

**How To Find
THE BEST
Dance School
for Your Dancer**

*by Natasha Brooksher
of Southwest Classical Dance Institute*

*Dedicated to the students of dance
and their parents,
who support the expression of art
through this medium*

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About The Authors



Natasha Brooksher

Mrs. Brooksher grew up in Woodbury, CT and received her Vaganova based ballet training at Nutmeg Ballet and graduated Valedictorian of her class, both in ballet and academically from Nonnewaug High School.

She also received honors in competition on the local, national and international levels.

Mrs. Brooksher's career included performing for Boston Ballet, Fort Worth/Dallas Ballet, and Ballet Arizona.

She enjoyed working with leading choreographers such as Paul Taylor, Twyla Tharp, Elisa Monte, Eliot Feld and Lyla York.

Some of the world's masters, including Tatiana Legat, Natalia Dudinskaya, Sergei Berejnoi, Vladimir Kolesnikov, Suki Schorer, Vicki Simon, Ben Stevenson and Caroline Llorca, made a huge impact on her stylistic sensibilities, especially in the classical repertoire.

During her performing career, Natasha taught as a guest teacher and coach at Nutmeg Conservatory for the Arts, Boston Ballet School, New York International Ballet Competition, as well as several schools in the Phoenix area.

She shares her life, career, and passion for dance with her husband Joshua Brooksher.

Visit their dance studio on the web at www.swcdi.com

Introduction

Finding the right dance studio or school can become a difficult process. What begins as a seemingly simple question of looking through the Yellow Pages for the closest studio with the biggest advertisement soon turns into an endless list of questions and concerns:

- Will my child have fun?
- What about safety?
- Will my child receive training that compliments his/her goals?
- Will I pay a fair price?
- What is good training?
- How do I tell if I have found a good teacher?
- What are the criteria for a good facility?
- Will my child have an enriching experience?

The list goes on.

These are all valid questions, and parents are justified in their concerns about the dance school they choose for their children.

After all, dance teachers have the potential to play a pivotal role in the physical and emotional development of their students, and with that should come a feeling of great responsibility.

In addition, the dance teachers of today are directly responsible for the face of the dance world of tomorrow — they are creating the dancers, teachers and artists who will continue to develop this art form in the future.

One of the common complaints we hear at our studio is the length of time and frustration often required to find the right studio.

By thoroughly analyzing the situation, we realized that one only needed to ask the right questions to eliminate frustration and ease the difficulty of the process.

But what are the right questions to ask?

This book tells you.

How to Find the Right School for Your Child

The first step to finding the right studio is discovering what your child wants. Talk with your child and find out what his/her goals, dreams or desires are with respect to dance.

If the focus is amusement and being with friends, and no serious aspirations are mentioned, then your goal will be to find more of a recreational studio.

However, if your child absolutely loves to dance — eats, thinks, sleeps and dreams dance — and has aspirations of a professional career, either on stage as a teacher or choreographer, then your goal is to find a professional training program.

Once you know what kind of a school you are looking for, it will be much easier to find it. This may sound silly, but too many people begin simply looking for a dance studio. It's easy to be impressed with rows of trophies and only a fool would fail to present his studio as the one for you.

By knowing the right questions to ask, you will no longer be impressed, until you hear the answers that fit your needs. And the best part of all, you'll no longer be looking for another studio every one to two years.

When Choosing a Dance Studio...

When choosing a dance school, make sure that you research the different training programs they have available and that they coincide with yours and your child's expectations of what you are looking for.

There are hundreds of small dance studios all over the United States which offer recreational type programs, some which also offer participation in an

“dance-sport” competitions.

However, there are precious few schools which offer professional level training programs or who have qualified professional teachers capable of equipping their students with the level of mastery required by the professional arena.

Regardless of what your child’s goals are, however, high level instruction should always be a top priority. Quality education in dance is the basis for a fulfilling experience on any level.

Is There a Difference Between a Dance School and a Commercial Studio?

