

What School? What Style?

If you want to be a dancer, is it imperative to go to a full-time dance school? How do you get in? (And what if you don't?) The buzzword these days is diversity – and we're not talking about the street-dance crew – so what about different dance styles? As boundaries between genres blur, dancers are expected to be able to switch from one style to another in quick succession. Our dancers talk about the value of a broad dance education and a great teacher, and why, even if you're a b-boy, perhaps you should learn ballet as well.

I think dance schools are looking for raw potential, I don't think they're looking for a finished product. It's a canvas that they can work on. **Lauren Cuthbertson**

I hadn't done a dance class prior to going to the Brit School, but I did gymnastics and I had a natural knack for dance. I was fortunate – my pointed foot was pretty much a flex at the time, but they saw that there was potential. **Teneisha Bonner**

To get into dance school you need to do your research. Look at all the schools and their past students and see if there are people you recognise that have been through that system. You also need to be realistic about what you've got to offer. You need some outside advice about what your strengths are to find the right school for you. **Aaron Sillis**

I should have it tattooed on my forehead that the Royal Ballet School is not the only school. Many great dancers did not go there. We've had a lot of kids come to us saying, 'I didn't get into the Royal Ballet School, my dance career is over.' And we say, hang on, there are other schools, there are other places, other countries. **Cassa Pancho**

I did ballet as a hobby till I was sixteen, one day a week after school. But then I got it into my head that I wanted a career in ballet. I wasn't accepted in the Royal Ballet School. I ended up going to Elmhurst and I was told I had the wrong body after my first year, that I was totally unsuitable for ballet. It left me distraught, my dreams shattered. Then I left and trained privately for ten months in Athens. At eighteen, I did an audition class for the Royal Ballet and got my contract on the spot. It wasn't self-belief, it was a desire to prove people wrong. People told me I couldn't do it so I was like, 'I will find a way.' **Melissa Hamilton**

There are many different routes to becoming a dancer and they don't all have to be conventional. So if you get a knock-back, if you don't get into the school that you wanted to go to, or the path to being a dancer seems obstructed – which is what happened to me – find another way. **Kate Prince**

We don't audition people who haven't done a proper formal training of at least three years at one of the recognised dance colleges. **Matthew Bourne**

I used to think going to vocational dance school was more important, but now I'm encountering people that trained in Shaolin kung fu and rhythmic gymnastics. The titans of modern dance techniques – Cunningham and Graham – are starting to slide away. Ballet is fairly

constant. I think whatever your practice you should touch base with ballet. Don't be scared of it. If you're scared of it you've got the wrong teacher. **Jonathan Goddard**

There are so many syllabuses. Cecchetti is an incredibly strong syllabus for classical ballet, for a professional, in the long term it really sets you up. RAD has a very good basis to start you off. But it's often really down to the teacher, not just the syllabus. Get recommendations, and don't get stuck with one teacher. I did a lot of outside classes which really opened my mind. **Darcey Bussell**

One of the things that's really helped in my seventeen-year career is diversity. I don't want to pigeonhole myself. To broaden my scope of working with different choreographers I've had to be a chameleon. I would have cut off a lot of opportunities and relationships if I hadn't approached dance like that. **Teneisha Bonner**

Experience as many dance styles as possible. Try them all. You might have an idea of one style of dance that's inspired you, but don't limit yourself to that. **Darcey Bussell**

It doesn't matter how you start. I did social dance – ballroom and Latin American and disco. That was my training. **Wayne McGregor**

I started off with freestyle disco dancing. I loved the freedom. It was just moving to music and rhythm and getting that into your body. It wasn't very technical, but I think it was a good start. When I got to high school we did ballet, contemporary, Greek dancing and flamenco. It was a fantastic combination. Flamenco taught you about rhythm, power and attack, and playing your body like an instrument. And ballet is the bible. You can't not have it. **Arthur Pita**

I did jazz, that's how I got good at turning and picking up steps. Tap is good for musicality and understanding how you can play with phrasing. When I came to ballet school I thought, 'This is very slow and hard and tedious.' It's good to do modern classes, some free dancing to change it up. **Matthew Golding**

For a classical dancer it's incredibly important to do contemporary, because it will only assist your classical dance. **Darcey Bussell**

I think the demands on dancers are much greater than ever. At one time dancers weren't expected to do so many different styles. When I was first teaching in London I used to get a lot of the Royal Ballet dancers coming to my rock-jazz classes in secret. Nowadays the classical dancers are exploring all kinds of contemporary dance and the dancers are being pushed beyond the limits, not just of the body but of the mind. **Arlene Phillips**

Become versatile. So that whatever movement style you meet you're able to adapt. So that you're able to do more with your body, with your energy. I was never great at ballet, but I appreciate that it gives me something, strength, a way of looking at the body and aligning it, a richness. There are a lot of dancers out there and a lot of competition, so the more you keep your options open, the better. **Hofesh Shechter**

The thing I say most often to the boys at our school is that they need to become more diverse and they need to learn ballet and technique and gymnastics and work on their agility. For girls, in the hip-hop/commercial industry, I say learn how to dance on the floor, do a bit of breaking, learn a trick. And don't rely on just being sexy, because that's boring. **Kate Prince**

I took myself off to ballet when I was fifteen at my local school to get some more technique. The teacher said, 'You can come to do ballet, but you have to start at the bottom,' so I was in the class with the six-year-olds, which was funny. I didn't really care. It was all part of the process of training. I knew that it was important to train as much as I could. **Maxine Doyle**

