

Larry's Corner

Ballroom vs. Ballet

There is more physical demands on those who are serious about ballet, rather than ballroom.

However ballet trained dancers are more difficult people to train in ballroom dancing.

The major problem here is getting women to balance, and advance on the heel, rather than the ball of the foot. Ballroom is advanced on the heel to the ball (Latin is basically opposite, and is more "ballet-friendly"). I hear women pleading that high heels are the culprit, and that accounts for the ball lead in advance steps. The same women walk on the dance floor on their heels, dance on the balls, and leave the dance floor on their heels, amusing? I always train my students in sound basic techniques, though the 2 major problems have always been:

- 1) Forward advance on the heel, and
- 2) Forward partner leads; regardless of gender (forward woman leads the motion, whilst the male controls line, of course).

I find the ballet women to have an extremely difficult time adapting to ballroom. More problems occur with lining their "center" to the male partner, a notoriously difficult practice for those coming from ballet, where matching body line is totally different.

Ballet dancers have the natural tendency to want to step forward toe first.

The idea of aligning their center to a partner's center is totally foreign to them. They are used to dancing alone so don't know anything about counter balancing their balance in relationship to their

partner while facing him. I say while facing him because most of the ballet training for partnering is done in relationship to your partner while man is behind lady. Or in the case of lift work relating your weight to each other in a completely different way, but not specifically while facing each other while holding hands.

Ballet dancers are tremendous dancers / athletes. But not all dance forms translate well to all other dance forms. Some things will transition over, and some things won't and then there's something's that are completely new.

Some lucky dancers have natural turnout while the rest of us are stretching those inner leg muscles to get those hips to turnout for better turnout. Not that I'm any authority on the whole ballet thing, but you really mean, strengthening? It is my understanding that one can have great flexibility, but to hold the turnout requires quite a bit of strength in the right places. Turnout is still very much a part of the essential positioning and training of Ballet Dancers. Ballet dancers still strive for that perfect 180. All the steps in a ballet repertoire evolve around correct placement, which a part of your placement is having good turnout.

Technically, especially from a

non-ballet dancer's point of view, good placement does not require turnout. All the parts can be perfectly lined up, and you can have your feet totally parallel. But even in ballroom, you get much more dynamic and solidly grounded movements when you use opposition in muscle groups within your own body. Turnout is one of the best examples of this kind of muscle opposition and I use it every time I do a chaine or pencil turn.

Of course, I'm not referring to closed-position body contact stuff here. Opposition in this type of dancing usually occurs between the body weights of the two partners, not so much within one's own body.

I am doing these stretches as I can't currently get the full 135 degrees of turnout that's needed for certain ballroom figures such as the basic natural turn in waltz.

The arched back is Ballet. There are certainly some ballroom dancers who incorrectly arch their backs.

The turnout we use for ballroom is quite a bit different than ballet turnout. I assume the turnout you're referring to is that which is used during the inside of a turn, such as Man's 5 of a Natural. This type of turnout is only partially a result of the upper thighs but not much more than you would naturally be able to produce from that area.

There are other forces at work here. CBM can account for up to 1/8 of the turn. Additional turnout can occur in the feet & ankles, and in very small amounts at the knees. Also, one may not truly be "pointing to DC" on 5. At least, not until the weight has begun to transfer to the RF, at which point the body is at least

facing center, the LF now beginning to "think" about moving inward. So even in a Viennese Natural with 1/2 turn, you will probably realistically never need to exceed 90 degrees, which is about the natural limit of an average body.

Ballet dancers strive to turn their feet not 1 degree farther than their hips... claiming that doing so is bad for you. Supposedly the angle of the ballet dancer's feet is completely a result of the upper-thighs, beginning at the ball & socket joint at the hip. To do this requires a great deal of strength and muscle usage.

More importantly, on the lady's step 2; most men don't do the back half of a natural turn much typically using a spin turn, instead - but the ladies are doing step 2 all the time. This type of turnout is only partially a result of the upper thighs but not much more than you would naturally be able to produce from that area.

The amount that is 'natural' is different for different people. I agree that most people can get fairly close to 135 degrees - or more specifically, most people can get more than 90 degrees.

There are other forces at work here. CBM can account for up to 1/8 of the turn.

I don't see this, unless you are turning the toe in on the back step (lady's step 1 of the waltz natural turn). If there's a certain amount of turn out between the feet, a hip rotation can reduce the turnout of one foot only by increasing that of the other. Toe in reduces the potential power of the swing, since one can no longer roll through the whole length of the foot from toe to heel if it doesn't lie along the direction of travel.

While turnout can occur at the ankles, I find that the better my feet are lined up with my knees, the better I can use all my leg muscles. Noticeable turnout at the ankles can also be unattractive.

Knees are hinge joints, designed for rotation about only one axis, and they

aren't that well designed at that. Misusing them for turnout is only asking for trouble.

