

WHAT MAKES A GOOD DANCER?

Technique and Training



A dictionary definition of dance technique might be – the way in which the dancer uses basic physical movements in performance or the ability to use fundamental physical movements effectively. In casual usage it has come to refer to a style of dance or movement vocabulary. Names associated with the techniques are normally those of a choreographer or teacher, e.g. Cunningham, Graham, etc.

Good technique is crucial to dance training in terms of keeping the dancer injury-free. According to Stuart Wright, “The simple fact is that virtually all dance injuries result from faulty technique ... ‘Technical correction is the best means to prevention and treatment.’” Acquiring good technique is a lifetime process.

Analysis of Technical Requirements



The Plie

A movement central to most dance forms. It is one of the first movements taught in a technique class, anatomically it is one of the most difficult to execute.

Attention must be given to the proper alignment of the hip, knee and ankle joints. At the beginning of a plie, the legs must be aligned so that a straight line could be drawn from the hip socket through the knee and ankle joints and to the second toe. This means that the knee should not protrude in front of the toes.

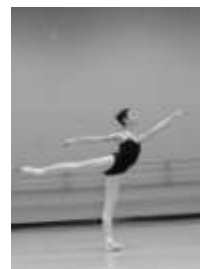
Any good technique will not only aim at technical expertise, but it will also aim to develop several movement skills such as **strength**, **stamina**, **flexibility**, **co-ordination**, **spatial** and **rhythmical clarity**.

Strength

Definition The ability of an individual to exert a muscular contraction or force against a resistance i.e., unless you are strong you are unable to articulate your body correctly. Therefore, muscular strength is best defined as the greatest amount of force that muscles can produce in a single maximal effort. It is muscular power that generates force.

There are two types of strength:

1. **Static:** no change in the length of the muscle, but the muscle still functions. This is also known as **Isometric Contraction**, e.g. holding a position like an arabesque in ballet.
2. **Dynamic:** the muscles change in length. They either lengthen, which is known as an **Eccentric Contraction**, or they shorten, which is known as a **Concentric Contraction**.



All types of contractions are used in a plie. Going into the plie the quadriceps lengthen (Eccentric), in the momentary pause at the bottom of the plie the muscles stay the same (Isometric), and the stretching out of the plie shortens the muscles (Concentric).

Muscle strength is of the utmost importance to any technique; it is needed for the execution of the most fundamental movements and positioning. Therefore, knowing which muscles to use and how to develop their strength is very important.

Stamina

Technique class itself cannot provide the conditioning necessary for injury-free performance. Dancers need stamina to perform demanding variations, strength to lift other dancers and flexibility to achieve the aesthetically desired movements.

Much of dance takes place in intervals of several minutes followed by varying periods of rest. The movement is either moderately intense with strong Isometric components or it is highly intense, brief-duration exercise, such as jumps or leaps. Sometimes this highly intense exercise must be sustained.

Energy must be generated rapidly, usually **anaerobic**, oxygen free. To train the short-term energy system activities must be selected that engage the muscles need for power movements. This usually involves strength training that increases the intensity of overload during maximum bursts of energy.

Dance often requires continuous movement performed for more than two minutes; this will use energy from **aerobic** as well as **anaerobic** energy systems. This work requires dances to have a highly trained oxygen transport system or **aerobic** system, and a well conditioned heart and vascular system that can circulate large quantities of oxygenated blood for relatively long durations. Dancers must be able to sustain physical activity with little fatigue, especially since fatigue is an important factor in the causation of injury. In training and rehearsal, dancers become easily fatigued when:

- a) Their technique is incorrect or inadequate
- b) They have not had enough fluid or carbohydrates
- c) When they are stressed or overloaded with training and performance

Flexibility

Defined as the range of motion around a joint or set of joints. There are two types:

1. **Static:** the range of movement produced statically without using the momentum of the movement itself.
2. **Functional:** the ability to move a joint with little resistance during actual dance movements.

