



*Backstage at the Ballet*  
**Curricular Guide**



# ABOUT THIS PERFORMANCE

Connecticut Ballet is pleased to bring this introductory program to your students! The performance by Connecticut Ballet is designed to give a general overview to students about:

- ballet vocabulary;
- ballet partnering between the male dancer and ballerina;
- pointe shoes and their use;
- the performance repertoire,
- and a taste of more contemporary styles such as jazz or swing.

**Classical ballet** is represented by a dance for three or *pas de tríos*. American jazz dance is represented by the music of Bix Beiderbecke. A company couple will demonstrate some *Swing dance* choreography, featuring standard lead/follow routine between a male and female on the dance floor.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

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# PROGRAM CONTENT

- Introduction: Artistic Director Brett Raphael or Balletmaster Alfredo Millan
- Demonstration of:
  - a) ballet class vocabulary — positions and steps
  - b) pointe work
  - c) partnering between the male and female dancer
- Opportunity for volunteers to try partnering the ballerina or being partnered by a male dancer
- Discussion/demonstration of ballet costumes, use of gesture/mime in ballet, musical accompaniment
- Performance of *Paganini Pas de Trois*, a dance for three in classical costumes
- Discussion of the difference between classical ballet and jazz or tap technique
- Showing of movement vocabulary for the jazz selection
- Performance of an excerpt from *Goose Pimples*, a jazz ballet to music by Bix Beiderbecke
- Dancers answer questions from the audience
- Students are encouraged to write to the dancers or draw pictures in response to the program, sharing their reflections and excitement about dance

# BACKGROUND

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF CLASSICAL BALLET

Classical ballet was developed from within the courts of France in the late 1500's and early 1600's. The courts needed entertainment and the earlier masquerades evolved into balletic entertainments, danced by the aristocracy and by professional dancers. Given such royal patronage, the ballets which were performed at the court were linked to the outstanding political and social events of their reigns. These social dancers acquired intricate floor patterns, or divertissements (literally, "diversions") for competitive princely feasts. At first/ court guests played principals and chorus, but soon thereafter, stages were erected at the far ends of big banquet halls, theatres were built and dancing masters supported by the court codified rules for the manner of performing in such exhibitions.

Thus began the first actual ballet technique or steps strung together to create short dances. Alongside the development of musical notation came the equivalent vocabulary of dance notation for instructional purposes. Louis XIV of France was perhaps the prime mover in the development of dance training, establishing the Royal Academy of Music and Dancing in 1661. Dance schools sprang up in the major capitals of Milan London, Copenhagen, and Leningrad in due course, beginning the course toward the modern ballet school as we know it today. Meanwhile, the courts sponsored national dance companies, often in conjunction with opera performances, which gave rise to the need for choreographers or balletmasters who created dances around certain stories or themes. Ballet acquired its own form by joining together the work of musicians and designers to create a spectacle or full-length ballet (ballet d'action).

The last 150 years have seen the true renaissance of the ballet as an art form. Classics such as *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake*, *Giselle*, and *Coppelia* have been created and preserved via productions worldwide. The 20th Century has seen even greater change with the introduction of non-narrative or abstract works into the repertoire and this influence of modern dance pioneers such as Isadora Duncan, Merce Cunningham, and Martha Graham. Today's ballet world is very exciting, mixing the old with the new, challenging today's young dancers to bridge both the classical world of 100 years ago with the contemporary world around us.

## WHO'S WHO IN THE BALLET?

The art of ballet is practiced by trained professional dancers who are members of a ballet company under the artistic direction of a man or woman with experience in many aspects of the dance and performance. A ballet company such as Connecticut Ballet has an **artistic director**, a **balletmistress** who is responsible for rehearsing and giving the dancers their daily technique class, and, of course, the **dancers** themselves.

On a given day, the company dancers have class together and then proceed right to rehearsal on whatever ballets are being prepared for the next performance. Like normal working people, the dancers work hard during the day and then leave for home and a good meal before resting their bodies. If the company has a performance, the dancers may go to the theatre to rehearse the ballet onstage or take part in a performance for the public.

Three other very important people are involved with the ballet: the **lighting designer** who chooses which lights in the theatre to use to illuminate the different ballets and which colors to emphasize in the lighting plot; the **wardrobe mistress or master**, who prepares the dancers costumes for each ballet and spends many hours ironing and steaming them to make sure they are perfect for performance; and the **stage manager** who directs the backstage schedule (like a school principal directs the school's teacher and staff) and the crew of technicians who run the lights, the curtain, and mop the dance floor before every performance. Without all these people helping the artistic director and the dancers, there would be no performance. Each person helps the others to prepare for a wonderful performance.

