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# Turning 'pointe': Adult ballet gains foothold in dance community

## Local ballet instructor sees diverse adult dancers at the barre

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By Dana Amihere

Like many adult dancers, Daniel Solomon had always admired and appreciated ballet, though he had never danced a step in his life.

"The understanding of the discipline one has by trying it and the respect and awe one has for dancers by doing it is different entirely," Solomon said.

Solomon, though, started attending ballet classes over a year after getting his Medicare card.

While Solomon isn't your typical dancer — for his lack of experience, age or gender — he and the scores of adults like him with a desire to dance later in life are becoming more the norm than the exception.

Kathy Mata, a former ballerina and dance teacher now in her 60s, has helped contribute to the recent trend before it was trendy.

Mata, who has taught ballet since 1985, has specialized in teaching adults since 1995 at San Francisco's Alonzo King LINES Dance Center.

"I felt adults weren't being trained in a very serious way," Mata said. Her students would tell her, "I went to a studio, and I'm the only adult."

Today, The LINES Dance Center offers 80 adult classes a week, catering to the raw beginner, the professional and everyone in between.

"It's an art form that's accessible for anyone to start at any time in their lives," said Robin Anderson, director of the LINES Dance Center.

Pilates instructor Karen Goldstein, and one of Mata's many students, said, "It means a lot to me that there's someone who really wants to teach adults ballet. Just because we're not little kids and we don't have a career in front of us doesn't mean we don't love to dance."

So where did all the adult dancers come from?

"It just happened. It seems like it's building itself. As there are more adults (dancing), there are more classes," recreational dancer Celeste Hall, 50, posits.

Others attribute the growth to exposure, popularity and acceptability on a larger scale.

According to the American College of Sports Medicine's annual report of the top 20 worldwide fitness trends, dance workouts ranked No. 9 in 2012, making the "it" list for the first time.

Survey respondents, over half ages 22-54 years old, have consistently favored workouts which strengthen and tone the entire body. Strength training (No. 2), fitness programs for older adults (No. 3) and core training (No. 7) have been on the rise since 2007 while mind/body exercise, yoga and pilates have fallen out of favor or off the list completely.

Dancers have long been admired for their lithe limbs, taut muscles and regal posture. Although women and men have been ditching their yoga mats and spinning classes for years, the trend has gone more mainstream in recent years.

The New York Times reported last year that there are at least 10 ballet-based workout studios in Manhattan alone. Franchise gyms all over the country, such as Equinox and Crunch, continue to add barre-centered workouts like Pure Barre, Barre Assets and the Bar Method to their class offerings.

In 2011, actress Natalie Portman snagged an Oscar for her leading role in the psychological thriller "Black Swan," a role for which she trained for more than a year before hitting the set. The Christmastime favorite "The Nutcracker" packs theaters with sold-out crowds worldwide every year. And Beatle Paul McCartney even debuted his first ballet in New York last year.

"Interest in ballet is perhaps as high now as it has been since (Russian dancer) Rudolf Nureyev

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defected to the United States (during the Cold War),” wrote Raymond Beauchmin in The National.

Nevertheless, this change in public opinion has been a long time coming. For years, professional athletes have taken ballet classes to enhance their speed, agility and flexibility. Seeing your favorite 250-pound linebacker or muscular goalkeeper in tights suddenly makes ballet seem less dorky.

University of Bath computer science student David Wilson, who decided to take up ballet at age 23, agrees that stereotypes – especially for men – have been eschewed by popular culture.

“I think Billy Elliot was a huge step forward for male dancers (at whatever age),” said Wilson, a former triathlete with no childhood dance experience. “Having people like Ryan Gosling ‘admit’ to taking ballet class certainly makes it easier to tell people.”

Hall echoed, “Society’s getting more and more relaxed about that sort of thing. People aren’t so worried about roles it seems.”

Perhaps one of the most controversial issues in adult dancing is the level to which adults are “supposed” to progress.