Flexibility is usually achieved through stretching, a specific form of exercise designed to increase or maintain flexibility. Functional flexibility requires much in terms of strength and co-ordination. For example, to perform a side leg extension sufficient strength is needed to

raise the weight of the leg, the timing of the external rotation and the extension of the knee are also important in terms of height.

Flexibility tends to be genetically inherited, although with the correct strengthening exercises beforehand; stretching exercises can be extremely useful. Muscle flexibility can, therefore, be developed. However, as the body grows older so its flexibility decreases. Early dance training increases the amount of flexibility the individual has. While repetition of exercises in class provides greater strength and stamina, it also allows the body to push itself a little further each time, gradually increasing its stretch or flexibility.

Inactivity is the worst enemy, and those who wish to maintain flexibility should undertake regular exercise in order to maintain it. Gradually extending the amount that tendons, ligaments and muscles can stretch will gradually improve flexibility.



Co-ordination

This is an important movement skill for the dancer to acquire as, where would the dancer be if she could not co-ordinate specific muscle contractions and release when performing movements.

For example, in a side leg extension, neuromuscular co-ordination is essential in order to not only raise the weight of the leg, but also to time the external rotation of the hip (engaging the deep outwards rotators to drop the hip under effectively) and the extension of the knee (raising the knee high before beginning to straighten the leg).

Apart from this specific neuromuscular co-ordination of the body and its movement is need, it would be no good if the dancer could not perform a graceful arm movement on top of fast, intricate footwork. Both arms and legs must be able to move with each other, and independently from each other. Movement should be fluid and free from clumsiness or awkwardness, unless of course this is the desired effect. The whole body should be in tune with itself, able to move as a whole or fragmented body parts.

Like flexibility, co-ordination is something we are born with and some people are naturally more co-ordinated than others. It can however be improved with practice.

Jazz dance prioritises isolation movements. An isolation occurs when a part moves on its own, independent of what the rest of the body is doing, or not.

Rhythmic and Spatial Clarity

A dancer's training should not merely concern itself with developing technique. It should also aim to develop the dancer's sense of rhythm in movements. Exercises in the centre should use many different rhythms, different rhythms for jumping exercises, with slow movements, and very quick travelling sequences. Such exercises give the dancer awareness of the music and with practice the dancer is able to recognise different time signatures and rhythmic phrasing very easily, helping both themselves as dancers and choreographers in creating movements.

Spatial awareness is also very important to a dancer, knowing how much space to use with certain movements. This sense of space allows the dancer to fill out her movement where appropriate and to give the smallest gesture clarity and significance. The quality of a dancer's movement can change so much just by using the space properly. It can also help the dancer in terms of stamina and endurance. Knowing which movements need the most space and energy, and knowing when to relax and take a breath when performing smaller moments or gesture using less space and energy.

Therefore spatial awareness is an essential part of the dancer's training and exercises in travelling along diagonal lines, on circular pathways etc., with a variety of different movements and rhythms should be a normal part of class and dance training.

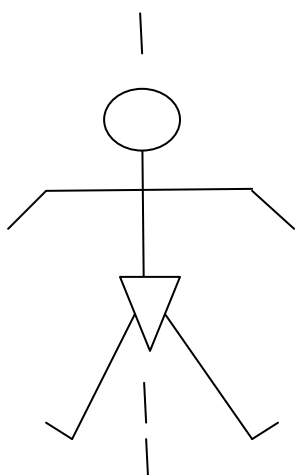
Gravity

Gravity is the force which attracts all objects towards earth. This is a constant force, which always has to be considered.

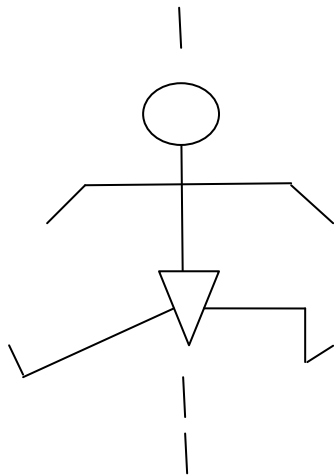
The centre of gravity is the point at which the force of gravity passes to earth and balance can be maintained. The centre of gravity varies when kneeling or lying down. This variation affects balance and stability. Other factors affecting stability are: the size of base and the line of gravity in relation to the base.

