

Ballet/exercise class forces body into shape

By ELAINE JUSTICE
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"One, two, in, out, back, plie, seven, eight."

The combinations seem endless. And I am in agony. Muscles straining, excess poundage bulging, the beginning intermediate ballet class at Bounds Dance Studio grinds through another series of steps to whip the body into shape.

"Beginning intermediate is a fairly new category," says studio instructor M'Liss Dorrance. "It's for people who've had dance training but maybe haven't done it for several years."

That's me. Once or twice a week, I join a class of out-of-shape former dancers who do stretches, bends and lifts that would make a quarterback wince. Why do they do it? I ask myself over and over as I rush into the three-foot wide cluttered studio dressing room where five women in leotards are talking. Trying to edge around them, I trip over a low bench and into a wall of shelves, coats and coat hangers. As I undress under a nearby coat, I listen to the women, eager to check out the competition.

"I'm exhausted. I just came from work. I had to fix dinner for the kids and drop them off before I came." Yes, we're noble, I think, and we're going to enjoy our martyrdom while it lasts.

I hope for the best as I step into the hall, feeling like a masquerader in tights and ballet slippers. Class members are bunched around the studio door, looking in on the advanced ballet class. Women whisper about Mrs. Dorrance, the teacher:

"She must be dead. She's taught at Duke all day long."

"She teaches at Duke, then teaches here all night?"

"Yup."

"Good grief."

She moves effortlessly through eight more counts. Dancers leap across the floor, following her lead. "Don't land so hard, lightly, lightly, Dorine. That's the way." The music stops and the class applauds, sweaty faces blank with exhaustion.

Now it's our turn. We walk into the large bright room and line up next to the walls. Everyone clutches the barre, a misplaced bannister running the length of the room, and everyone sneaks uncertain looks at the mirror on the opposite wall.

Mrs. Dorrance breezes in, tells us to call her M'Liss and calls the roll while would-be dancers stare at their toes or touch them if they can. We begin with simple plies and stretches in first and second position. Predictably, I am stiff. My body has been in mothballs for years.

"Tell yourself it's all right up here," says M'Liss pointing to her head, "and everything else will be O.K." I lift my chin and try a little harder.

"If you're not professional-minded," says M'Liss between classes, "if you don't have that enthusiasm to strive for the best even though some of the people you see will never be dancers, something's missing even then." I'm amazed that though M'Liss Dorrance has been a professional dancer, she hasn't lost enthusiasm for the unglamorous classroom. Her credits include a summer scholarship studying with the Joffrey Ballet and stints with the National Ballet Company and the now defunct American Ballet Company founded by Eliot Feld. The present-day Eliot Feld Ballet Company is smaller but just as prestigious as the New York City Ballet.

"I was rehearsing and performing in one of Lew Christensen's new ballets at the opening of the Kennedy Center," she says. "Then a local group in Alexandria, Va., hired a bunch of us through their recreation department as an active part of their humanities program. The real bread-and-butter of the program was our work with the school systems. We taught elementary ballet to all the schools." The recreation department formed a company for the dancers, who sponsored creative workshops between performances. "All the members of the company taught," says M'Liss. "It was then I learned the difference between teaching the creative movement versus making it."

"I actually like the job. It was nice being in one area for a change. When I was with the company, we'd go to three different cities a week and do a series of one-night stands. It got so I wasn't sure whether I was being an artist or not."

She seems sure about teaching. "I love it," she says. But she had already put an end to her professional days after chipping her ankle twice in a row. "I fell with my ankle twisted under me." Then she did it again about a month later. "It took me three to four months to really get back into dancing shape."

In beginning intermediate class, M'Liss removes her shoe. "Let me show you how to point your toes with the foot I can point," she says. Is her other foot that bad? She tells me after class that it is. Dancers have a short professional life, she says, because the strain of day-in-day-out practice wears the body out. "After awhile, your body just says 'No.'" Lynne Shackelford, an advanced student with years of ballet training, agreed. "Sometimes after class I can hardly move, but it's worth it." Why? "Because I forget everything when I dance. I just sort of let myself get involved in the movement, and I don't think about anything."



Anything? I think plenty about how my body is taking all this — the bending, the straining to bring that leg up one more inch into a mediocre arabesque, a position with one leg extended into the air.

"You look like you have stomach flu," says M'Liss as she demonstrates a movement with a lifted torso instead of a collapsed one. We grin sheepishly and try the step again. Everyone tries again and again, sometimes with no seeming improvement. "Sometimes it's painful," says M'Liss of would-be dancers. "They work so hard, and you know they have no ear for the music and no feel for it." The ones who do have a 'feel for it' go to special schools or get scholarships to study with professional companies during the summer. "We send the promising ones to N.C. School of the Arts in Winston-Salem. It's sort of a professional setting." There students take regular classes supplemented by special classes catering to their artistic talents. A young dancer might have two or three ballet classes a day in addition to a regular workload.

I shake my head, not believing the dedication a serious dancer must have, wondering why I'm even here. Why do we try so hard. I ask M'Liss. What makes working women, mothers, wives come here? "Adults are less and less afraid to do it," she says. "It's becoming more and more accepted." She notes the increased enrollment in evening classes for beginners. "It's not like it used to be. People used to discourage you if they thought you weren't going to cut it."

But now they are here, and many of them are seeing results. I've read articles claiming ballet can actually change the body shape. I tell M'Liss. "Oh sure," she says. "With proper training your entire body makeup can be turned around." She doesn't mean once a week training. Like any exercise, dance cannot tone muscles unless it's done constantly. Even three times a week is not enough, although M'Liss says she sees tremendous difference in pupils who take twice a week.

As our class ends, I see our assignment on the bulletin board. "SEE *The Turning Point* THIS WEEK." I ask about companies touring the area and get ready response. My classmates follow professional ballet. "Once you get it into your system," says an intermediate beginner, "you can't stand to go without it. After a few days you get this itch," to dance and to see dance.

"You're more than what you are when you dance," M'Liss says. "You become a performer." She doesn't find the tremendous growth of local and regional dance surprising for that reason. "But there are no dance critics," she says shrugging. Dance has to be encouraged, recognized, applauded for its excellence or shot down for its ineptness, she says. We discuss how we read the many local advance stories that appear before a company comes, only to wait in vain for a critical article to appear after a performance. "We need someone to write about dance," she says.

I am glad everyone has left as I nod, smile and head for the dressing room. That's what I want to do.

