

En l'Air

News from
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ACADEMY of
BALLET
Educational Training
Association

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In the line-up: Dancers from Levels 3, 4 and 5 (Photo: Charles Flachs)

The Dance Student's Responsibility

by Rose and Charles Flachs

There is a very interesting article in the recent *POINTE* magazine that contains an interview with our teacher's sister, who is the director of the National Ballet School of Cuba. Ramona de Saá is interviewed by Aurora Bosch, another teacher from this prestigious school. Here is an edited sample of the interview; our comments follow.

AB: What is the relationship between technique and artistry in the context of a rapidly changing culture?

RDS: So often in today's culture things are too accelerated. You see this a lot at competitions. They have to be prepared to put it together themselves at the last minute. This is today's world! I don't mind taking students to competitions because they learn a lot, but I think I may be allergic to them [laughs]. Many of the jury's adjudicators are there for only one reason: to "go shopping" for talent to add to their school or associated company.

AB: Students are living in a very different culture than the one we grew up in, when we received our training. Today's world has a multiplicity of influences, and our students are eager to respond to them, but it is harder for them to meet the variety of demands that are made on them.

RDS: Yes, they have their mobile phones and an entire technology that absorbs them and so much of their time. We have to recognize that it is a kind of addiction, but we also have to acknowledge how it has altered their vision of the world. It means something important to them artistically, so from our foundation, we must let it become part of the *œuvre*.

From Rose and Charles

Two thoughts come to mind in reading this: one is the role of technology in today's dance world, and the other is the dancer's responsibility in their dance education.

What is the responsibility of the student? It is actually quite extensive. It requires more than just showing up. A good way to look at it is to start with the assumption that as a student you are 50% responsible for your activity in the classroom. Without substantial responsibility, how could you conceive of performing on stage, where the demands are heightened? The teacher has the responsibility to impart material, tailoring it to the individual dancer and creating a positive, but rigorous atmosphere in the class. The teacher also should attempt to inspire an artistic integration between the

dancer, music, and movement. However, it is the student's responsibility to be open to these stimuli and to latch on to them in a serious manner. This requires the mind to be working actively in class. If, as a student, you find that you are not able to pick up exercises, or are easily distracted in class, you are not using your mind to its fullest capacity. It is time to step up if you want to progress. No student is made by the teacher; it is always the student who gets inspired and creates their own success. The teacher's role is as a guide in this process.

How does present-day technology play into responsibility and development? Again, it is complicated. Certainly, it would be foolish to imagine that we will go back to a day when cell phones and social media are not ubiquitous. But it is important to examine how a flat screen and electronic interaction is different from the physical experience of dancing. A photo on Instagram is a different means of communication than a live performance. The demands, atmosphere and mental concentration are heightened and amplified when you are both physically and mentally present, using your body as your instrument. Often, photos and videos shown on social media do not have the integrity due for the serious study of ballet or other dance forms. It is the user's responsibility to recognize what is appropriate to post and know that, at its most useful, social media should support the work and efforts of the classroom and performance, not detract from its goals of providing an artistic and moving experience that can actually change the way you think and therefore act in the larger world. Art can be a reflection of what is ideal in humanity, and to do that it must live up to a higher standard than the average social media post. Finding that standard is a challenge worth pursuing when we engage with the cyber world.

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The Massachusetts Academy of Ballet

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Welcome to MAB, Alessandra Garcia!

by Neville Meroni

MAB's new hip-hop teacher, Alessandra Garcia (known to her students as Ally) burst onto the scene this fall with inspiring choreography, contagious energy, and humor. Level 4 student Neville Meroni sat down with Ally to discuss the sources of her training and inspiration.



Ally started her training in tap and jazz in Spring Valley, New York, about thirty minutes outside of New York City, at a studio called Coupé. Ally became interested in hip-hop at about eight, but was not able to actually start hip-hop classes until she was eleven years old. Her first hip-hop teacher, Kadee, was also the first to introduce girls' technique at Coupé, helping to break down gender barriers.

