

# DANCE TRAINING:

## *A Tool for Developing Academic Skills*

Dance integrates body, art and intellect. It provides students with one of life's most valuable tools for survival: discipline

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By Vicki L. Blake

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**T**here is a popular misconception that dance training is a marginal academic pursuit, doing little to aid the student in the development of academic skills. Dancers work and express themselves physically in their art, but the physical mastery of the instrument depends largely upon the simultaneous development of a whole cadre of intellectual skills. Because these intellectual skills do not include expressing oneself in written form, much of the academic society discounts the courses for intellectual development.

There are, however, many skills to be gained in dance training which are highly valued in academic circles: the development of strong concentration skills, observational/analytical abilities, attention to detail, the ability to rapidly perceive patterns and whole units of information, knowledge of the instrument, and how it most efficiently functions, the understanding of the musical, theatrical, and aesthetic elements. All are critical to the development of the dancer, much more important than physical prowess.

The dancer simultaneously works both intellectually and physically. Both sides must be developed if the dancer is to master the instrument and to perform with sensitivity. The dancer is required to "know", to understand, to assimilate on two levels. The intellectual knowledge usually precedes the kinetic knowledge. The mind is much nimbler than the body. The discipline of the art form is working unceasingly until the body "knows" what the intellect has perceived.

The dancer must "know" intellectually and kinetically how the

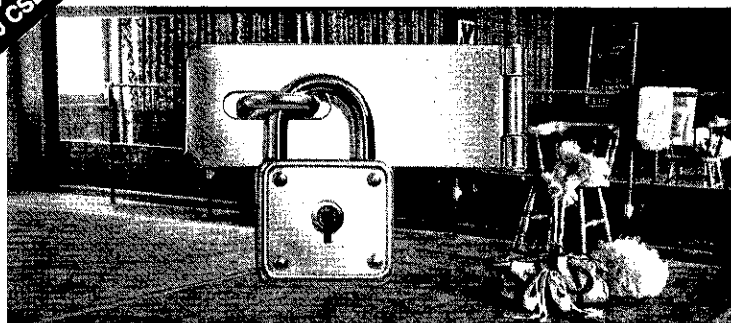
body works most efficiently and safely. The dancer must understand and utilize basic concepts of human anatomy and physiology. A dancer must learn a new language, a vocabulary of words and corresponding movements which form the basis for the various dance performance styles. A dancer must understand with great precision the line, texture, dynamic shadings, motivation, initiating element, time quality, spatial orientation, and musical relationship of any movement.

In order to perceive and rapidly assimilate all of this, the dancer must develop strong concentration skills and excellent analytical abilities. If the mind is to rapidly analyze, memorize and assimilate all of these elements which make up any *single* dance movement and then put all of these single movements together in phrases and whole works, the dancer must be an incredibly keen observer of others and self.

If the dancer is to succeed, strong concentration skills are essential. Any lapse in concentration will result in either a sketchy, inadequate perception of the per-

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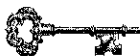


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## ACADEMIC SKILLS

formed movement, improper performance of the movement, or both. Any lack of concentration is exposed almost immediately not only to the teacher but also to the student and, indeed, the whole class when the student attempts to perform the movements. Dancers develop the ability to work with great concentration for extended periods of time.

Most classes run 1 1/2 to 2 hours and one spends nearly the entire time concentrating either on the instructor's movement and comments or on applying that information to oneself. In a dance class, the teacher presents a series of problems and every student must answer every question. Daydreamers are rapidly exposed!

Analytical and observational skills are developed simultaneously with concentration skills. When the instructor presents even a single movement the student must almost simultaneously observe and analyze in great detail a large quantity of information. The dancer must perceive and assimilate every detail of:

- The line or shape of the movement. Where exactly are the eyes, feet, knees, elbows, torso?
- The spatial orientation of the movement. Exactly in which direction(s) does the movement face and move? Where in the space of the studio and in relation to other movements should it be performed?
- The initiating element of the movement. Which body part initiates the movement? Does it begin in the feet, torso, shoulder, hip, knee, head?
- The musical relationship or timing quality of the movement. When should the movement be initiated? How long should it continue? Should it have a sustained or sudden quality?
- The texture and dynamic shading of the movement. Is the movement strong or light, heavy or limp, direct or flexible in focus, free or bound in flow? Should it float, punch, press, wring, flick, swing, suspend, drop, dab?
- The relationship of the movement to the phrase. How is the movement most fluidly and efficiently connected with movements before and after it? Which movement is the high point of the phrase? Where are the accents?
- The proper use of the instrument. How can the movement be done most effi-

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## ACADEMIC SKILLS

ciently and safely by the human body?

- The motivation for the movement. Why is the movement important? Why was this movement chosen? What aspects are to be emphasized?

All of this is observed, analyzed, and memorized in a few seconds in an advanced class, yet greatest difficulty for the dancer still lies ahead. The information must also be assimilated immediately and applied to their often unwilling or unable instrument. The dancer must master the instrument, must work unceasingly until the body will perform what the mind has perceived, analyzed, and memorized.

The mastery of the technique is, however, but the very beginning—the base of the mountain for a dancer. All of these abilities must become second nature. The unnatural must become the natural. In a rehearsal situation, mastery of technique is assumed. There is little time for working on skills as the dancer must now assimilate and memorize movement much more rapidly. Phrase upon phrase are taught in succession. Intellectual and analytical skills are pushed to their limits.

Dancers develop even more quickness in memorization/assimilation skills as a result, and the material must still be memorized with conciseness and much attention to detail.

Yet another transition remains. The work must move from the rehearsal hall to the stage. A new task awaits the dancers. Now they must transcend the movement. The movement must have become so much a natural part of the dancer that energy can be spent in becoming a character, in taking on a certain quality, in evoking a certain attitude, or in enjoying and relishing the movement for its own sake. The dancer's conscious effort must be directed toward the aesthetic, artistic, spiritual, and/or emotional qualities of the movement. A dancer who cannot transcend the movement is sterile and lifeless on stage.

Only when all of these abilities are developed will the dancer succeed. A strong, well-proportioned, supple instrument is a great value to the potential dancer, but only if the intellectual/academic skills and artistic/aesthetic sensitivities can be developed. One without the others is of no value.

The intellectual abilities which a

dancer develops simultaneously with and more often before mastery of the physical instrument are surely assets in pursuing other areas of academic interest. Learning to dance implies learning to concentrate, to observe, to analyze, to perceive patterns, to assimilate whole units of information rapidly, to become sensitive to fine detail and artistic concerns, to work for long term goals with great dedication and discipline. Are these not skills to be desired as results from all the academic learning, skills which would aid a student in any discipline?

Dance as an art form and as an academic discipline deserves recognition for its *integration* of the intellectual and spiritual with the physical, for its potential for developing the *whole* person—artistically, physically, and academically.

Vicki L. Blake was instrumental in the development of the dance component of the theatre/dance program at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. She is Artistic Director of Danceworks, the student touring company at the college, and also freelances as a choreographer.