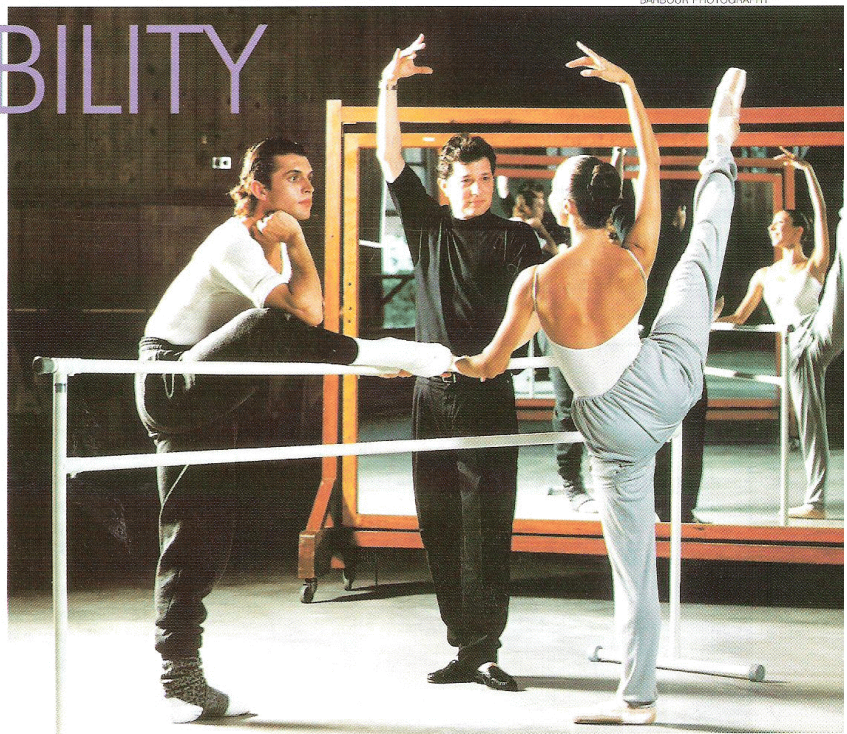


# SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

How to teach your dancers to put their hearts into the dance without getting broken by the business.

BY  
KATHERINE  
MAYFIELD

**Creating careers:**  
These dancers are living the dream of dancing professionally at Carolina Ballet, Artistic Director Robert Weiss.



I have the privilege of playing the piano for several ballet classes every week, and I thoroughly enjoy watching the dancers learn—from the youngest, who are still figuring out how to make their arms and legs work, to dancers who have trained for years and years, and are well on the climb to perfection. I see the love of the dance on many of their faces, and I wonder how many of their hearts and spirits will be broken along the path to their dreams.

Many young dancers train with high expectations of success, and most have no idea how difficult pursuing a professional dance career can be.

Teachers can prepare their students for the difficulties of professional life, even as they teach them technique and style.

## THE LOVE OF DANCE, NOT "STARDOM"

The first step is to find a way to foster a love of the dance, rather than a quest for glamour and prestige. If an artist loves the art, and the deep expression of self that the art gives rise to, then the need for stardom does not become all-important. Passion for dance, even for the daily discipline of classes and rehearsals, will do much to help a young dancer weather the difficulties of the professional world.

Gail Collins, Director of Pioneer Valley Ballet in Northampton, Massachusetts, says, "The questions that every dancer has to answer are: Am I happy with what I'm doing? Am I happy with the process of climbing the ladder? Am I enjoying not just those few times when the audience is

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cheering wildly, but am I also enjoying the discipline of daily class?" Teach your students to invest themselves and their hearts in the dance—every moment they are dancing.

### THE JOY OF MOVEMENT

Try to get the student's inner self involved, through the love of the music or the enjoyment of movement. You can help students connect the movements with their emotions by giving them a sense of the music. You accomplish this naturally through the choreography you teach them, but you might also gather a class to watch a particularly moving performance on video, and discuss why the performance is so moving, and why particular movements or sequences seem to evoke certain feelings.