Once she got started, Ally wanted to stretch her abilities in hip-hop, and began taking all the classes she could with people who were big in the industry from places like Long Island, Queens, New Jersey, and Boston.

At Coupé, the teachers focused on technique, and also served as approachable mentors, not solely focused on competition. Kadee invited Ally help in classes with exercises, and told Ally that she should become a teacher, because of her natural power of authority.

In high school, Ally participated in a variety of dance ensembles. When she graduated and moved on to Smith College as a dance major, she had to reorient in order to continue her hip-hop studies at the same level. Between academics and work, it was difficult to find the kind of time and opportunities she'd had earlier. She persisted in asking for the kind of training she wanted, and she feels she was able to help shape the department through her efforts. When she met Shakia Johnson, who is now on the faculty at Mt. Holyoke College, she had a breakthrough, and was once again inspired to teach. She graduated in May of 2018 and joined MAB a few months later.

As she establishes herself in the dance education world, Ally also works retail, dogsits, and drives for Lyft, but lately her opportunities have grown. In addition to MAB, Ally teaches at The Dance Project CT in Terryville, CT, setting competition choreography for a group piece and a solo. She also teaches all levels of hip-hop and a beginner adult class at Ascendance Inner World Arts in Florence. She is an Artist-In-Residence at the Hilltown Charter School, working with kids from several different grades during their physical education classes, adding hip-hop to the standard sports lineup. She does similar work once a week at an after-school program in Chicopee, MA. Ally also loves to cuddle her dog, sleep, and bake when she has the chance to relax at home.

Ally enjoys working with the students at MAB. She writes, "I love how focused and fun the students are. They take everything that I offer them in stride; we laugh, we jam, and it's a great way to finish off the evening. I believe that several of the students in class do not have any formal hip-hop experience, but you would never know. Everyone works hard to get the rhythm and speed of the movement, and it's a class where they can just let go. I feel like I can be quite silly in class, and my choreography is challenging but it still reflects who I am. The students are aware of that, and I sense that it makes them want to level up their movement, let go of fear, and keep the class energy positive."

Her students agree. Thank you for sharing your gifts with the MAB community, Ally!



Better Body Image

by Connie Flachs



There is a girl staring at me in the mirror. I've been trained to see her not as a human, but as a project. The ideal finished product can easily be found by Googling "ballerina," specifically Sylvie Guillem. Or Suzanne Farrell. Wendy Whelan. Paloma Herrera. Natalia Osipova. All will provide a good example of the desired result.

Comparisons can also be made to the bodies surrounding this reflected figure. The feet of the adjacent woman arch more. The dancer behind her seems to have longer, thinner legs without the problematic bulge of the mirror girl's muscular quadriceps. And then there is that soft roll of flesh resting on the mirror image's hip. ("That's just skin," a friend once told me. But she wasn't to be trusted. She didn't understand the project.) I hike up the waistband of my tights and see the offending imperfection located in the mirror camouflaged slightly. A temporary fix.

This is a scientific study of body. A dissociative, intellectual evaluation. Later, lying in my bed with post-epson salt bathed feet and legs aching from a week of rehearsal, I sob. The human I am doesn't want to be a project. She wants to be enough. She wants to be okay. She wants to be beautiful, both the superficial kind and the deep beauty associated with love and confidence and making change in the world. But every time she looks in the mirror, that girl, with her curvy bottom, fleshed out arms, and lack of jutting hip bones, reminds her she isn't allowed to be content yet. She isn't worthy of speaking up and sharing her opinion. She definitely doesn't deserve to ask for a raise. And the reasons why she wasn't cast in the role she wanted are abundantly clear. There's far too much work to do to expect anyone to value the human underneath the renovation project happening on the surface.

This has been my experience, in varying intensities, for my entire eight year professional ballet career. I don't believe that all dancers feel this way, but I know that many do, because they have told me. They have told me in tearful dressing room talks, wine soaked weekend confessions, and discussions about why they left the dance world.