The line of gravity in relation to the base is very important. The nearer the line of gravity falls to the centre of the base the more stable the person is. As the line of gravity falls nearer to the perimeter of the base, stability decreases. If the line of gravity falls outside the base, the balance or stability becomes precarious.

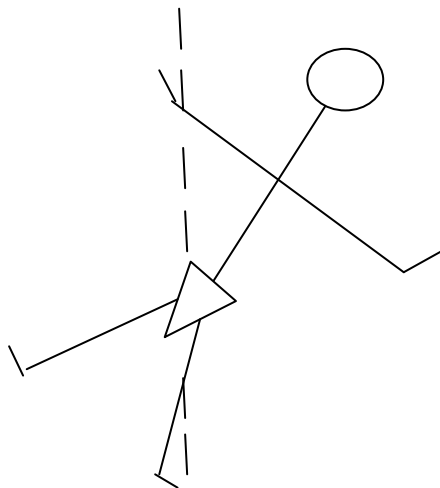
Stable – the line of gravity is well within the base



Less stable – the line of gravity is to one side of the base



Unstable – the line of gravity is outside the base i.e., falling/over balancing



Dance Technique

In order to improve our ability to dance and perform at any dance style we must improve our technique. Regular practice of any movement through warm up and dance classes will help improve technique.

Contemporary Technique

One of the most common contemporary techniques is Graham, named after Martha Graham. A Graham class is divided into three stages:



1. The class starts with floor work. This involves simple exercises either sitting or lying on the floor. These exercises help increase the suppleness of the spine and limbs.
2. Stage two is called centre work. This consists of exercises that you perform standing, but remain in place. These exercises help to develop balance and a sense of movement from the dancer's centre.
3. The third stage involves moving in space. Travelling steps and sequences, to improve co-ordination, rhythm and spatial awareness.

Jazz Technique

In a jazz class you start with a warm up, and then progress onto exercises designed to improve rhythm and isolation, which is very important for jazz dance. The class usually involves learning sequences that are built up gradually and become more complicated as your technique improves. Different movements are added each time in order to build upon skills.



Ballet Technique

Nearly every step in ballet begins and ends with one of the five positions of the feet. The feet and legs have to be turned out from the hips so that the toes and knees face sideways, a turnout. All classes, no matter how advanced, follow the same two stage structure:

1. Exercises at the barre. You always start off with an exercise on plies.
2. Centre practice, which starts off slow and ends with jumps, turns and travelling steps.



General Technique Points

How to Stand

Learning how to stand correctly can take a lot of practice. Your head should be held up with your chin level. The shoulders should be relaxed to lengthen the neck. The stomach and bottom should be well tucked in and the weight should be carried on the balls of the feet, so that the heels touch the floor but do not dig in.

Posture

Posture is the way in which a dancer holds themselves, whether standing, sitting or lying. Good posture is very important for dance as it helps a dancer to move and look better. For good posture, your shoulders should be relaxed and level, the head held up and the spine straight.

The Centre of Movement

The centre of movement is the dance term for the mid-point of the body where all dance moves begin. Knowing where your centre of movement is helps you to keep balance when dancing. If you pull in the stomach and imagine that it is touching the spin, the point where it touches is your centre.

Spotting

Dancers have to learn to spot, that is, to focus on an object while turning. In class, you learn to spot by looking at a fixed point. You focus on it for as long as possible during a turn before whipping your head around to look at it again. A dancer spots in order to maintain a pathway, direction and to combat dizziness.

Jumps/Elevation

When landing from a jump the tips of the toes should touch the ground first. The sole should touch the ground next and the heels of the foot last. The knees must bend to take some of the weight and this also makes the landing smooth and quiet.

