

## Chapter 1

# Curtain Up! Welcome to the Ballet

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Ballet beginnings
- ▶ What you need to get started
- ▶ Dancing like a pro — for fun and enjoyment

Welcome to world of ballet — a universe of beauty and grace, aerial pyrotechnics, heroes, villains, and a fairy or two. Where the sound of tapping toes melds with the luscious strains of a full orchestra. Where true love always triumphs, evil is destroyed, and everybody has great legs.

This is the world of ballet. And by the way — don't be put off by the fact that all the guys are wearing tights. It's art, man, art!

## *Ballet for Life*

Whether you want to participate in ballet or just watch it, the ballet experience can excite and inspire you. Ballet is one of the most beautiful forms of expression ever devised: an exquisite mix of sight and sound, stunning aesthetics, and awesome technique.

Though the professional ballet world may or may not be for you, the *practice* of ballet certainly can be. Ballet can give you more strength and flexibility, better alignment, and infinite grace — for life. It can counteract the aging effects of gravity, reduce stress, and prevent injury. And until you've tried moving your body to some of the most beautiful music ever written, you've missed one of the greatest joys life has to offer.

Imagine waking up after 100 years of sleep, released from a curse, and finding your true love. You may feel inspired to attempt such superhuman feats as the one depicted in Figure 1-1 (after a good stretch, of course). In fact, you may even be exuberant enough to do it *three* times, like Princess Aurora and Prince Desir  in *Sleeping Beauty*. That's what we love most about ballet — above all, it can bring *ecstasy* into your life.

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## Part I: Ballet Dancing from the Top

**Figure 1-1:**  
The  
exuberance  
of ballet:  
Evelyn  
Cisneros  
and  
Anthony  
Randazzo in  
*Sleeping  
Beauty*.



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## *In the Beginning . . .*

The ballet moves in this book have a long tradition — longer than most things on earth. In ballet, an understanding of that tradition is extremely important. In this section, we acquaint you with the winding road that led to the beautiful art form you can experience today.

Just like music, dance has existed since prehistoric times. Rhythmic chanting — usually meant to appease the gods or to while away the time between woolly mammoth sightings — soon became accompanied by body movement. After all, what's more natural than swaying to the beat?

Some of the earliest organized dances took place in ancient Greek dramas, which sometimes incorporated a dancing chorus. Even then, it paid to know how to move your feet. The tradition made its way to Italy, where theatrical dancing became enhanced by manual gestures, or mime. (You can read more about mime in Chapter 16.) This tradition was kept alive for centuries by minstrels who sang, tumbled, juggled, and reveled their way through the Dark Ages.

## *Court dancing for fun and profit*

It was during the High Renaissance in northern Italy that court ballroom dancing was born. (The words “ballet” and “ball” are both derived from the Italian word *ballare*, meaning “to dance”.) Performed by the nobility, court dances became all the rage. They spread to France — where they reached their height at the court of King Louis XIV.

King Louis, the Sun King (or “Twinkle Toes,” as he was almost certainly not known), was an accomplished dancer himself, as you can see in Figure 1-2. He established the first official school of ballet, known today as the Paris Opera Ballet. That’s why, to this day, all ballet vocabulary is in French.



**Figure 1-2:**  
King Louis  
XIV, the Sun  
King, in a  
ballet pose  
of his time.

Whereas the first performers were kings, noblemen, and other slackers dancing for their own enjoyment, ballet eventually became much more structured and elaborate, demanding strong legs, great balance, and increasingly virtuosic technique. Professional ballet was born.

If you were to suddenly wake up at a dance performance in the year 1680, two things would strike you: The dancers, as they accidentally slammed into your suddenly materialized body, and the fact that everyone onstage was a guy. Ballet was for athletes; it was unbecoming (so people thought) for women to participate in such bold and daring moves.

The first women didn’t appear professionally until 1681 — and when they did, they wore big hoop skirts, high heels, and wigs. Eventually, someone got the idea that a ballerina could be much more effective with her legs visible. So beginning in the early 1700s, women began dancing in shorter and shorter skirts, and without hoops, heels, or wigs.

## *The Paris Opera and pointe work*

The more of their bodies they revealed, the more popular ballerinas became. But in order to truly win the favor of the audience, one more element was needed. Something so strange, so masochistic, that you would never believe it in a million years. We’re talking, of course, of dancing on the tips of their toes — *en pointe*.

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The thought behind this bizarre concept was this: If a woman could point her feet unnaturally down at a 90-degree angle and stand *really* high off the ground, balancing on the very tips of two or three toes, she would appear to be floating.

And that was a good thing — this was the Romantic era, and most ballets of the time involved spirits, fairies, and supernatural creatures, like women whose day job involved being dead. Floating above the surface of the stage just seemed the right thing to do.

This feat of the feet was possible with the help of special shoes, known today as *pointe* shoes. And the first ballerina who pulled it off was Marie Taglioni (see Figure 1-3) — daughter of a famous choreographer at the Paris Opera.



**Figure 1-3:**  
Marie  
Taglioni,  
the first  
ballerina  
to dance  
*en pointe*.

Dancing *en pointe* did the trick — thereafter, women not only became the *equals* of the men onstage, but actually *dominated* ballet for well over a century.

As time passed, *pointe* shoes became stronger and more supportive, allowing ballerinas to stay up longer and dance more complicated steps. Today *pointe* work is a substantial area of any ballerina's training; she must be able to balance on the points of her toes, strong and secure, for longer than it took you to read this sentence.



After all these years, the Paris Opera remains one of the best ballet companies in the world, boasting some phenomenal dancers. If you ever visit Paris, make sure to stop by the Opera Garnier — where the first *pointe* shoes of Marie Taglioni are still on display.

