

LEARNING MADE EASY



Ballet

for
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Learn the basics
of the barre

Study the steps, from the chassé
to the glissade and beyond

Explore the mysterious
art of ballet mime

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Music Director, Joffrey Ballet;
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by **Scott Speck and Evelyn Cisneros**

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Introduction

Ooooooh. Well done!

With enormous strength, passion, and finesse, you've made a flying leap into the world of dance. Notice how deftly you hoisted this book; how stylishly you soared over the Table of Contents; how gracefully you flipped to this page.

Take that a step further, and you've got *ballet* — where women in tutus and men in tights leap across the stage, doing some very unusual things to their own bodies.

Ballet is a form of dance, and you've experienced it all your life: on TV, in the movies, at your junior high school prom. (Okay, maybe you skipped the prom.) If you've ever heard the names Fred Astaire, Paula Abdul, or Mikhail Baryshnikov, you know more than enough to get started.

Whether you want to *dance* ballet or just find out all about it, your ballet experience can remain as powerful and elegant as it began. All you have to do is take it one step at a time.

About This Book

To get one thing straight right off the bat: We take for granted that you're a highly intelligent person. After all, you've chosen this book from among a whole *shelf* of ballet books.

But in today's world, you're expected to be fully conversant with *millions* of different subjects. Clearly, even the greatest genius can't know *everything*. It happens that you, O Reader, are still in the first stages of ballet mastery.

That's why we've written *Ballet For Dummies*. Without presupposing any prior experience, this book gives you a thorough understanding of the basics of classical ballet. It broadens and deepens your appreciation for the art form. It helps you

explore the steps yourself (if you want), within your own comfort level. It puts you at ease discussing ballet in any situation. And although this book is not a suitable alternative to a graduate degree in ballet, it's much more fun and costs about \$90,000 less.

Conventions Used in This Book

As you leaf through this book, you may notice that we use French terms to refer to ballet steps. Ballet began in France, and you can't get very far in ballet without tackling a couple of these terms. But not to fear — we provide pronunciations for each term throughout each chapter. You can find a detailed list of the French terms, and others, in the glossary at the back of the book.

We also use letter-and-number combinations, such as D-1, D-2, or D-3, to refer to different directions in a room. These combinations help guide you as you do the steps, allowing you to face the right direction at the right time. Turn to Chapter 9 for more information about this room layout. You also find it printed on the Cheat Sheet at the front of this book, just in case you get lost along the way.

Foolish Assumptions

We don't make any assumptions about you, O Reader. For example, we don't assume that you have any previous experience with ballet — although if you do, you can still find plenty in this book to keep you busy. We explain everything from the beginning, so that you can go farther, faster, in your exploration of this great dance form.

However, some people do make some unfortunate assumptions about ballet before they know much about it. In the following list, we can help you ward off a few ballet misconceptions that are quite common — especially in America.

- » **You need to be rich to enjoy ballet.** Not at all! As we show you throughout this book, you can discover the joys of ballet with nothing more than this book, a sturdy piece of furniture, and your own two feet.
- » **You need to be skinny to dance.** Not true — unless you plan to audition for a huge ballet company like the Bolshoi tomorrow. Whether you're shaped like an hourglass or a clock, you can begin to explore the steps in this book.

- » **You need to start young.** Again, if you want to be a world-famous professional dancer, it helps to start dancing as a kid. But if your goal is to master the steps and enjoy the art, you can start at almost any age. You should see what Grandpa did yesterday.
- » **Ballet is just for girls.** Yes, it is for women and girls. But it's also very much for guys. Ballet as we know it was invented by a king, and at first, *only* men were allowed to dance it. Professional ballet dancers are just as fit as Olympic athletes — and in many countries, male dancers are revered as macho national heroes.

People of all ages, genders, colors, shapes, and sizes are discovering ballet — and having a blast doing it. Starting today, you can, too.

How This Book Is Organized

We divided this book into five different parts, for your reading pleasure.

Part 1: Ballet Dancing from the Top

In this part, we ease you into the world of ballet. We show you what ballet is and how it started. We introduce you to the most popular kinds of ballet attire. We let you in on the warm-ups that the pros use. And we present the basics of ballet technique — things you can do right here, right now, without any prior training.