I also know that ballet doesn't cause eating disorders or body image issues. The reality is a far more complex

Summer is for Growth

At home and away

by Rachel Smythe, parent and MABETA Board member

For motivated students, summer can be a great time to explore and fine-tune dance skills. Summer intensive opportunities abound—from MAB’s own challenging four-week program to intensives that take place in foreign countries and include cultural and language aspects.

Many MAB dancers took advantage of these kinds of programs in 2018, and all concur that time spent at MAB during the school year helped to develop the conditioning, technique, and discipline they needed to succeed in these programs. “I was able to keep up while other people had to adjust a lot,” Sally Gill observes, speaking of her experience with the School of Pennsylvania Ballet. She credits this to the “strong foundation” MAB has given her. Chloe Larouche, who danced at the Bolshoi Ballet Academy Summer Intensive in New York City and MAB, agrees. “I felt like technically I was ready,” she states.

Dancers report coming out of these summer programs with new skills and a greater sense of accomplishment. Charlotte Black, who attended MAB’s summer program, gained ground with her turns and pointe work. “I found my stride,” she says. “I think I definitely improved in that area.”

Another student of MAB’s summer program, Abby Paul, gained experience in partnering, something she considers “good to know in the ballet world.”

Emery Meroni attended the Bolshoi program as well as MAB, and saw his relationship with music change. “I tended to be a little tense,” he recalls, “and my teacher was always saying, ‘When you’re dancing, you really have to show the audience what they hear in the music.’ That was an interesting correction for me.”

Meanwhile, Nolan Saito was inspired seeing what other students in his peer group at the Boston Ballet summer program were capable of. “I think I wasn’t pushing myself as much before because I hadn’t seen for myself what was possible with people my age,” he says.

Others, like Amber Fournier, who attended the American Academy of Ballet as well as MAB, saw their quality of

performance improve. “You’re in a totally different place, performing for people that you don’t know, and you just learn how to adapt and perform with all you’ve got,” she relates.

Audrey West found the Bolshoi’s summer intensive challenging, yet rewarding. “I found myself doing a lot of stuff I didn’t think I could do,” she recalls.

Summer programs benefit the dancers’ conditioning as well. Sally Gill saw her stamina and fitness level improve, thanks to the Pilates classes and conditioning opportunities offered by the School of Pennsylvania Ballet.

Most consistently dancers report a rise in their confidence. Hannah King admits to “feeling low” at the start of her summer experience. But over the course of the three weeks, her attitude changed. “I really improved,” she says. “I just needed to be more confident in myself.”

Neville Meroni completed all four weeks of MAB’s summer intensive program and says, “By the end of the summer, you can feel confident you’re doing a good job.”

For students considering attending a summer program, MAB dancers are unanimous in their advice: “Go for it!” And, keep going for it, according to one dancer who relates she had to audition more than once to get into her chosen program. Once you’re accepted, be ready to work hard and, if necessary, adjust to a ballet style different from what you’re used to. If you prefer sticking with the style MAB teaches (Vaganova), make finding a summer program with a similar style a priority.

Finally, don’t allow yourself to be intimidated by other dancers you’ll see. According to Charlotte O’Shea, who spent time at the Akhmedova Dance Academy in Maryland, “I spent probably a week worried because (the other dancers) were really good...they’d been taking classes a lot longer.” In the end, she decided to simply work hard and have fun and came away feeling she’d gotten a lot from the experience. May Saito, who attended the Bolshoi Academy, Pennsylvania Academy of



Nolan (seated, center) at Boston Ballet Summer Dance Program



Amber at the American Academy of Ballet



Chloe and partner at the Bolshoi Ballet Academy Summer Intensive



May and Emery at the MAB Summer Intensive



May at the Bolshoi Ballet Academy Summer Intensive



Emery and partner at the Bolshoi Ballet Academy Summer Intensive

Ballet and MAB’s summer intensive, agrees. “Don’t spend your time comparing yourself to other dancers,” she advises. “Focus on improving on your own (dancing), because the time is short.”



