A dancer must have the physical and emotional maturity, alongside the technical ability to be ready for pointe shoes. Once technique and proper body alignment are in place, dancers still have the work of learning how to sew and prepare their shoes (a task that CUB dancers must demonstrate independently). A dancer can take up to a month to gain competency in the sewing process for their shoes!

Junior Company dancer Maya Keeble remembers getting her first pair of pointe shoes on June 8 when she was 10 years old. "That was the happiest day of my life. I'd seen all the older girls with their shoes, and I couldn't wait to get mine." The dancers all describe being on pointe as a rite of passage for them. In preparation for getting on point they spend months with conditioning exercises. They work out with stretch bands, pick up pennies with their toes, and work toward the day when they finally get the chance to slowly and carefully rise up on pink satin shoes with a two-inch platform.

Dancers feet get strong and tough, supporting their bodies pirouette after pirouette. Maya says when she gets a blister from dancing, she goes home to show her dad because, "I know I am working hard!" Pride in working hard is reiterated by the other dancers in the studio. After a long rehearsal or performance, dancers dose their feet in an ice bath. When the dancers take to the stage, they say being on pointe makes them feel graceful and beautiful. They are captivated right alongside their audience with the choreography, music, and lights. Being on pointe is a supreme feeling of balance and connectedness, from the core through the hip and leg, right down to the floor.

Each pointe shoe is handmade with the tip composed of a rigid box of dense layers of fabric, paper and/or cardboard hardened by glue. No pair of pointe shoes is ever the same, even though the size and brand of shoe may be identical. Dancers often have two pairs of pointe shoes in use: one they are "breaking in" and another that is more of a favorite. None of the dancers had ever deconstructed a pointe shoe, because most of them keep them all! Old pairs (or "dead shoes" as they call them) are like a visual reminder of accomplishment. Clearly, the dancers could talk about this topic for hours.

"Pull out of your shoes. Don't sink into your shoes. Get over your box!" are phrases the CUB dancers think of when being instructed on pointe. "Being on pointe brings another challenge. What I love about ballet is that you can always get better," Maya says with a determined glint in her eyes. "I like dancing on pointe as much as dancing on flat. The pointe shoe is your tool. You get to look like you're floating, you turn faster, and you can just go for it!" says Valerie, "This is what I dreamed about with my plastic cups!"

It was so much fun for me to talk with our dancers about their experiences on pointe; they have such insights and enthusiasm. In this spring's production of *Cinderella*, we will all be paying close attention to a different kind of shoe (the glass slipper). After talking with our dancers, I feel a greater appreciation for all those dancers on pointe across the stage. From our younger dancers making their debut on point, to one of our male dancers on pointe in his role as the stepsister, to our corps de ballet dancers whose experience and artistry will whisk us away, let's enjoy this beloved fairy tale.

All the best to each of you,
Ali Lewis

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ost of us are accustomed to a division between science and art. Science, on the one hand, is empirical, verifiable, and knowledge producing. Art, on the other, is evocative, entertaining, and full of emotion. Scientists toil in controlled environments; they produce articles and sometimes patent their work. Artists stand before audiences; they produce experiences and every once in awhile break through on a national scale. There are moments of obvious overlap between science and art -- a jaw-dropping photo taken by the Hubble Space Telescope; a play or film that focuses on scientific discovery -- but these are the exceptions that prove the rule. Science and art don't just occupy separate buildings on campus. They occupy separate cultural spheres.

But if science seeks to explain the physical world, it must engage with (and perhaps even do) art. And if art hopes to reach and express the depths of human experience, it cannot ignore science, especially when the art form is classical ballet. This may seem odd given the absence of lab coats and equations from CU Ballet productions, but just because the sciences aren't clearly marked, does not mean that they are absent.

In order to bring a ballet to life, a dancer must have a keen sense of himself or herself as a system. It isn't enough for a dancer to know which leaps and turns and poses happen when. He must know how to execute these moves in a controlled way. If she uses too much

force, a dancer may lose her balance. If he doesn't have the proper leverage and timing, a lift may not reach its full dramatic height. To make matters more challenging, each dancer's system is unique. "Too much force" and "too little leverage" vary from one dancer to the next.

At the same time, each dancer must be keenly aware of herself or himself as part of a larger system, the corps de ballet, for instance. This system is more dynamic and has complexities that go beyond having sixteen young women on stage performing the same choreography. In this system, each dancer must consider not just her own movements, but the movements of those around her and the environment through which all of the dancers are moving. If a dancer simply performs the choreography, she will almost certainly disrupt the system. It is easy to look past these systems and to miss their complexity, because the art of the ballet is just so breathtaking.

There is, however, a great deal to learn from the science of the art of ballet. Some systems engineers working at the cutting edge of their field study dancers in search of ways to create robots that can, like a corps de ballet dancer, function in a system in spite of changing environments. As it turns out, asking a robot to adjust its balance and movement patterns autonomously, and to apply exactly the right amount of force to complete a task is a significant challenge. Whether they live for robotics or prefer literature, CU Ballet dancers can certainly relate.



Tickets for Kids

Champaign Urbana Ballet's Tickets for Kids outreach program sends about 200 children and their family members or teachers to *The Nutcracker* each season as well as the spring ballet. Social workers and teachers identify children and families who might not otherwise attend the ballet due to a variety of circumstances including financial need, language barriers, and special needs. Committee member Heather Ochs (local Champaign Schools psychologist) connects residents and caretakers from Swann Center to the ballet, making sure handicap accessible seats are readied, and following up afterward for feedback. She says the residents may not have use of their bodies in a typical way, but their caretakers are always amazed at how the residents respond to the music and lights of the ballet experience. This past *Nutcracker*, the

entire dance team at Jefferson Middle School attended a performance. Dance Team and math teacher Ilyana Lopez said that none of her dancers had ever attended a ballet. She said it was an unforgettable experience for each of them. Dr. Howard Elementary school teacher (and former Board Member/Head Wrangler) Jennifer Simmons accompanied her students to The Nutcracker and said she cried with joy after the performance. From the curtain opening, to the cupcakes at intermission, to the final bow, her students and so many others had a unique and special connection with the art of ballet because of this important outreach program. *Tickets for Kids* accepts donations year-round, and pays for each ticket used by the children, teachers, and families.





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