Also, one may not truly be "pointing to DC" on 5. At least, not until the weight has begun to transfer to the RF, at which point the body is at least facing center, the LF now beginning to move inward.

That's the instant I'm talking about - at mid stride, when the weight is transferring from the left heel to the right toe. The body turn can decrease the turnout of the right foot, but only by increasing the turnout of the left - the total is still 135 degrees.

So even in a Viennese Natural with 1/2 turn, you will probably realistically never need to exceed 90, which is about the natural limit of an average body.

Actually, I'd agree that smaller turnout is required for Viennese waltz - the left foot can step back with some turn in or curve on step 4 (step 1 for the lady). One doesn't need to roll through the full length of the foot, since the total travel will be limited by the partner on the forward half of the turn - with 1/2 turn, the difference between the distances traveled by the two partners is greater.

Ballet dancers strive to turn their feet not 1 degree farther than their hips... claiming that doing so is bad for you.

The turnout we use for ballroom is quite a bit different than ballet turnout. Well, different in that weight isn't taken on both feet at the same time, and in that we

are moving across the floor from foot to foot - but then, those are the basic differences between ballroom and most other forms of dancing. If turnout were only a static position in ballet, and one merely stood w/ the legs turned out the above statement might be true. However, all dance forms move across the floor and transfer weight from one foot to the other all the time. All good dancers in any form will use turnout in varying degrees to create the best possible movement sequences. In whatever style, turnout must occur from the hip, w/ the muscles surrounding that joint both stretched to allow the maximum rotation and strengthened to support/hold/maintain the position required by the particular form. Turning out from the ankles or worse, from the knees, will lead to nothing but trouble, producing at the very least sore muscles and creating the potential for very serious injury. This is especially true for the knee joint which, as noted in another post, is a hinge joint allowing for flexion and extension. Any rotation which occurs is incidental and must not be developed. While the ankle joint does allow for rotation, working only that joint for turnout w/o support from the hip will again lead to problems in the knee joint. Any teacher in any dance style who makes statements such as "rotate the feet", "turn out the feet", "rotate the knees"(yes I have heard this one), or any other similar statement is plainly and simply wrong!

Additional turnout can occur in the feet & ankles, and in very small amounts at the knees.

While turnout can occur at the ankles, I find that the better my feet are lined up with my knees, the better I can use all my leg muscles. Noticeable turnout at the ankles can also be unattractive. Many dance teachers use some version of the statement knees over toes to encourage this kind of support. By creating this alignment, the large bones of the leg are

used to support the body along w/ proper muscle usage. This allows for a very stable base from which the next movement, whatever it is can be easily accomplished. Any action which results in weight being born on the inside of the knee &/or ankle will be far less stable, look awkward, will be generally unstable, and make movement to the next step not only unattractive but potentially dangerous.

The adductors which control movement inward toward the center of the body also work to turn the leg inward-not what you want in turnout. The abductors, which control movements away from the medial line of the body and the gluteals (there are three different sets-maximus, medius and minimus) are responsible for creating/supporting turnout.

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A couple of thoughts: The point that everyone seems to be forgetting is that ballroom dancing is done with the feet parallel 99% of the time. The turned-out position which started this whole discussion, (namely steps 4-6 of the natural turn,) is midway between two parallel positions, and therefore only a fraction of a second is spent turned-out.

In ballet, one strives for perfect and correct turnout constantly, whether standing on one foot, both feet, or moving from foot to foot. The hip rotators are always engaged.

In ballroom, except when hitting a line, the object is to have one's feet pointing the same direction as one's center. The difficulty arises when one is turning. When turning while moving forward, the solution is to swivel one's standing foot so that both feet remain parallel and aligned with one's center. When turning while moving backward this is impractical, so step back with CBM, leave that foot as it has landed, but continues to turn through the knees and hips. It is important to note that at this point weight is transferring to the other foot, which is pointing to the new alignment, and that the center is almost caught up with this new foot. Furthermore, as one moves away from the first step, the weight rolls to the inside edge of the ball of the foot, which is pulled in as the adductors draw the legs together, parallel! The hip rotator muscles are engaged briefly.

There is a difference of opinion as to how far and how early the center should actually turn. Some feel that the center (and thus the feet) should have turned somewhat before taking the backwards step with the left foot, leaving the foot in a turned in position. Take the turn more

gradually, over the full three beats of the bar, and have the left foot land in the book alignment. This doesn't mean, by the way, that you haven't started the turn yet, just that I started in an under turned position from the previous bar.

I do back halves of naturals all the time when I dance waltz. I'm guessing that the statement is referring to advanced levels of dancing which I assume gives you lots of other choices of moves to do following the first half of the natural turn. As a beginner, about all you do to follow the first half of the natural turn is the back half of the natural, the spin turn, and an occasional outside change still working on that one though?