There is one other major party to the world of ballet: the **audience**. The audience has an active role in the performance because they respond to the presentation. Some-times, an audience will respond by clapping their appreciation, and sometimes they will stand at the end and give the dancers a standing ovation or call, "Bravo!" which means they really enjoyed the show. The audience member has a big responsibility: showing the dancers how they feel about their performance, by first concentrating on the ballet and then responding to the dancers directly in the curtain calls or bows. This is a very important part of every performance. It is the audience's way of saying, "Thank You!" to the dancers.

# WHAT'S IT LIKE TO BE A DANCER?

Ballet dancers are normal people, like you, who have chosen a magnificent form of artistic expression and self expression as a way of life. They are devoted to their daily work in the dance studio in the theatre. They love what they do.

A dancer's professional life consists of three main parts:

- 1) class and rehearsal;
- 2) performance;
- 3) "homework" - meaning time and thought spent to remember everything learned each day and to prepare for the next.

In addition to their work on ballets/ the dancer spends time preparing his or her shoes for the next rehearsal day. Women do this more than men because the ballerina's pointe shoes wear out fairly quickly.

A dancer's day begins much like yours. They get up and have a good breakfast. Dancers need food, lots of it, because they work out all day. Imagine if your entire school day were spent in gym class — you'd get pretty hungry.

When the dancer comes to the dance studio, they need to change into their practice clothes and those with long hair need to put their hair up in a bun. Then the dancers spend 15 minutes to one-half hour warming-up in order to prepare themselves for "Company class." Company class is a one and one-half hour morning ritual — it is something a dancer does every day for their entire career. Class prepares the dancer's body and mind for rehearsal and performance. It is the place where they learn how to improve and perfect each movement, the place where they continually learn how to be better.

Following class, the dancers rehearse, usually five hours a day when they are not performing, and two to three hours a day when they are. In rehearsal, the dancers learn new steps and spend hours perfecting choreography that they will dance in performance. The dancer has to learn very quickly and remember many things at once because nothing is written down for them in rehearsal and performance. Unlike a musician who has a score with notes in front of him or her to read, the dancer must know all the music and the steps in his or her head. A dancer is usually shown a sequence only once or twice and

from that demonstration, they know the steps, the arm movements or *Ports de bras*, and the music. When a dancer rehearses new choreography, their ability to learn quickly is very important to the choreographer.

A dancer may perform as many as twenty ballets or roles in one season. Each ballet has different music, different choreography, and different styles. The dancer, because of their training and concentration, is able to remember all the ballets they perform. In performance, a dancer is truly on his or her own, prepared by years of training, yet free to draw on their instincts and spontaneous impulses to convey their characters, the music, and their own joy of dancing. The best dancers are the ones who make you feel excited to be at the ballet.

## WHAT ARE 'JAZZ' AND 'TAP'?

Both jazz and tap dancing were born right here in America in this century. But both forms have their origins in much earlier times. When Africans were first forced to come to this country as slaves, they brought their own music and dance with them. The American government was afraid they would rebel against the slave-owners, so a law was passed in 1739 forbidding Africans from beating their drums or blowing their horns!

But that didn't stop the dancing. Blacks used their hands and feet to clap and stamp out their music and native dances. Known as "hamboning" or "patting juba," the person hits his/her own body to create a sound as if it were an instrument. The feet became another instrument for expression — stomping, stepping, and clicking all sorts of rhythms. Dance historian Sally Sommer says, "People have probably always performed percussive dancing...any form of dance in which the body, or ground, is played as a percussive instrument."

At about this time, jig and clog dances, brought over by Irish immigrants, were becoming popular. In this form of step dancing, the feet execute complicated motions but the upper body remain as stiff and unmoving as possible. The two cultural groups the Irish and the Africans, witnessed each other's dances (on plantations, at balls, and socials) and began to borrow from each other. Historian Sommer believes that "*Tap is the melt-down of two different cultures' dance forms into a singular one...but rhythm comes most forcefully from the African heritage or percussive sensibility.*"

Tap, as it was called, eventually became a mainstay of vaudeville performers between the early 1900s and the late 1930s. The ‘Golden Age of Tap,’ as it was called/ featured such great performers as Bill Robinson (“Bojangles”), John Bubbles, Fred Astaire, and Charles “Honi” Coles, performing in movies and jazz and night clubs in Harlem Eventually, tap dancing fell out of favor because of various factors - the arrival of motion pictures, the Great Depression (which caused vaudeville theaters to close), and the birth of a new form of dancing — Jazz.