Give them a sense of the joy of movement for the movement's sake alone—the satisfaction of learning a precise arm movement, the release in the stretch of a muscle, the grace of an arabesque or jeté. Your students should appreciate what they experience day to day in training, rather than expecting satisfaction and enjoyment only when they're performing or when they're hired into a professional company.

## THE PROFESSIONAL WORLD: A REALITY CHECK

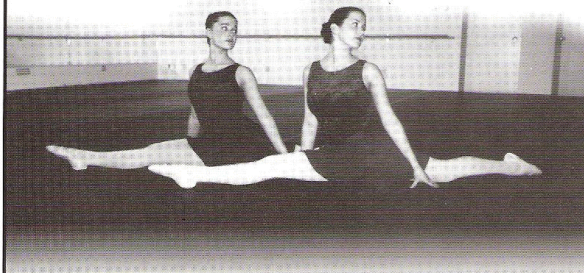
There's a fine line for a young dancer between having the necessary persistence and determination to pursue a career over the long haul, and wanting success so badly they will throw everything else in life away.

"You have to be very focused to make it to the top," says Collins. "You can't have a lot of outside interests; but by the same token, anyone that becomes completely focused in only one thing can lose sight of being a human being." It's a delicate balance.

Part of a teacher's responsibility is to educate students about the uncertainty, the likelihood of disappointment, the possibility of rejection—and to help them understand that their lives and the way they feel about themselves are more important than achieving success or stardom.

The young dancer is used to doing everything in order: plié, tendu; first barre work, then center work—so the student may expect his or her career to move in the same kind of orderly fashion: from the corps, to principal, to soloist. Even if a child is well-educated and disciplined, he or she won't really understand how tough it can be to audi-

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tion over and over and over again, without being hired for a company position or getting cast in a role.

The more you can prepare your students for the realities of life as a professional dancer, the easier it will be for them to maintain their self-esteem and emotional equilibrium as they pursue their careers. Here are things you can do.

- Have a professional dancer come and speak to your students about his or her experiences in the professional world.
- Share some of your own experiences if you are or have been a professional performer.
- Spend one or two classes a year just talking about the differences between taking classes and navigating the professional world of dance.
- Consider giving your students a reading assignment: a professional dancer's autobiography. You might even spend part of the class discussing the issues.

## TEACH THEM PATIENCE

Try to give students a sense that even if they do achieve a company position, life will not immediately become fulfilling and glamorous.

When young dancers hear that pursuing a professional career will be a struggle, they see a romantic vision of a starving artist creating great art, and though they need that dream to keep going through the tough times, they must also be aware of the realities. To be an artist, you have to be a human being—but a human being is vulnerable, and you have to be tough to make it.

## TEACH INDEPENDENCE

Children are great imitators, and one of the best ways for them to learn the precision of dance is to imitate the teacher's positions and movements. But if imitation is all they learn, they're likely to spend the rest of their lives imitating others—in dance, and other areas of their lives. Teach your students self-sufficiency and self-discipline—to keep going when times are rough, to be prepared in case a big break appears.

## GIFT OF SELF-ESTEEM

Make your students feel valued and worthy whether or not they pass auditions or dance with perfection. Self-esteem is very important. Students often remember teachers who valued and respected them. If you can give your students the gift of self-esteem, they're more likely to be successful—no matter what path in life they choose—and more likely to be happy, whether or not they achieve the success they hope for. **DTN**

*Katherine Mayfield is the author of Smart Actors, Foolish Choices: A Self-Help Guide to Coping Emotionally with the Business (Back Stage Books, 1996) and Acting A to Z: The Young Person's Guide to a Stage or Screen Career. She also presents workshops for schools and colleges on coping with the emotional stresses of pursuing a career in the arts.*