One of our favorite chapters tells you all about music. Besides being an incredibly rich art form in its own right, music is the inspiration for most ballet. We show you how to listen to music, count it out, and coordinate your steps with it.

Part 2: Belly Up to the Barre

In Part 2, we introduce you to the *barre* — that long, horizontal, wooden pole that ballet dancers use to start every single day of their lives.

In the three chapters of this part, we demonstrate just about everything a person can do at the barre — and even how to get along without one. Some of these steps are extremely simple to grasp — such as the *plié* (“plee-AY”), or knee bend. Others (in later chapters) are successively more advanced.

Part 3: Center Floor, Anyone?

This part shows you the awesome steps that you can try out on the ballet floor — or in your living room. We start with the first tentative steps away from the barre and end with amazing *pirouettes* (spins) and thrilling jumps across the floor.

We even explain some very advanced steps that you often see the pros do — like the whip turn known as the *fouetté* (“foo-et-TAY”) and the stunningly impressive *double tour*, or double turn in the air.

Part 4: Living the Ballet Life

In Part 4, we point out all the ways that ballet can change you. From performing a simple dance (alone or in pairs) to watching the great masterpieces onstage, this part is a complete guide to making ballet an important part of your life.

One chapter is all about *choreography* — the art of creating an original ballet. We introduce you to some of the world’s greatest choreographers, and show you how to design your own dances.

Part 5: The Part of Tens

Part 5 contains our picks for the Top Ten of ballet — everything from the most common steps to the best-loved ballets; from the most useful ballet terminology to the ten strangest (but truest) facts about those sleek and graceful animals known as professional ballet dancers.

Icons Used in This Book

Throughout *Ballet For Dummies*, we use several icons to point out important features worth noting.



TIP

This icon clues you in on a handy shortcut, technique, or suggestion that can help you get more out of your ballet experience.



REMEMBER

This icon reminds you of an important point — something that appears elsewhere in the book, or something you should always remember as you practice ballet.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

For especially complicated moves, or their descriptions, let this icon be your guide.



TRY IT!

This icon marks an opportunity for you to get up and dance.



WARNING

Sometimes you just gotta be *really* careful. We use this icon when we want to show you how to do a step without hurting yourself.



BALLET
BACKSTAGE

This icon lets you into the backstage world of ballet. It also signals great stories worth repeating.

Where to Go from Here

We designed this book so that you can start *reading* anywhere. Use the Table of Contents or the index as a starting point, if you want. Or, if you're in a romantic mood, put on a CD of *Swan Lake*, skip right to the chapter on partnering (Chapter 14) and discover what you'll be able to do in the not-too-distant future.

But if you want to actually *try* what you've read, we strongly recommend that you start at the beginning. In ballet, each exercise gives you the skills you need to try the next. As ballet dancers are always saying, "You gotta *plié* before you can *double tour*." (Oh yeah — there's a glossary at the back too.)

The reason that ballet becomes an obsession for so many people, including us, is that it has incredible power. If you're attuned to it and are within its sphere of influence, you simply cannot remain unchanged.

We hope that this book helps you to tune into the life-affirming force of ballet. We hope that you want to experience more. And we hope that this incredible art continues to move you and change you as long as you live.

1

Ballet Dancing from the Top

IN THIS PART . . .

You've seen ballet before. You've marveled at its beauty and grace. You've wondered what on earth was going on. Now you're about to watch it through different eyes — and maybe even prepare to do it yourself.

In this part, we ease you into this strange art form. We show you what ballet is, and even give you a little history. We tell you what you need to look good — both in the studio and onstage. And we tell you about music, ballet's great inspiration.

This is the part where you don't even have to sweat. (Well, except for the part about abs.) No nitty. No gritty. Just fun.

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

Chapter **1**

Curtain Up! Welcome to the Ballet

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 Desiré in *Sleeping Beauty*. That's what we love most about ballet — above all, it can bring *ecstasy* into your life.



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*.

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.

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.



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