Classical dance training is based on the study of classical ballet, which is the basis for the other styles of classical dance. Other types of “classical” dance training include jazz, tap, modern, flamenco, and character/folk/national dance. Schools of classical dance focus on proficiency, artistry and good taste, offering only one or two performances annually. Most of these kind of schools are non-profit organizations that show a clear vision and mission for their charitable purpose and artistic philosophy.

Commercial dance generally consists of “Las Vegas” or “Los Angeles” style jazz---the kind you see in music videos, hip-hop, popping, and break dancing. They often offer low-quality classes in the classical dance styles listed above.

These studios focus on producing multiple pieces for several competition performances a year, as well as a yearly recital. Very often (not always), these studios allow inappropriate costumes, music content or unsuitable choreography. These kinds of studios are most often for-profit entities that do not focus on public works or their impact on community culture.

Sometimes you can determine the orientation of a studio from the organizations of which the directors are members. Most non-profit studios are members of several arts organizations.

Is There Really Any Difference in the Training from One Studio to the Next?

Well rounded dance programs should offer an array of classes with the main focus on classical ballet: ballet technique, pointe, variations/repertoire, pas de deux, character, mime, choreography, modern, stretch/strength, Pilates, modern, jazz or even music lessons. All of these classes contribute to some aspect of training a well rounded, well informed dancer.

Some schools also incorporate an end of program performance, so rehearsals in preparation for that would also be a part of the schedule. Performing should not be the focal point, however; learning and increasing knowledge should be the main objective, as there will be plenty of time for performing later.

Your child's placement in a new school should be age appropriate with a professional training program. For example, if your child is 13, and is able to enter a studio in the top grade, there obviously is not much room for your child to improve or reach his/her full potential. It's fine to be at the top of class, but not at the top of the school, unless *age* and *qualifications* dictate that.

Basic hallmarks of good training are:

- Proper placement and focus on correct fundamentals
- Emphasis on correct execution of steps, with focus on clean lines, strength and stability, rather than high kicks and flashy tricks (They come in time with proper coaching).
- Technical proficiency of a majority of students in the school, not just

select few

- Students' low occurrence of injury
- Success of graduating students in the professional arena or university scholarship awards

Is There Something that Helps to Prevent Injury?

The two most important factors in injury prevention are proper instruction with a qualified and experienced professional, and the proper dance floor. Research the injury rate at the school. If its high it means the training and floors are inadequate.

We will address the issue of finding the right training/teacher a little later

Quality dance floors are “sprung” and covered with Marley.

A sprung dance floor does not actually have springs in the floor, but rather high density foam incorporated into its design. Usually the sub floor is the concrete foundation, above that lie sections of the high density foam.

High grade plywood is then laid over the foam to spread out the impact. Marley covering is then put on top of the plywood to prevent slipping and even out the dance surface.

The high density foam absorbs the shock of landing from high jumps and repeated impact on the body. This relieves the majority of pressure and the impact on joints, ligaments and muscles.

In addition to absorbing the energy of the impact, the high grade plywood floor also relieves stress on the body by not rebounding back immediately. This prevents a counter force on the body after landing.

It also makes the dancer use their own power to push off the floor rather than using the spring of the floor. This aids in creating muscle strength and control.

Without a sprung floor, the types of injuries that are prevalent include: Achilles tendonitis, plantar fasciitis, stress fractures of all bones of the lower legs, and ankles, knee cartilage damage, lower back pain, hip pain.

A myriad of other injuries occur that are not directly related, such as sprain ankles, shin splints or heel/ankle spurs, because of tight muscles in the leg created from dancing on a floor that is too hard.

If a floor does not have Marley covering, floors should be wood that is not coated with varnish or polyurethane to keep the floor surface from being too slippery.

Usually rosin is allowed on wood floors in order to prevent slipping. Some studios who do have Marley do not allow rosin on the floor in order to prolong the life of the Marley.

However, if the studio temperature is too cold, the pores in the Marley surface shrink creating a very slippery surface. As a result, most professional training schools do allow a small amount of rosin on the Marley floors.

Without a proper dance floor surface, injuries such as chronically pulled or strained inner thigh muscles, calves and muscles of the feet are common due to the body's efforts to keep from slipping.

