

## Art of Dance

Always artful, an intricate combination of movement, music, storytelling and much more makes up a ballet performance. Long before the curtain rises, the stage is set. As beautiful and delicate as ballet appears during a performance, many hours of hard work and behind-the-scenes planning has taken place. Practice, rehearsal, set design, choreography, music, lighting, and costume design are all part of the show. There



is truly no small part in a ballet. Dancers execute the choreography. Musicians and conductors perform the music. Electricians oversee the lighting. Stagehands move props. Stage managers move people around the set. Costume designers create and seamstresses care for the costumes. And an entire symphony takes place in concert to stage a show. *All* of these roles are intricate parts of a ballet.

## **Dancers**

Ballet may appear graceful and effortless on stage, but many years of hard work and discipline are required in the dance studio long before dancers are ready for the stage. The basis of every movement in ballet is correct posture and placement of



head, arms, legs and body. Even ballet stars often do a class with a teacher every morning prior to performing. Every class begins with stretching and working at the *barre*. Next, dancers practice slow smooth steps away from the *barre* before ending with fast turns, jumps and *pointe* work.

### On Your Toes

“Toe Dancing”, as it was first called, is literally dancing “*en pointe*”. This legendary dance technique emerged in the late 1700s. By definition, it is the action of rising to the toes while performing ballet steps. By design, this technique was developed so dancers appear weightless and ethereal on stage. Dancing *en pointe* also makes a dancer’s legs look longer. In 1832, Italian ballerina Marie Taglioni performed the full-length romantic ballet *La Sylphide en pointe* in Paris. The choreography was created by her father, Filippo Taglioni, who wished to use toe dancing to emphasize his daughter’s “otherworldly” lightness in this role. She is largely credited as the developer and pioneer of *en pointe* technique. It was this ballet and her performance that also helped popularize the tutu!



Because dancing *en pointe* requires the use of the entire body for support, including the legs and abdominal muscles, it demands arduous training. Specially-developed *pointe* shoes are used for point work. Though pretty in pink, they are hard-toed and have a stiff shank. So demanding and intense, dancing *en pointe* can wear out a new pair of *pointe* shoes in just one performance! No task for the timid, dancing *en pointe* requires considerable strength, balance and skill and is the central part of a ballerina’s training and repertory. Young girls usually begin dancing *en pointe* between the ages of 10 and 15, provided they have studied classical ballet for three or more years. Preparation for *pointe* work is slow and gradual. Though it appears effortless on stage, point work is a slow process that requires close supervision by a teacher to perfect.



## **Choreographer**

A choreographer is the person responsible for creating a ballet. Choreography literally means "dance-writing". A choreographer chooses the music and the theme of a ballet. Most importantly, it is the choreographer who plans the steps and the movements which the audience sees on stage. Whether using new music specifically composed for a ballet or a time-honored score, a choreographer adds unique nuances and special touches to even the most well-known ballets. Since music and dance go hand in hand, the choreographer, conductor and dancers all work closely together to create each moment of movement. A notator keeps a record of the steps conceived by the choreographer for the ballet by writing them down in symbols.



## **Music**

If dance is the heart, then music is the soul of every ballet. Whether performed by a live orchestra or pre-recorded, music helps create the mood and the magic. A ballet may either be choreographed to music specially composed for it or to already-existing music. Existing music may be used in its original form or it can be adapted and arranged by another composer to suit the vision of the choreographer. With a single note or symphony of sound, music sets the stage for all movement. Romance, sorrow, jubilation, happiness and heartbreak are all created in concert with a ballet's musical composition.

## Costumes

The right costumes on stage can reach out and grab the attention of every audience member—even those seated in the very back row.

Costumes can help convey a message or a moment and assist in setting the scene.

They can indicate an era or even create an aura. The perfect costume allows a character to truly come to life.

Long white dresses with cascading skirts can set a romantic mood. Elaborate, realistic masks and headdresses add drama. A delicate multi-layered tutu

allows a ballerina to beautifully display her technique and gives her the freedom to dance.



For a new ballet, designers may make sketches of all costumes and detail the fabric and trimmings for the greatest impact. Costumes may also be custom-ordered or embellished by hand.

Unforgettable and magical, costumes play an important role of their own. Remember when Odile first appears in her dark tutu in *Swan Lake* or Cinderella emerges in her finest hour at the ball? Amazing costumes are never forgotten long after the curtain closes. Whether carefully conceived and constructed by in-house wardrobe departments, purchased from professional costumers, or handed down from year to year for a role,

costumes take center stage in every ballet. Partnered with music and dance, costumes play a colorful and often-elaborate role in storytelling.



## Makeup

Because of the strong stage lighting, all dancers, both male and female, wear stage makeup. Makeup helps to exaggerate and accentuate every dancer's features, as well as helps them to truly get into character.

Professional makeup artists work backstage at some performances while most ballerinas apply their own stage makeup. Up close, stage makeup may appear garish and gaudy, but under the bright lights on stage, it beautifully dramatizes the features. Makeup can add beauty, drama and attitude to any character. Costumes and makeup team up to create a memorable character.



## Set Design & Lighting

Backdrops, props, and lighting are all key players in the production of every ballet. Set designers plan the stage layout well in advance, often



276 - Constantin Esmont,  
ensemble de décors pour  
« Le Sommeil de la Belle au bois dormant »  
Saint-Petersbourg, 1892.

making models so the choreographer can see how the sets will look and function once constructed by carpenters. Intricate, elaborate and ingenious backdrops can be true works of art. Large backdrops may be painted flat

on the floor by teams of artists using a grid system before they are set up in all of their glory on stage. Scenes are often changed between acts and a flurry of activity takes place backstage during the intermission to reset the scenery.

Lighting is important in setting the mood. It spotlights the dancers and can add an aura of magic and mystique. Colored lights, spotlights and special effects are all used to create atmosphere and ambience so the audience may be transcended through time

and uplifted away—lost in the moment, enchantment and beauty of ballet.

### **Props**

Props add an air of authenticity and spectacle. No “wallflowers”, props can introduce and authenticate an entire era. And often, a



simple prop propels an intricate story. Why the very nutcracker Clara receives from her Uncle Drosselmeyer in the holiday favorite *The Nutcracker* is counted among the most famous of all ballet props! When Cinderella dances with her broom or loses her slipper, props are spotlighted. Every choreographed sword fight scene in *Romeo and Juliet*

requires a choreographer *and* a prop crew! Prop placement is carefully planned and choreographed prior to each performance in every ballet.

### **Backstage**

Before the curtain rises and the ballet begins, during the performance and after the show, a backstage “ballet” of its own is underway. Out of sight and earshot of the audience, a flurry of activity takes place behind the scenes. At any given moment, a stage manager may be emphatically calling dancers to the stage as they wait in the wings before being thrust into the spotlight. A seamstress may be fixing or fitting costumes. Stagehands may be quickly moving props about. Carpenters can be found preparing for scene changes. And lighting crews may be synchronizing spots. Both on stage and behind the scenes, drama and excitement accompanies every ballet.