

Taking Class Part One (The Beginner)

I started formal dance training at 14 years of age at The Inner City Ensemble Theatre and Dance Company in Paterson NJ. ICE was known for providing opportunities for teenagers in the neighborhood an outlet for expression instead of the alternative which was a life in the streets. I knew about the company because I would attend some of their public performances and was in awe of the dancing - I used to go home after watching a performance and try to recreate some of the choreography.

At 12 years of age I auditioned for ICE but was not chosen however, my sister was and whenever she would go to rehearsals I would tag along. Eventually, one of the choreographers found out that I could dance and asked me to become a member of the 1st company - the performing company.

It didn't last long. I was too young and after my sister decided to drop out, I wasn't going to go without her. So, I dropped out as well.

Two years later, ICE was having auditions and at that time I was a freshman attending Eastside High School in Paterson. I was also heavy into soccer and wanted to play for Eastside's soccer team. When I went to the coach and asked if I could try out he said that he already had his team assembled. The next day, posted on a door at school, there was a notice about auditions for ICE - I went and this time I was accepted.

At ICE, they provided several forms of dance - Ballet, Jazz and Modern. Each class requiring a different set of dress requirements that I did not have - for my audition/Ballet class I wore a Karate uniform (so embarrassing).

Never taking a formal dance class, there were a few things that I needed to learn, mainly learning what and how to dress for the various classes that I was required to take. For Ballet class, white leotard, black tights, ballet shoes and the dreaded dance belt - Jazz, black leotard, black Jazz pants and Jazz shoes, Modern, black leotard, Jazz pants/sweatpants and bare feet.

Dance belts are torturous! I have never worn a dance belt that I could say was comfortable and even after purchasing all forms of dance belts later in my career, never have I worn one that I could say, "hmm...this actually feels ok." On the other hand, any guy starting out, you have to wear it - it's better to be safe than sorry even though there will be times when you are going to feel sorry for being safe.

Shoes were a problem for me as well. I didn't have much money at first, so I basically purchased a pair of ballet shoes on sale from Capezio. They were black and made of leather. The sole of the shoe was not very supple so my feet looked terrible when I pointed and I didn't have a good point to begin with so imagine a pair of golf clubs that were slightly bent more than usual at the bottom and you have my feet.

Rule of thumb when taking your first dance classes...focus 110% on your teachers. They are providing you with the information you need to progress, not your friends. If you have a question, always ask your teacher. There are going to be other dancers in the class that think they may know better and are going to tell you what to do because they have a false sense that they are the best in the class. As a result, they are going to find opportunities to tell you what to do - don't let them, trust your teacher. Many times, these students that are endowed with this false sense of themselves decide to strike out into the world when they are older only to discover that compared to the rest of the real dance world, they are a very tiny plankton in the great sea of dance. If you continue to listen to your teachers, you will eventually begin to work with choreographers and if you did your job well with teachers, choreographers will love you.

On the other hand, you may encounter teachers

On the other hand, not all dance teachers are great. At ICE, I was fortunate to have been taught by teachers that have either taught at Juilliard or have danced with professional dance companies. They weren't high school students that have gone through the studios that they were or continue to take class from. To put it more bluntly, **children cannot teach children to dance** in order to get to the next level of a career in dance. A dance teacher needs to have experience in years as well as a career in the profession of dance.

I hate to also say this but, you have to love taking class. If you don't, then going to the next level most likely is not an option. Dance class has to be more than just moving around to waste time, show offing, doing it because your parents are forcing you, hanging with friends, increase your chances of getting a part in the Nutcracker, or anything else other than you can't go a day without it - you take dance class because you want to dance...period. This means that there is no difference between taking class and performing at the Met - it's all dance and you just can't live without it. My audition for ICE was a ballet class. I never took ballet before, but I knew that I was hooked after the second class. The reason was that there was a methodology to ballet that I found made sense to me. Also, in a chaotic world, ballet class was the only place where I knew what was going to happen from plie to gran allegro...it was my rock in a raging river.

Did I want to be a ballet dancer...HELL NO! For me, dance is language and how can you relate or communicate with others if you only know one language. Ballet was my foundation. If a dancer has been studying with a ballet master that understands how to teach ballet, that dancer can go on to learn and master other forms of dance.

Does this mean that Ballet dancers can dance any form of dance...emphatically NO. If you rely on one form, you will look like a dancer that is trying to dance another form, badly. If you get a chance, watch [Baryshnikov on Broadway](#). Really look at the difference between the way Liza and Misha are moving. I could go on forever with the differences, but I am only going to talk about one - the back. Liza moves through her back - she allows it to twist and bend naturally in response to her movement. Misha's back is straight and high - this is the trait of a dancer that has been doing ballet his/her entire life and only exposed to other forms many years later. Reason is, if you are going to be able to perform [11 rubles](#)

(pirouettes...see White Nights clip), you need to call upon your center at a moment's notice - center becomes and unconscious act.

All in all, as a beginning dancer, don't get discouraged. If you are doing it because you want to do it, there is no right or wrong - a teacher that tells you that you are **doing** something wrong does not mean that **you** are wrong.

See every correction as an opportunity for you to be a better dancer - I'm pretty sure that when one is learning a new language, they are going to make a few mistakes.

Lastly, if you don't feel a desire to dance - if it doesn't feel like food, a source of life, don't think that you are not worthy of dance. People dance for many reasons and if you just find dance fun, then by all means, keep dancing!