Injuries such as strained shin/peroneal muscles or sprained ankles can be common due to slipping.

Dance studio flooring should never be tile, concrete, Pergo, linoleum or asphalt tile. No dance floor should be directly on a concrete sub floor.

How Can I Tell if I Have Found a Good Teacher?

When deciding on a dance school, make sure to do research on the faculty who will be teaching your child.

It is probably safe to assume the bigger schools will have reputable teachers who will undoubtedly have had professional level training in dance, a professional performing career, and sometimes university schooling and/or teacher training.

However, these credentials do not guarantee a teacher who will teach well. *Reputation and the success of former students are the biggest factors in evaluating teachers.*

It is of utmost importance for teachers to have themselves been schooled in the methodology they teach.

Good teachers will have reputations that speak to the quality of training they provide their students.

Reputable teachers also will not be shy about telling you/your child what is in their best interest, be it about specific training corrections, or advice about a particular event, school or program, whether you/your child like the answer they give you or not.

It is a good sign to see teachers, who give correction during classes. Expect to see them walking around and physically make corrections on students (especially younger classes), as opposed to simply spouting out combinations and leaving it at that.

Sometimes it is necessary for the teacher to relay unpleasant information, if it is in the student's best interests. Ask around---other parents and students are very good sources of this kind of information.

Are private lessons necessary?

Generally speaking, private lessons should only be necessary in preparation for a specific event, i.e. an audition video or final finishing rehearsals for a performance or competition, or to catch a student up to where they need to be for their age level if they have started late.

Excellent training and a teacher's keen eye during technique and pointe classes should adequately prepare students for the challenges they face during their exams, repertoire/choreography rehearsals and performances.

What Can I Expect to Pay for Good Dance Instruction?

Make sure that you research all of the fees associated with attending a particular studio.

Most studios allow for a predetermined number of classes per week depending on the classes for which you have registered.

Try to find a studio that has recreational classes offered on punch cards for a set amount of classes that you prepay for. That way you pay for only the classes your child takes, and you don't have to worry about makeup classes.

Many have set tuition rates that include all required classes for their more advanced/professional training programs.

However, tuition often does not include fees associated with performing: costume fees/rental, prop fees, production fees, rehearsal fees, company fees can all be costs associated with participating in a competition or yearly recital.

Depending on how many pieces your child is required or has been invited to perform in, these amounts can quickly add up to thousands of dollars a year.

Some schools, however, include all tuition fees and all performing/competition costs rolled into one monthly rate for their more serious professional program students.

What are the Ballet Buzz Words and Why Should I Be Careful of Them?

First, beware if the studio promotes that it offers several different techniques/styles of ballet (e.g. "a combination of Vaganova, Balanchine & Cecchetti"). This actually indicates that they are using buzz words as marketing tools.

Schools that offer different teaching methods are experimenting with their teaching methods, which can be dangerous to the physical well-being of the students. Also, learning more than one technique at the same time, especially in the early formative years, can be confusing for the student, as well as create thick and bulky muscles because of the differences in the training methods.

The Vaganova methodology of training classical dance is the strongest base from which a dancer can springboard into other avenues if they so choose.

All of the truly great ballerinas and premier danseurs of the last century have come from this training.

Dancers of this caliber have been able to dance in any company across the globe, no matter what was asked of them by the choreography.

The Vaganova method uses a very specific, detailed and scientific approach to training the muscles and bodies of students to accomplish clean and graceful lines, and great technical fireworks.

Vaganova also incorporates a philosophy in the training of giving of oneself which develops the student in body, mind and spirit. It is a method which provides a true mastery, within which lies the ability of connection through individual expression.

Finding schools and teachers who accurately and successfully train students in the Vaganova method can be a challenge.

Many schools claim to teach the Vaganova method, though do not have the necessary class levels or well-trained teachers to accommodate the method training.

Very few studios have the programs in place, or teachers with enough knowledge and experience to adequately train their students for profession careers---check out the success of the school's previous graduates.

