

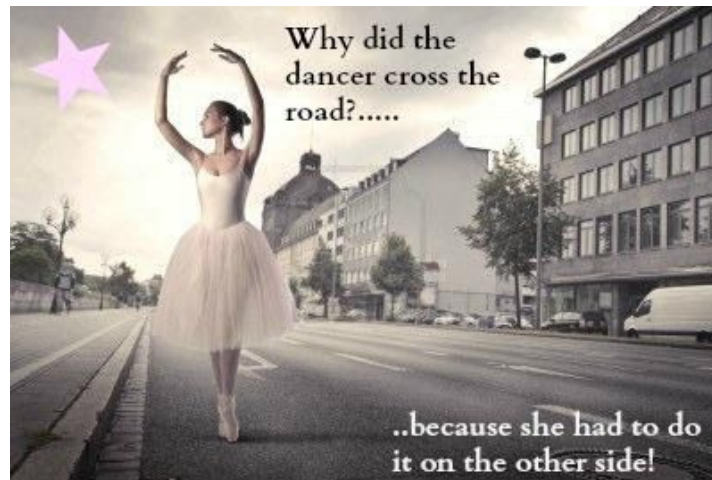
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A Universal Language



People often say that dance is the universal language, and it makes sense because you can be illiterate and unable to understand a single word of English but still be able to feel something or express yourself through dance. However, maybe you hate the arts and could never understand what it meant to be “moved” by art, if that’s the case, ballet can be considered a universal language in another way too. Words used within the discourse community in ballet are consistent throughout the world, so it could literally be considered a universal language. Ballet originated in France, so all the steps are named in French. These names are used from America, to Japan, to Russia. Yes, some ballet academies around the world have their own way of naming the steps, but if the school is well known enough to be able to rename the steps, chances are the alternate names will slowly spread across the world and be recognized as well. This means that if I were a ballerina who was fluent in the ballet discourse, I could fly from America to Russia to take class. Even though I wouldn’t be able to understand exactly what the instructors there were trying to say to me (assuming that I know absolutely no Russian), I would still be able to pick up on the dance combinations and have a general idea of what they’re focusing on. Pretty cool right? However, don’t get the consistency of the language confused with simplicity. Just like any other language, learning how to talk the talk in the ballet community will also take just as much time and effort.

Dancing vs. Knowing how to talk the talk



I joined the ballet community when I was in second grade, and to my surprise, learning how to talk the talk and be truly part of the community took much longer than I anticipated. It started when my doctor diagnosed me with a back problem. My options were to either get surgery at the tiny age of seven, or enroll in a year of ballet classes and hope that would fix the problem. My mother, of course, chose the non invasive choice, and before I knew it I was being dragged to my first class against my will. Little did I know that this first class would be a door to a community that was welcoming and encouraging, and would eventually shape the rest of my life. Mind you, the class wasn't some eye opening experience that changed my life instantly. I actually hated it first year and these strong feelings could mostly be traced back to the fact that I wasn't familiar with the discourse. When I was younger and thought of ballet, I imagined little girls in pink tutus leaping around and twirling with their arms in an O shape above their heads. I didn't know that being able to dance effortlessly included so much time focused on the vocabulary. It made more sense as I grew older, because I can't think of any way you would become a good dancer if you were unable to communicate like one. Like basketball, horseback riding, or any other sport and hobby, you start off not knowing anything then pick up the language as you become more interested in the activity. Picking up the way ballerinas talk not only allows you to understand how your teacher wants you to perform a certain step, but it can also help keep you updated on the ballet world, and allow you to appreciate the art form better. Though knowing the discourse is such a good tool to have, learning it at the beginning was such a struggle. At first, all the words sounded like a foreign language, because they were literally in a foreign language (French). After a few years and with more exposure to them, the terms started to stick with me more. Soon, I was able to understand all the weird lingo that my ballet teachers used, and found myself talking like them with my other ballet peers, however even after dancing for over 12 years, I'm still learning new words. Like for everything else, there is always more to learn and I'm constantly getting reminded of that through my ballet life.

Beginners vs. Experts



When I tell people that I do ballet, the most common thing I hear is a childhood story about how they enrolled in a ballet class when they were in preschool but quit before entering elementary school. All these baby ballerinas who quit early really add up and you see a clear trend where there is a huge population of novices in this community and a constant small group of experts. If I were to graph this, it would probably look like a chart of a stock market crash. It's not like ballerinas are mean and force everyone they don't like out, but people just get intimidated with all the terms that must be learned in the beginning and quit. Despite all the kindness and encouragement the community gives to young dancers to help keep the arts alive, the pool of experts is always considerably smaller than the number of beginners. This usually means that authors of magazine articles and advice columns written for members of the community will take some time to explain ideas and "dumb down" the language for those who may not be as experienced. This, however, does not mean that someone who knows nothing about ballet will be able to totally comprehend every article in a dance magazine. As always, some basics are always needed, but perhaps the ballet community is considered more welcoming to outsiders because they're constantly trying to encourage other to take a stab at learning more of the complicated discourse that is involved in ballet.

Want to join? I thought you'd never ask!



Yes, part of being a ballet dancer includes standing on our toes and wearing tutus like you see in the movies, but getting to this level takes years of training. It is during the first few years when you pick up on the terminology. Like other languages, the ballet language also has different dialects in different areas of the world. As you take classes from different instructors and attend workshops, you pick up on how ballet schools around the world speak. During this time, you have hopefully sparked enough of an interest to watch ballets on YouTube or read up on ballet storylines. This will help you familiarize yourself with the famous ballerinas and music. After learning the names of steps and getting familiar with the ballets, you slowly begin to pick up on special words that teachers use to describe how steps should be done. At first you will struggle with what “turned out” means and what an “instep” is, but with time and more corrections, things will begin to make sense to you. After four to five years of practicing the language, you can finally call yourself fluent. Congratulations!

Like any sport or art form, ballet is very hard and takes many years to master the movements and language. Most of the challenges can be tied back to the fact that the discourse is so complex and that there are so many terms that are all equally important for you to know in the world of ballet. Though it sounds like lots of work to be integrated into the community, as someone who has fallen in love with ballet, I can tell you that if it's an interest of yours, learning the discourse is a small price to pay to be a part of such an amazing community.