

# The Discipline of Technique

by Kelli Woodruff

Clean lines, injury prevention, effortless movements, body awareness, strength of movement, and ability to execute advanced dance skills are all reasons to focus time and energy on dance technique. The desire to perfect these strengths motivates dancers to focus both time and energy on basic key elements of mature technique. In my opinion there is nothing more beautiful than a dancer who performs movements with clean lines and looks as though his/her body is being elongated beyond the finger tips and toes. Hyper-extended arms, flexed feet, hunched shoulders, released abdominals, bent knees, and lifeless hands are all body alignment issues in dance that ruin the beautiful clean lines a dancer is working to achieve. Also, when the body parts mentioned above are not properly aligned the execution of dance skills seem laborious where as the goal is to make dance seem effortless.

Because ballet is said to be the foundation of all dance, it is imperative to incorporate at least the fundamentals of ballet into dance training. It is very difficult for a dancer to perform an advanced dance movement if he/she does not have an understanding of correct alignment and placement in basic dance movements. If a dancer can grasp the basic concepts of movements such as a plié or tendu, and learn how to execute them properly, then the dancer can move on to more difficult movements and execute them accurately.

Two dance basics that are beneficial in working on dance technique are plié and tendu. A plié is so important to be able to perform well because it is the beginning and end of many movements... pirouette prep, prep for a grand jeté or other leaps. A plié also allows for ease of recovery or landing from many movements and a soft recovery will protect joints from being jarred and stressed, thus extending the dancers' career and protecting the dancer from knee and ankle injuries.

A tendu is important for the dancer to learn in order for the foot and leg to be shaped properly when leaving the floor. The leg should stretch from the hip all the way to the end of the toes. Toes should not rest on the floor as a tendu is being executed. As the leg is moved from a closed position to the stretched (tendu) the leg remains straight. Performing tendus repetitively trains the leg not to bend as it begins to leave the floor. So, when more advanced movements such as grand battements or high kicks are taught, the leg is automatically used to not bending as it leaves the floor. Performing tendus in derriere is effective in training the back leg to extend in a grand jeté instead of being bent. Students frequently fail to straighten their back legs in leaps, but going back to the basic tendu in warm-up helps to remind dancers of how it feels for the back leg to be straight and foot pointed before their leg ever leaves the floor.

As a dancer becomes more aware of the mechanics of a small movement as a plié or tendu then the body becomes more aware of how it should move while executing more difficult movements. Thus injuries are less likely to occur as the body is now aligned and able to execute a movement more efficiently.

A dancer who has a strong dance technique background will make even a grand jeté look more effortless and beautiful than a dancer who has not been trained on the fundamentals of dance technique. A dancer with strong dance technique will dance with more control because she will understand how her body works and how to properly align and execute a movement. Also an understanding of dance technique will allow a student to be able to move on to more advanced choreographical elements that might require the dancer to move off her center of gravity. Once a dancer can execute basic dance technique movements properly, he/she can then move on to more difficult movements and are able to perform them with correct body alignment.

## Plié

[plee-AY]

Bent, bending. A bending of the knee or knees. This is an exercise to render the joints and muscles soft and pliable and the tendons flexible and elastic, and to develop a sense of balance.

## Tendu

[tahn-DEW]

Stretched. A tendu is an exercise to force the insteps well outward. The working foot slides from the first or fifth position to the second or fourth position without lifting the toe from the ground. Both knees must be kept straight. When the foot reaches the position *pointe tendue*, it then returns to the first or fifth position.

Dance technique, however, should never be sacrificed for height in leaps or kicks. It is also better to execute fewer turns properly than to constantly work for multiple turns performed incorrectly. The more the body is trained to align properly the stronger the dancer will become as the muscles remember the correct alignment position. When crunch time for contest season comes around, continue to incorporate dance technique into the cleaning process of dances. If pirouettes are not being executed properly, then have students practice the turn as a balance. Repeat the turn section without the turn several times just working on placement. Then repeat the turn section several times with the music in order to execute this section with precision. Critique each student on the mechanics, and have the students critique each other. It is difficult to see what each student needs to work on, which is why it is helpful to have dancers watch each other. They learn a great deal from watching especially if a weaker dancer is paired up with a stronger dancer. Try not to let a movement in a dance go by without working on the proper technical execution.

It is a slow process having to go back to the basics, but it is definitely important, especially if a dancer has not received prior proper training. With the advancement of dance skills being performed with dance teams today it is worth the time and energy to go back to the basics and train the body to align properly. Many injuries will be prevented and your dancers will be less frustrated once they know how their body works.