Spring Show 2018

Photos: Charles Flachs





interaction of genetic predisposition, perfectionist traits, family upbringing, childhood teachers, and studio environment. Yet, the dance world is not blameless. The risk factor for disordered eating or body dysmorphia in ballerinas (and many aesthetic-focused athletes) is much higher. This intense struggle faced by many artists has been taboo for far too long, buried in shame and constrained by self-loathing. To question if this struggle is worthwhile is heresy, a rejection of ballet itself. If a pursuit of the perfect line (i.e. the perfect body) is no longer healthy or manageable for you, then who are you to call yourself a ballet dancer?

We need to talk about this. There is no denying the fact that ballet is both an athletic pursuit and an aesthetic art form. The bodies on stage must be able to execute the steps and express the intention behind the choreography. They must be interesting, beautiful, or intriguing to the audience. The goal is to be long-necked, sinewy limbed, lithe, hyperextended, with beautiful feet. But must mental health be jeopardized in this pursuit? Does physical health need to be put on the back burner? Should disruption in one's reproductive system be brushed aside? Where do we draw the line on the kinds of bodies we will accept as "ballet bodies" and the means that are required to achieve them? What are we losing, as an art form, when we reject artists that don't fit this ideal?

I don't have the answers to these questions. But I know that more conversations, honest ones that include both the polished photos we post on our dance Instagram accounts and the tears that have soaked through our pillowcases, need to be had.

I haven't even found the balance in my own relationship with my body. I rarely can accept its imperfections when I start off my day with plies at the barre. I often struggle with a deep anger at how far I am from ballet's ideal, which has become integrated into my own ideal. I usually cringe at photos of myself. There are so many renovations I would like to do. But I lack the resources for some of them, and many that I've done before just don't seem sustainable any more. In the meantime, I have to keep living in this house.

I développ  and catch a glimpse of that woman in the mirror. For a split-second, before my mind begins a tally of her imperfections and aesthetic failures, I see a fleeting glimpse of something else. I see the years she has dedicated to training in an art form she loves. I see the desire she has to communicate and share stories with an audience. I see the way she has tried to care for herself. I see the emotions she has expressed under the stage lights. I see a human.

Connie Flachs, an alumna of MAB, is in her eighth season as a professional ballet dancer. She is the Co-Founder of Better Body Image Grand Rapids. To learn more, check out www.betterbodyimageconference.com. She is also always willing to chat with dancers (or anyone!) who struggle with body image and help them find resources.

Summer of Russian

An MAB student experiences ballet, language and culture in Moscow

by Rachel Smythe, parent and MABETA Board member



Emma Jane (front row, far right) with her ballet class in Moscow

This past summer, one of MAB's level 5 students, Emma Jane Konkoly, was selected for an academic program that allowed her to train at the Bolshoi Ballet Academy in Moscow, Russia. While there, Emma Jane stayed in the academy's dorms, her days filled with ballet classes, character dancing, gymnastics, and language lessons. With only short breaks for showers and meals, Emma Jane says the program was intense, but excursions on evenings and weekends, as well as time spent with host families, brought fun and variety to her stay.

Emma Jane says it was truly an immersion experience. "We were like babies," she recalls. "It was really hard to communicate at first." Her host families helped, though, and Emma Jane has fond memories of time spent with these people improving her language skills. Two children, in particular, took her in hand and invented simple games to help her expand her vocabulary. "They would bring food out from the cabinet, and then we would say the word in Russian, and we just played fun games like that," Emma Jane recalls. "I really loved that part."

In fact, Emma Jane's vocabulary grew to the point where, at the end of her six-week stay, she was able to understand key phrases in ballet class without the help of a translator.