## *Russia and America*

After 1850, the center of the ballet world shifted from Paris to St. Petersburg, Russia. There the master choreographer Marius Petipa, working with the music of the great composer Peter Tchaikovsky, was beginning to draw the attention of the world. Their creations, such as *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker*, remain immortal masterpieces of ballet.

Over time, the technical demands of Russian ballets continued to increase, and by the early 1900s, the Imperial Russian Ballet School was training the greatest dancers in the world. On a recent trip to Russia for the purposes of researching this book (at least that's what we told the IRS), we confirmed that it is still possible to see superb dancing in Russia.

But it wasn't long before some Russian dancers began to crave more artistic freedom, and a quiet exodus from Russia began. The so-called Ballets Russes, made up of some of Russia's greatest dancers, toured Europe and America in the early 1900s, reviving interest in classical ballet. The brilliant Russian ballerina named Anna Pavlova formed her own company and toured all over the world, bringing ballet to thousands who had never seen it before.

Several Russian dancers found a new home in America. One was George Balanchine, who established a major ballet school in the 1930s, which eventually supported the New York City Ballet. America's enthusiastic support of ballet continues to draw some of the best dancers and choreographers in the world.

## *Today's stage*

Today you can find a ballet company, with magnificent dancers, in almost every major city on earth. Many companies have their own ballet schools — some for training future professionals, and others for interested amateurs.

After two hundred years of female domination, male dancers have regained ballet superstardom. Leading the movement were such geniuses as Rudolf Nureyev and Mikhail Baryshnikov — masters of clean lines, high jumps, and Olympian athleticism.

The technical demands on dancers still continue to increase. Dancers must excel in classical technique in order to master the old warhorses; yet they must also be ready to throw themselves — literally — into some of the newest choreography (see Figure 1-4). Ballet continues to be more and more diverse, fun to watch, and even more fun to do.

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## Part I: Ballet Dancing from the Top

**Figure 1-4:**

Evelyn Cisneros and Anthony Randazzo in *Rubies* (choreographed by George Balanchine), a contemporary ballet that showcases the amazing possibilities of modern choreography.



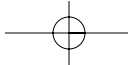
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## Watching Great Choreography for Inspiration

As you fine-tune your classical ballet technique — or even if you just like to *read* about it — you become better equipped to understand and fully enjoy the things that make choreography great. In this book, we hope to turn you on to many different styles of ballet. We take you from the classics of Marius Petipa and company to the more contemporary styles of George Balanchine, Jerome Robbins, Jiri Kylian, and Mark Morris — to name just a few.

Naturally, some styles of ballet are easier to understand than others. Some ballets immediately seem to sparkle like exquisite jewels, while others, at first glance, resemble a flurry of headless chickens. We're not here to torture you; we want to help you find out what we love.

Does one style appeal to you more than all the others? If so, you can continue your exploration of ballet by delving into other works in that style or by that choreographer. Or if you like them all, fantastic! Our job just got a lot easier.



## Gathering Your Ballet Materials

What equipment do you need to begin exploring ballet? To begin, not much. For example, any old workout clothes will do; if you want to get fancy, we suggest some special ballet clothing in Chapter 2.

Shoes are probably the most important and personal item you need (with the exception of the men's dance belt), and we point you in the direction of the right ballet slippers for you.

As for other equipment, you can do an impressive array of things with nothing more than a good-sized room and a solid piece of furniture. But there's plenty of optional equipment to choose from in Chapter 2.

## Staying Healthy and Avoiding Injury

In ballet, you occasionally ask your body to do extraordinary things. Your body is your high-performance instrument — and it's essential to protect your body from injury any way you can. A healthy diet, good warm-ups, and adequate rest are essential. In Chapters 2 and 3 we show you some of the ways to keep your body healthy. And later, in Chapter 22, we show you how lifestyle can affect your performance.

We can't emphasize enough that ballet is *progressive*. Each exercise gives you the strength, balance, and confidence to prepare you for the next. And so, one of the best ways to avoid injury is to try the steps in the order that we present them. Do a good warm-up first (we show you how in Chapter 3); then go through the barre exercises in Part II, and the center floor exercises in Part III.



If you've exercised in the past, you know how important it is not to overstretch or strain your body. Note to self: Don't attempt anything in this book that feels painful or too difficult. There is a fine line between just enough and too much, and only you know where that line is.

Listen to your body: Nobody else can hear it. If they can, something is definitely wrong.

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### *Getting Started: It's Easier Than You Think*

As art forms go, ballet can get pretty intricate. Some of the most advanced moves in this book may take weeks or even months of practice. But you can do certain things right now, with almost no practice at all. Just to prove it to you, give this a try:



- 1. Stand with your feet close together. Keeping your heels touching, turn your legs outward so that your toes point away from each other.**
- 2. With a table or chair for support, rise up on your feet so that you are supporting yourself on the balls of your feet.**
- 3. Now come back down and bend your knees, leaving your heels on the ground.**

Check it out — here you are, only a few paragraphs into Chapter 1, and you have already conquered first position, the *relevé*, and the *demi-plié*! You should be proud. (See Chapters 4 and 6 for more detailed information on these moves.)

### *Why Being a Ballet Novice Helps You Enjoy Ballet*

You may not believe this, but it's true: You, O Novice, have a surprising advantage over many of the world's ballet fanatics. You cross the threshold of this astonishing creative realm unfettered by preconditioning or ballet prejudice. You're a veritable open book. A clean slate. An empty canvas on which the great choreographers can paint their visual landscapes. We can't *wait* to get started with you.

And that's what many "balletomanes" often forget: Ballet is not a purely intellectual pursuit. More than many other arts, ballet is about free, unencumbered expression.

In this book, we help you master that expression — and unlock your capacity to experience one of life's greatest highs.