

High Art is

Hard Work

An average day at the IU ballet studio

By Clemens Matuschek

If there is any symbol for a ballerina's life, it is the shoes she wears.

They look elegant, soft, and even gentle when seen on a dancer's feet. But on a closer look, one discovers they are likely to be worn out by the body weight and force they have to take every day. The heavily reinforced soles are dirty from dust picked up in countless pirouettes. And instead of soft, they feel brutally hard: they have to enable a ballerina to dance *en pointe*, that is, on the tip of her toes. Only girls practice this elegant yet painful art, one of classical ballet's central stylistic elements. They direct themselves upwards, with the least possible contact to earth, like flying.

But even ballet dancers are bound to gravity. The high art of making it look easy is hard work; that is what a ballerina's shoes tell you.

"A ballet shoe lasts for a week on the average," explains Grace Schwartz, a sophomore dancer. "I don't really want to know how many I've bought and wrecked since I started dancing." Like many of her ballet mates, she started practicing regularly at the age of seven. In fact, she was only three years old when she first stepped onto a dance floor; her mother is a piano player accompanying a ballet company in Baltimore and took Grace along to rehearsals.

Ever since, she has been dreaming of becoming a professional ballet dancer. To succeed in this tough, incredibly competitive business, there is one simple formula: practice, practice, practice.

At Indiana University, practicing is the domain of Jacques Cesbron, former principal dancer with the Paris Opera and Metropolitan Opera Ballet and now one of three professors at the School of Music's Ballet Department. Five days a week, four to six hours a day, he works with his students in the studio on steps, jumps, gestures, and expression.

The ballet studio is a functional, warehouse-like room on the 3rd floor of the Musical Arts Center. There are mirrors only on two adjacent walls, not on all four – if they were facing each other, the endless reflections would be more irritating than helpful. Not much of the bright outside day can be sensed in here, but Cesbron and his students are eager to start.

“The language of ballet is the same all over the world,” he points out while some twenty dancers are warming up. (By the way – it's French.) “The classes look the same wherever you go – Moscow, Paris, Bloomington. You always start with the same kinds of exercises. For example, you never start with jumps.”

But although Cesbron begins the practice session with what he calls “simple steps,” this is already a kind of physical education that requires power, control, and balance. And it looks so much better than what most of the sports students at the gym do! Cesbron announces the combination of steps to be exercised without much explanation, yet all the dancers know what to add to make it look elegant – body tension, the delightful movement of the hands. The exercises and positions seem to flow smoothly,

merging into each other, forming an elegant continuum. These are just meant to be warming up exercises, but twenty athletic, beautifully shaped bodies bowing, twenty right arms rising, and twenty left legs stretching in synchronization make an aesthetic picture that already gives a foretaste of the elegance of a real stage performance.

Here, in the studio high above the lobby of the Musical Arts Center, the only audience is the dancers themselves, observing and controlling their movements in the mirrors on the walls. And there is Cesbron, of course. He walks around, continuously emitting a singsong made up of counting, French terms, and individual comments: “Première position! 1 and 2 and 3, come down; 5 and 6 and *élevé*. 1 and 2 and 3, *plié*; 4 and raise your head! and 8.”

For the more complicated exercises, he splits the class into smaller groups in order to work with students closer in detail. When he does so, the other dancers observe their colleagues carefully since it might save them from making the same mistakes.

Today, Cesbron is satisfied with his students: “Good job. But remember: tomorrow we are having a *pas de deux* class. That’s going to be exhausting for the guys when they lift up the girls...” Especially since there are 5 male and 15 female ballet students in his class.

Grace also is content. Her ankles, which tended to hurt after the extensive rehearsals for the latest production, “Cinderella,” feel good and healthy. In fact, a lot of dancers have health problems, especially with ankles and knees. Grace promised herself not to burn the candle at both ends: “Over summer, when there are no performances, I can afford to take a break and see a doctor.” After all, her future depends on her fitness.

As the dancers leave the studio for a break, they stick to an old tradition and applaud the pianist. His importance is not to be underestimated; nobody can imagine a ballet class without a pianist. The one taking the applause with a smile is Chun Chi An. He's been playing for the IU Ballet Company for more than ten years and insists his job is not to be mistaken as a kind of human CD player. "When you are dancing live, you need the energy of live music," he says. "I'm also more flexible. I know exactly what kind of music a teacher wants for a certain exercise, and I can switch and adapt to variations quickly. I don't need scores; the music is in my head anyway."

This is a characteristic trait that Chun Chi shares with Cesbron. When working on a new choreography, the professor relies entirely on his ears and his imagination. "I can't read a score anyway, and I'm bad at counting music. Sometimes, I wonder how it was possible for me to become a ballet dancer... But seriously: I just listen to the flow of the music, and my imagination turns it into motion."

The love for motion is the reason shared by all ballet dancers to work hard and survive the hours of exercising. As Grace describes it: "When you dance, you leave your own body. When you have a passion like that, it's an overwhelming feeling that takes over you."