But, for Emma Jane, perhaps the most valuable part of the experience was the introduction to Russia's culture and people. It was a chance to see, firsthand, how the Russian people differ from the preconceived notions we have of them.

"I just love that I got to be there this summer when there were so many issues going on with politics between the U.S. and Russia," she relates. "Being able to share with my friends and family here that those stereotypes aren't true—especially right now—I think that that's so important."

Many of her encounters with Russian people took place in Gorky Park, a public area off Red Square that Emma Jane says became one of her favorite haunts.

"I feel like you got the biggest grasp on what Russian people are really like there because you saw people skateboarding, talking with their friends, eating food...It's just this beautiful park, and I really felt like I was part of the culture there," she recalls.

Emma Jane says anyone considering applying to this program should "go for it!" And, though she uses words like "challenging" and "demanding" to describe her time at the academy, she is also quick to claim it's the most rewarding thing she's ever done. Not only did the experience stretch her physically, it forced her to develop stronger study habits. And then there's the increase in cultural understanding. In Emma Jane's mind, that may be the most valuable thing she gained.

"People are just so much more than you think of on a first impression," she says. "I think it's really important to understand that everyone has more depths to them. Learning people's depths can help you tolerate different kinds of people, and I think, especially, in this day and age, that's so important."

A New Ballet Faculty Member

Welcome, Risa!

by Rachel Smythe, parent and MABETA Board member



Risa (center) teaching a class

Risa Peals didn't realize it, but when she attended her first ballet class at MAB this past summer, she was starting down a path to a teaching job at the studio. Within weeks of that first class, Risa was leading classes of her own, bringing her training and passion for ballet to MAB's level 3 and 4 students.

Born in Tokyo, Japan, Risa began taking ballet at the age of three. At first, she attended classes simply because her older sister did. Later, though, she came to love ballet for reasons of her own.

At thirteen, she began attending the Russia Ballet Institute in Tokyo, learning from teachers who had once taught at the Bolshoi. When that studio closed, she moved on to the Kishibe Ballet Studio (also in Tokyo). Finally, after high school, she spent a year in Canada, attending the Goh Ballet Academy while studying English.

Risa admits that balancing the demands of a heavy academic schedule and ballet proved to be the biggest challenge for her as a young dancer. As an elementary student, she attended a "cram school" where children who wanted to be accepted into private middle schools went for additional study after regular school hours. The resulting homework load left little time for friends or interests outside of ballet.

In later years, Risa had to travel two hours by train to her ballet studio. Her dance classes began late in the evening, and she often faced a pile of unfinished homework when she returned home at night. "It was hard for me to keep up with schoolwork and ballet,"

she confesses. "I always wished I had more than twenty-four hours in a day."

Despite these challenges, Risa retained her passion for dancing. "I love how the classical music is so relaxing....I love the challenge of ballet as well. Throughout the entire performance you are mentally and physically draining yourself, trying to make every graceful movement look perfect. No matter how much strain you endure, you can never let the audience notice how difficult it is. I believe that is the beauty of ballet."

When not dancing, Risa enjoys exploring America with her husband, an American serviceman she met in Japan. The two sometimes travel to New York or Boston to link up with old school friends of Risa's or spend time together at the gym where Risa enjoys experimenting with new ballet exercises and Pilates. Risa says her real passion, though, lies in trying American foods. Her current favorite is cheesecake.

Welcome, Risa! We're so glad you've joined the team at MAB.

MAB Faculty

Rose Flachs, Co-Director
Charles Flachs, Co-Director
Alessandra Garcia
Mændy MacFarland
Erica Maillet
Risa Peals

Halloween at MAB



Level 5 dressed as farm animals and farmers



Level 4 dressed as characters from Winnie the Pooh. And a cow.

UP NEXT: Nutcracker & Sweets

December 14, 15 and 16
Wistariahurst Museum

Tickets: wistariahurst.org



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All-Academy photo after the Spring Show, June 2018 (photo by Charles Flachs)

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