Originally, the word “jazz” can be traced to West Africa and was used by American blacks as a slang for sexual activity and/or music played in bordellos. Beginning with the onset of the happy and giddy *Charleston*, (named after the city of its origin), and the increasing independence of women in the 20’s, “jazz dancing” took Broadway by storm with its sharp-edged movements and aggressive rhythms. In the 30’s and 40’s, choreographers such as Jack Cole, Bob Fosse, and Jerome Robbins expanded the form (borrowing heavily from ballet and Oriental movement) to include the full power of the body onstage and in the new classroom teaching techniques. Jazz was firmly in place as an American dance form. During the 50’s and 60’s, jazz reflected the times, borrowing from social dances and showing new freedom. In the 70’s and 80’s, jazz gave way to disco, funk, and break dancing forms as popular expressions.

As famous jazz guru, Gus Giordano, puts it: “Jazz dance deals with sensuality — it’s not celebrating the romance of ballet or the cranial character of much modern dance.”

# CLASSROOM DISCUSSION & ACTIVITIES

- 1) Use a historical timeline to discuss the period when ballet emerged in Europe.
- 2) Discuss sign language and how it can relate to mime. Pick a story and create mime gestures (as you might see in a ballet) in place of key words.
- 3) Use the story of a famous ballet to write your own play/poem or short story.
- 4) Choose scenes from a ballet and draw illustrations.
- 5) Research a day in the life of a ballet dancer.
- 6) Write a story with a ballet dancer as the main character.
- 7) Have a child demonstrate the five basic ballet positions.
- 8) Research some famous dancers and choreographers such as Anna Pavlova, Vaslav Nijinsky, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Agnes De Mille, Jerome Robbins, George Balanchine, Martha Graham, Alvin Alley, Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson, Jose Limon.
- 9) Try some balancing and lifting tasks - compare everyday movement to dance movements. How do they differ? What makes it a dance?
- 10) Compare tap dancing to other forms of dance students may be familiar with, such as ballet, modern, jazz, ballroom, rock and roll, and break dancing. What role does improvisation play in tap dancing and jazz music?
- 11) Have students research the history and evolution of another type of dance, or ask them to find out about a folk dance from that country or others.
- 12) Discuss the feeling and mood of the different dance forms as presented in the Connecticut Ballet performance.
- 13) Try some "hamboning" yourself, clapping your hands and slapping your elbows, thighs, and shoulders.
- 14) Based on what you saw, try to make up your own dance, making up your own walk-around or time-step. Practice it and perform it for your friends.
- 15) Stage a vaudeville act of your own using several forms of dance drawn from student's diverse backgrounds.
- 16) Discuss the differences between "rap" or "hip hop" and "jazz."
- 17) Have students keep a list of dance or movement seen on television or video over the course of one week. Compare notes as to what was seen and whether or not an influence of tap and jazz can be detected in the movement.

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# SHORT QUIZ: THE ART OF BALLET AND ITS HISTORY

Ballet is a form of \_\_\_\_\_ dance.

Classical dance forms are those that have been developed into highly stylized structures within a culture. They have generally developed within the \_\_\_\_\_ circle of power within a society.

By contrast, traditional or \_\_\_\_\_ dance forms are those that have arisen out of the tradition of a people.

\_\_\_\_\_ dance often has its roots in folk dance.

Classical ballet developed in the courts of Italy and French court ballet reached its peak under the reign of Louis XIV, also known as \_\_\_\_\_.

During the 18th century, the ballet d'action was developed. In this type of ballet, the story was told through the \_\_\_\_\_.

In the early 19th century, ballet was part of a movement in the arts known as the \_\_\_\_\_ movement. Some of the characteristics you might find in ballets from the 'romantic' period are: \_\_\_\_\_.

Dancers usually begin their day with a \_\_\_\_\_.

A warmup consists of movements designed to raise the core body temperature and prepare the \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ for the strenuous dance activities to follow.

For more information about our organization and its programs, please visit:

**[www.connecticutballet.com](http://www.connecticutballet.com)**

Following the performance, students and teachers are welcome to email their responses to:

**[ctballet@ix.netcom.com](mailto:ctballet@ix.netcom.com)**

# STANDARDS FOR DANCE K-12

## CONNECTICUT DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

- Content Standard 1:** Identify and Perform Movement Elements and Dance Skills
- Content Standard 2:** Understand Choreographic Principles, Processes and Structures
- Content Standard 3:** Understand How Dance Creates and Communicates Meaning
- Content Standard 4:** Apply Analytical and Evaluative Thinking Skills in Dance
- Content Standard 5:** Demonstrate Understanding of Dance in Various Cultures and Historical Periods
- Content Standard 6:** Make Connections Between Dance and Healthful Living
- Content Standard 7:** Make Connections Between Dance, Other Disciplines, and Daily Life

\*Please note: detailed information on each content standard by grade level can be found on the Connecticut State Department of Education's website ([www.sde.ct.gov/sde/site/default.asp](http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/site/default.asp))