Adults dancing en pointe is a schismatic issue in the ballet community. As children aren’t permitted to begin pointe work until age 10 or 11, when their feet bones are healthiest, adults are often considered dogs too old to learn new tricks. Propriety, however, doesn’t seem to register with dancers like Dawn Ma.

An architect and engineer, Ma trained until instructor Mata felt she could handle the rigors of pointe work. With a body going on age 30, “She worked with what I had,” said Ma. “She really understands how an adult body works, the limitations but also the possibilities.”

John Wyatt, a middle-aged client services representative with a spare tire parked in his mid-section, is even more of an anomaly. In Michelle Ortega’s short documentary “Adult Beginner Ballet,” Wyatt describes the difficulty of finding a teacher who would teach a man pointe.

“Do you know any place an elderly male can learn ballet?,” he inquired at studio after studio. Though he thought ballet was “girls’ stuff” as a kid, today, he enthusiastically says his pink pointe shoes “rock.”

Today, the number of opportunities for adult ballet dancers has risen. Establishments like the adult-centric The Studio in Brookline, Mass., only teach pupils 18 years or older and boast that, unlike studios which intermingle adults with teens, adults aren’t an “afterthought.”

Ballet instructor Sharon Werth, who currently lives and teaches in University Park, says she has seen a transformation in the dance community and the adults who choose to dance.

While studying dance at California State University at Long Beach, Werth’s major was a part of the physical education department.

“And just as I was leaving it moved to the arts department,” Werth said.

Similarly, Werth attributes the increasing diversity of adult dancers to men and women whose maturity makes them feel less threatened by the barre.

“I studied (dance) from a very technical aspect, but there’s also a very spiritual aspect. If somebody feels that there is a dancer inside them then they shouldn’t be afraid to search for it,” Werth said.

One of Werth’s students, Hall, began dancing in 2005. A transgender who was in transition from male to female, Hall said that ballet “gave (her) permission to do something fun in (her) life, even if (she) was bad at it.”

Being with people who are doing dancing for the same reasons – for fun, recreation and “me” time – makes taking classes much more comfortable, Hall said.

“Fifteen-(year-olds), 17-year-olds still have the idea that they’re going to make a living in dance, that they’re going to be Baryshnikov,” Hall joked.

Nevertheless, there is an increasing number of performance and intensive training programs for adults.

Camp isn’t just for kids anymore.

Sun King Summer Dance Intensives run by Heidi Winston-Stahle give adults with some training the chance to dance all-day, everyday for one week. From pointe to pas de deux (male-female partner dancing), men and women from all over the world descend upon Richmond, Va., Saratoga, N.Y., Waldorf, Md., and Vancouver for “adult dance camp.”

“As a mature dancer, I have no aspirations to be a professional dancer, but I do enjoy the artistry of learning how to potentially be that way, and it’s the only place that really takes our artistry seriously regardless of the level that you’re at,” said Gigi Volk, of Orange County, Calif.

But for adults who dream of being on stage, Kathy Mata Ballet dance company is a viable option dancing eight shows per year. Founded in 1988, it is one of the only adult dance companies in the country to offer non-professionals performance opportunities. On top of full-time jobs as graphic designers, engineers, teachers, statisticians and entrepreneurs, the 11 dancers rehearse four times a week.

Urban planner/designer and company dancer Claire Vlach said, “I dance because it allows me to escape from day-to-day stresses. I like that dancing is a physical activity with an aesthetic component. Unlike most sports, it’s not about winning – it’s about creating something beautiful.”

Be it a creative outlet, a retreat from life’s stresses or a childhood dream deferred, adult dancers are not only more accepted but also more widespread. And that’s just fine with them.

“If it fulfills that need in them, even if they may not ‘look’ like a dancer, it’s still a very positive thing, and they shouldn’t be judgmental of themselves,” Werth said. “If it gives them satisfaction then that’s what they should do, that’s what they need to do for themselves.”

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