In musical theatre, dancers need to have a basic technique, a strong ballet technique. I remember hating it at first, but it taught me how to do pirouettes, how to spot, how to turn. It's basic training: find your centre. And it's great for your posture. **Stephen Mear**

In musical theatre, it happens time and time again that you get the most phenomenal dancers and then the musical director will say, 'Sorry, you've got a "D" voice and we can't put you on a mic.' Dancers who want to do musical theatre have to remember the big picture, they have to be able to sing and they have to work on it equally as hard as they do their dancing. **Arlene Phillips**

Going to stage school, doing ballet and contemporary, that's a much more institutionalised kind of schooling. From a hip-hop/street-dance perspective you have to live it, be going to classes, going to battles, going to the underground events. That's a different kind of schooling, that's a cultural kind of schooling. **Kenrick Sandy**

I used to teach six or seven days a week all over London, save my money, and then go out to New York, LA or Paris with all my savings, for a week at a time, to do class every day. It's great. It throws you in at the deep end and you learn from lots of people. **Kate Prince**

I did a degree in Dance and English, then I applied for an MA, and in the interim I just did everything I could, loads of independent training, loads of classes and workshops. Not just dance, but writing courses and poetry courses and seeing lots of art. I remember reading something Martha Graham said about educating yourself as an artist constantly. And I remember reading somewhere that Pina Bausch used to listen to eight hours of classical music a day. Everything informs you as a theatre-maker. **Maxine Doyle**

My first obstacle was how to combine academic education with ballet practice and I was very lucky because my mother wouldn't compromise. Unless I finished my studies I was not allowed to dance, and I will be forever grateful to her for that. It always concerns me to see that some dance schools think that's not important. A ballet career can be very, very short and you need to ensure you have a safety net, and your academic schooling is one of those safety nets. **Tamara Rojo**

Learning a classical art form can be boring to start off with. You can't always find the excitement, but hopefully a teacher will be able to give it to you. **Seeta Patel**

I did the Royal Ballet Junior Associate programme at eight and the summer school – which is quite intense when you're nine or ten years old. I didn't enjoy all of it. I found Junior Associates so boring. For me, the brutal training of dance rained on my imaginative parade. And so I would be naughty and rebel and then get told off. The freedom I had in my old ballet school to be able to just dance around is what kept me going. **Lauren Cuthbertson**

My very first teacher taught me to be fearless, to turn faster, jump higher. 'You can jump higher than that!' she would say. 'Why can't you do the splits?' So I would

stretch every day until I could do the splits. There was never any question, it was, 'Just do it.' I remember aged eight she was teaching me double *tours en l'air*. I just threw myself around. A lot of dancers lose that freedom. **Steven McRae**

My teacher picked me out and there was an instant trust, instant belief, a connection. It's important for you to be listened to. With a teacher, if you don't trust that person, it won't work. I've seen dancers work with certain people and get worse. It's so important for a dancer to have a good coach. **Melissa Hamilton**

I was never top of the class, the teacher's pet. I had a lot of ups and downs, but I had teachers that held on to me and said, 'I believe in you. Let's give it another go.' **Matthew Golding**

I was told by teachers that I would never be a dancer, but I knew that dancing was what I wanted to make my life. I went to university and I was dancing with other like-minded, self-taught people. No, I didn't go to a well-known college, but I got a lot of hands-on experience. Don't let someone tell you that you can't, there's always a way. You might not be the prima ballerina – you might end up being a dance teacher or a choreographer – but you can still make dance your life if that's what you're passionate about. **Kate Prince**

A Word on Pointe Shoes

Don't start pointe work too soon. If you start too soon your legs aren't strong enough for it and you end up going up using your feet, rather than it being your leg muscles that are lifting you. **Lauren Cuthbertson**

Get good shoes that fit you properly. Don't just wear anything off the shelf, ask questions. **Tamara Rojo**

With pointe work, you go through the pain, but there are tips. To prepare for pointe work, if you can bathe your feet in a bucket of water with a couple of capfuls of surgical spirit, it hardens up the skin. And I use a toe pad. When I was younger it was animal wool – you mould it around your foot. **Lauren Cuthbertson**

I remember at school the teachers talking to the girls about not wearing anything in their pointe shoes. Now that my feet are battered old things I'd just say, go through it. **Jonathan Goddard**

I've always learned from what the more experienced dancers do. I remember when I was studying in Spain, Carole Arbo, who was an étoile at the Paris Opera, came as a guest artist and we stole a pair of her pointe shoes – well, she threw them in a bin and we took them and studied them. Now I cut the back of the sole to three quarters, I empty the glue from the sides of the shoes so they're not so stiff. I shellac the front so they are hard where I'm on pointe. **Tamara Rojo**

You have to bang your shoes, to make them less noisy, but that's only for shows. That can make your shoes softer, so if you're training and you're on a budget, you don't want to be banging them to death. **Lauren Cuthbertson**

I remember trying out a thousand ways to tape up my toes so they wouldn't get sore, but in the end I realised the way was just to go through the pain until you become used to it. It's just one of those sacrifices you have to go through for ballet. You've just got to suck it up, that's normally my advice. **Cassa Pancho**

Darning pointe shoes is so time-consuming, but I think the minute you don't care to sew your shoes for the next day, is the minute you don't really care about dancing. I find it quite calming – unless it's five minutes before the *Sleeping Beauty* and you're about to do the Rose Adagio. **Lauren Cuthbertson**