Even in advanced dancing, there are lots of examples of swing used on step 4 of the natural: 456 Natural - Running Finish - Syncopated Hairpin - step 4 of Triple Chasse - Open Natural, and, my favorite: Any teacher in any dance style who makes statements such as "rotate the feet", "turn out the feet", "rotate the knees", or any other similar statement is plainly and simply wrong!

Be careful of blanket statements such as these. Anybody who claims that something is absolutely and definitively wrong without exception is plainly and simply wrong!

Ballroom dancers of the smooth variety prefer parallel foot positioning on the whole. Very often, the legs will turn to a different angle than the body, although still parallel to each other. This is sort of like having one leg turned in and the other turned out. We use this type of positioning for very specific reasons, but mainly because it helps us to achieve the strongest possible movements that we strive for. It also requires the occasional usage of the inside edges of the feet, with a knee turned inward. It sounds ugly, but it's what we do. And it works.

Latin style ballroom is different. In this style, the feet turn out but the knees turn

in. You heard me right. We actually want to be on the inside edges of our feet. It's how we get the notorious Latin hip motion.

Not that I want you to injure yourself, but try this out just once. Take a first position, with "moderate" turnout... roughly 90 (45 per foot). Feet flat. Bend one knee only, while holding the other one straight. Bend it as far as your body will allow, but remember: the opposing leg must remain straight. The feet must remain flat. Oh, and the upper body can't shift at all. Now straighten both legs again and do the same thing with the other side. Continue alternating, making sure to always straighten one before bending the next, with the upper body being completely unaffected.

The first time you do this exercise, do it the way you're used to: knees bending over the toes, all turned out equally. Now pay attention to your hips: what are they doing? My guess is that they're shifting slightly side to side.

Now try it "our" way: when you bend the knee, veer it inward so that it's really bending forward at 0 degrees while the foot is still at 45. You'll notice that in order to do this, you must roll your foot to the inside edge. At the same time, keep the other leg straight. Better yet, press the straight leg back. Now what do you notice about the hips?

If you did everything I described, you would have found that the combination of the feet being turned out, knees bending inward, feet rolling to inside edge, and straight leg pressing back actually cause the hips to rotate or "twist" around the spine, and to a much greater degree. Did you hurt yourself? Didn't think so.

Turnout in the Latin style involves not only rotation of the ankles, but rotation of that infamous knee joint that you are claiming can do no rotation. It's all in the eye of the beholder.

A relatively small percentage of ballroom dancers, Latin or smooth,

experience major injuries or wear especially compared with ballet dancers. In fact, the majority of the injuries that we sustain don't come from causing damage to our own bodies -- we get them mostly from collisions, or sometimes from being whacked by a careless partner! Also, our professional performing careers tend to last much longer, sometimes into our forties and in a few rare cases, fifties.

Not bad for a gang that uses the inside edges of our feet!

Everybody is different. So for the sake of argument, we give or take 5 or 6 degrees. You say the average person is 135d at the hips, and I say you've got to be kidding! I'm saying this because when I turnout from the upper-thighs, keeping my feet in line with this angle, I achieve about 90d. Yes, I too can go to about 135, but only if I involve the feet.

A good part of the extra 45 degrees is coming from your ankles, and you're not noticing it.

Really turnout your feet to 135 and take a close look at your upper thighs, near the hips. Is the angle really the same? If you had started ballet at the age of 5, then I might believe you.

Turnout at the hips helps the leg muscles do their thing. It also helps you pick up your center, which is great for balance and posture, and sharp spins. This is why ballet dancers adore it so.

That's the instant I'm talking about at

mid stride, when the weight is transferred from the left heel to the right toe. The body turn can decrease the turnout of the right foot, but only by increasing the turnout of the left the total is still 135 degrees.

Actually, the weight doesn't transfer from left heel to right toe on 5, but from left ball to right ball. Even more accurately, the inside edge of the left ball. When the knee "veers inward" like this, it helps rotate the hip almost to DC, so that there's relatively little turnout happening in the right leg. As for the left leg, yes, there's turnout. But again, taking into account the other factors, CBM, etc., and as a little added bonus, the fact that you're now on the inside edge of the LF, the turnout at the hips is, at this point in the movement, nothing really to speak of.

The greatest degree of turnout happens immediately prior to the weight change, when the right foot is simply "pointing". But even here, I'm going to attribute at least some of it to CBM and foot turnout.

Feet can naturally turnout a little bit. I don't know exactly how many 15 degrees each, maybe. Even ballet dancers do it as they warm-up it's called "foot circles". What's bad is forcing the ankle or the knee joint to stretch beyond their limits. After all, you can't stretch a joint.

Wow, my brain is tired. I think I'll go do some foot circles and then hit the hay.

To be Continued in May

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