Not all "Russian training" or "Soviet training" is the same, and not all is Vaganova-based.

There are several major schools in the former USSR that teach seemingly similar methods, but slight differences in style and basic principles make them distinct from Vaganova's system of training.

The Balanchine style has become a well-respected and popular style of classical ballet. The basic technique on which this style was developed is Vaganova training.

However, Balanchine's choreography, like Vaganova's training system, is very specific. Only those licensed by the Balanchine Trust are allowed to teach Balanchine's choreography.

Look for a studio with directors who can clearly explain why they teach the technique they advertise using. Any director who knows what he or she is doing can clearly explain things to you and make perfect sense. Ask questions. The directors with more your child's interest at heart, as opposed to just your money, will be excited to share with you his or her wealth of information.

Why Not All Dance is all the Same, Why Ballet is Not Just Ballet

Contrary to what most people believe about dance, specifically ballet, there are many different styles and techniques.

So what is the difference between a style and a technique? A style of ballet refers to the specific way in which the material is danced.

For example, the style of arms used for Swan Lake is very different from that used for Giselle or Balanchine's "Who Cares?", each a distinct style.

The technique, however, is the way in which a dancer is trained to do the basic steps which make up all ballet, regardless of style. The best way to determine which technique to study under is one of versatility —ask "if I train in this certain way, will I still be able to dance other styles as well?"

Will My Child Have Fun?

“Fun” can be a matter of perspective: momentary satisfaction can be had from running, dancing, jumping, with no real structure or training involved just for the joy of it.

But a longer term sense of achievement, fulfillment, and freedom can be had through disciplined training of the body and mind. Hard work, focused attention, and continuing progress fills a need in us all for the satisfaction of a job well-done.

Achieving goals which seem unattainable at first, through steady training and commitment gives a feeling of great personal fulfillment. As a parent, you guide your child to see the difference between instant gratification and long term achievement.

Just as you can't eat fast food all the time (even though it tastes good and is convenient, quick & easy) and expect to stay healthy, you can't expect that dance instruction with focus placed predominantly on performing will provide a solid foundation.

You have to help steer your child in the right direction to stay on the path to their goals.

What Are the Criteria for a Good Dance Facility?

The most important factors for a good dance facility are those that directly impact the quality of dance the training:

- Foam Sprung floors with Marley flooring in all studios
- High ceiling clearance (for high jumps and lifts)
- Studios large enough to accommodate the training, as well as class size
- Mirrors on one long wall of the studio
- Secure and sturdy barres
- Access to rosin if needed

Other amenities that help make the studio a more comfortable place to study are:

- Boys/Girls changing areas
- Bathrooms
- Lounge/kitchen area
- Reception desk
- Director's office/consultation & meeting area
- Study area/library
- In-house wardrobe/costume room
- Additional workout room with free weights, Pilates/Total Gym equipment etc.

Will My Child Have an Enriching Experience?

If you have weighed all of the criteria, and you have done your research on the topics discussed in this article, you should find the right match for your child.

Remember, that an enriching experience expands your horizons, opens your mind to other possibilities, and expands your view of yourself and the world around you.

The fine arts, and dance in particular, can do just that in a very personal way through its innately physical nature, especially if you involve yourself and your child in a school or dance institution that has that kind of philosophy and mission at its heart.

Now, take a look at the next section so you have a review of the important questions to ask. With the information you now possess, the answers you receive to the questions you ask will be rather telling and will definitely assist you in deciding quickly whether or not a dance studio has what you're looking for.

Review

Use the following questions as a quick guide to get you asking the questions that will assist you to quickly determine whether or not a particular dance studio is the best one for your child and you.

1. What kind of training does your studio offer?
2. Are you a non-profit organization?
3. What arts organizations are you members of?
4. What is the main focus of your dance program?
5. How many recitals do you have a year?
6. Is there an extra cost for recitals?
7. Is there an extra cost for recital costumes?
8. What kind of flooring do you have?
9. Have you had any student injuries?
10. Who are the professional dancers who trained under your tutelage?
11. What happens if a class is missed?
12. What technique does your studio teach and why?

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