

Rotary Club of Edmonton West Classification Talk: “The Dance Studio”
presented by Ross Brierton ARAD dip PDTC (RAD London)

“So You Think You Can Dance”, “Dancing With The Stars”, “Dance Moms”; these television shows provide audiences with a snap shot of the world of dance and dancing is cool to a young audience. For some viewers these shows are the real thing. For others they are entertainment. My reality today is to present to you my professional involvement in “The Dance Studio”; so here is my story.

Some time ago, my parents and I immigrated to Canada from Scotland and settled in London, Ontario. Keen to meet new friends I enrolled in swimming and soon became proficient in backstroke winning the city and southwestern Ontario championships for consecutive years. Those wins brought me to the attention of the head coach of the London Aquatic Club. He recommended that I join his team and start training for potential participation in the Olympic games. I was up for the challenge and started on my quest. As part of our swim teams’ training it was suggested that we take gymnastics or dance to improve our overall skill. I opted to take jazz dance as I liked the music the teacher played in her classes. Well it wasn’t long before the owner of the dance studio saw me in performance and she insisted that I take ballet. Her good teaching was the essence of my inspiration. Who knew that my first ballet class would lead me to 41 years of involvement in the business of dance performance and education. My Olympic dreams would have to wait.

To be a young dancer you need coordination: how to stop and start, how to change direction, how to go backwards or forwards, how to alter speed or rhythm, how to do simple steps like skipping, running, jumping and hopping. At the age of eight or nine you are ready to begin serious ballet training whether or not you intend to specialize in this technique or make it your career. **BALLET** is the best training for: Balance, Alignment, Length Through The Spine, Length Through The Arms, Legs and Feet, Elevation, and finally an ability to Turn. Other kinds of dancing – jazz, tap, modern and folk greatly benefit from the skills taught in a ballet class as the point of every exercise in ballet is to perform each movement harmoniously and with grace.

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If you choose to earn your living by performing in the theatre, you should go to a professional dance studio. The best dance schools, as well as jobs, are typically associated with professional companies. The opportunities to perform to an audience gives you confidence and working with first-rate choreographers and directors gives you style and stamina.

Typically dance companies hold annual auditions. If you study in one of their schools chances are you will audition when your teacher considers you ready and when replacements are needed. If you come from out of town, you can contact the company directly for an audition. Or if the company travels you can get your teacher to arrange one for you in your own city. In any case the prerequisites for your first job are talent, a fit appearance, excellence in training, perseverance and luck. Luck will take you a certain distance but perseverance will take you far as once you start looking for a job it may take months.

As a professional dancer you learn that it is an exacting profession and it makes relentless demands. Interdependence is a vital component. You work in an association of people on all levels of familiarity and in all combinations of responsibilities. It is your duty to learn when to take the initiative and when to proceed with obedience, when to go to the top for instruction and when to keep still. A well-run dance company is as tightly organized as a battle unit, with an equivalent chain of command.

If a life on stage is not for you, then furthering your education in dance studies at a college or university may be the option to fulfill your passion. Many higher education institutions offer dance programs that include studies in:

- The training of teachers
- The training of choreographers
- The training of critics
- The use of technology in recording movement
- Research

The successful completion of a degree can offer graduates employment in their specified field.

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There are also independent agencies that provide opportunities for prospective dance teachers with accreditation in a variety of subjects. These organizations include the Royal Academy of Dance, the Cecchetti Council, Dance Masters of America or the many teachers training programs offered by professional dance companies. Instructors with licenses or certificates from these organizations can be relied upon for their expertise.

Once certified as a teacher, your delivery of dance education typically takes one of two routes.

The first is to be self-employed where you seek out teaching opportunities at private dance studios.

You report directly to the owner and provide enrolled students with the dance training required for

them to perform in specific dance examinations, festivals and competitions. The second option is to

work as a contracted employee of a not-for-profit dance school, school board, college or university.

Once again you may be given the aforementioned tasks to do in the training of pupils but opportunities

of working on larger community based projects involving other performing arts organizations may also

be offered.

In my journey, I joined the Royal Winnipeg Ballet at the age of 17, the youngest male dancer of my peer

group, giving performances of ballets by world leading choreographers throughout North America,

Europe and the Middle East. Showing potential for teaching and choreography, I withdrew from

performing and received my instructional accreditation from the Royal Academy of Dance in London,

England.

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During my teaching career, I worked for two not-for profit organizations; the Royal Winnipeg Ballet School, then the Alberta Ballet School. During my thirteen years with the Alberta Ballet School my mantra became "to produce pupils that would be a pleasure to watch and a delight to know". The school's programming grew to include a company of young pre-professional dancers that would give performances in a variety of venues including: "Nutcracker Suite" at Heritage Mall, "Salute to Vienna" and the "Edmonton Symphony Pops Performances" at the Winspear Centre and "An Invitation To Ballet" school tours throughout Alberta. Many of the dancers involved in these events pursued professional careers as performers, choreographers and teachers.

Upon conclusion of my contract with the Alberta Ballet School, I began free-lance work. This included teaching dance movement to students in the University of Alberta's BFA Acting Program, coaching ballet students throughout North America and providing mentoring, tutoring and teaching supervision of teachers enrolled in the Royal Academy of Dance's accreditation system. From 2011 to 2013, I served as International Adviser for the Americas to the Board of Directors of the Royal Academy of Dance in London, England and advocated for the further inclusion of male students and male teachers in its worldwide programming.

I have been retired from dance teaching for several years and I now realise that the dance instruction I provided gave:

- All students and teachers an honest, truthful and fair assessment of their work.
- An opportunity to make meaningful relationships within different learning environments.
- Furthered individuals in their personal learning and understanding of the discipline required to achieve realistic goals.

As for my Olympic dreams... While I did not compete in the 1984 Summer Olympics held in Los Angeles as my fellow London Aquatic Club team member Ken Fitzpatrick did, it was my distinct pleasure to dance with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet at the Olympic Arts Festival which ran alongside the many sporting events. I think our swim coach would have been proud! And now for your viewing pleasure we would like to present a view of what it is like to dance around the world.