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CLASSICAL BALLET in the Modern World

The sounds of murmuring echo off the white walls as dancers shuffle into the studio in their leotards and tights. Their hair is swept back into neat buns, and the ribbons of their ballet shoes are tucked away. They have come early before the technique class to warm up. Some stand by the barre, lifting their legs and extending their limbs and backs into intricate, precise poses. Some run or jump to get their heart rate up, and some lie stretching on the marley floor. They practice their pirouettes (turns) and port de bras (arm movements). They fuss over the cleanliness of each position: first, second, fourth, fifth. They examine themselves in the mirror: is my leg crossed when I lift it back? Is my head tilted too far? Thin rays of sunlight trickle through the cracks in the curtains. When the teacher arrives, the students perk up; those who were sitting now stand. The pianist sits down, and the students line up in front of the barre with their legs in fifth position. "Révérence" the teacher intstructs. The music starts to play. The class begins.

Inna Bayer, Artistic Director of Bayer Ballet Academy (BBA), says, "When I was young, I thought everybody thought ballet was beautiful. How impossible not to love such beauty." Bayer founded Bayer Ballet Academy, a local ballet school in Mountain View, California, in 2005. Since then, the school has become a prestigious international training center where students as young as 11 replace regular school with online learning to pursue professional dance careers.

As modern ballet has grown, companies that have been classical for generations have increasingly included fewer classical ballets in their repertoire. Some say that pivoting to modern ballet is the only way to keep the art alive. According to Sarah Keough of The Washington Post, "Money problems weigh on ballet like a stone around its neck: salaries, rent, costumes, toe shoes, insurance, musicians, storage, and so on… To survive into the future, I think the average ballet company would do better to downsize, aim for excitement, stir the pot — and drop the full-length ballets, which are better left to the few larger, richer operations" (qtd. in Martin). In some ways, the ballet world has no choice but to lean away from classical ballet. Modern-style productions are more economical due to simpler set designs and costumes. Contemporary pieces capture modern audiences more reliably than traditional classical works. Additionally, modern dances often require fewer rehearsal hours, saving companies more money. However, leaving classical ballet behind would mean losing the treasured choreographies that have been performed for centuries.

While classical ballet may be declining in its

global cultural influence, it still offers students skills and learning experiences that push them to grow and can help them succeed in other fields.



Bayer Ballet is one of the few institutions that resists the trend by preserving classical ballet through high artistic standards and rigorous training. Bayer Ballet emphasizes quality above all else. Other ballet schools rarely stage large classical productions due to time and budgetary constraints. By contrast, Inna Bayer does everything she can to make her ambitious classical performances happen. By preserving the traditions of classical ballet and teaching the art form authentically, Bayer Ballet spreads love for ballet and brings people together to appreciate the beauty of dance.

Though BBA is now a large school with an excellent reputation, it didn't start out this way. Inna Bayer explains, "From the beginning, it was only me. I had no students and no money. I just had a School gym in Menlo Park, which I rented. When I got more students, I rented Samovar [back room in an Eastern European Grocery store]. And then I rented one small studio on El Camino, and in 2010, I found a place here." Bayer started her school hoping to pass on her knowledge of ballet through the Vaganova curriculum, a technique developed by legendary dancer, teacher, and choreographer Agrippina Vaganova in the late nineteenth century. With this in mind, Bayer grew the school from what it was to what it is today. She believed that the community needed a place like BBA.



The scale and quality of its productions set Bayer Ballet apart from other ballet schools. Guest dancers are invited to perform from schools like the Royal Ballet School and the Kazakh National Academy, costumes are handmade in Europe, and choreographers are invited to stage new productions. It takes a great deal of work to run productions of this size while teaching and managing students full-time. Inna Bayer describes, "We compete several times a year, we have workshops, we have productions, we have full-length ballets, and we host guest teachers. We have summer shows, spring shows, and we participate in a lot of community events. We attend three competitions a year, plus the finals [for each one]. Our students compete in many different locations. It's a lot of work." For a long time, Bayer single-handedly ran her school. Now that the school is larger she has assistant staff, but she still makes the creative decisions that go into each production. Running the business side of the school while also teaching is challenging. In addition to the meetings, phone calls, and paperwork, Bayer teaches classes and private lessons, directs rehearsals, and organizes school events. Nonetheless, this doesn't lessen Inna Bayer's love for teaching dance.



Inna Bayer, Artistic Director of BBA

All of the students at BBA are hungry to improve. Both students and teachers are passionate about ballet and take pride in their work. Many families have made sacrifices for their children to take classes at BBA. Some students commute from hours away, and others have moved from outside the country to join the school.

Bayer has dedicated her life to her craft: raising strong, beautiful dancers. "I like to discover new things to help students improve. The longer you are teaching, the more you understand. You discover something new every day." (Bayer). In ballet, good teachers are rare. This is because being a good teacher requires many specific qualities. They must have sharp eyes to catch mistakes and fix them, and they must always be curious and willing to learn. They must be investigative, figure out why a movement is not working, and articulate their discovery to their students in a clear and implementable way. Inna Bayer's passion for teaching has never faltered, even after many years in the field.

Chloe Helimets is a 15-year-old student in Bay-

er Ballet Academy's day program. She started homeschooling three years ago to devote more time to pursuing her dream of becoming a professional dancer. She wakes up at 5:45 and commutes for over an hour to get to the studio at 8 am. She does much of her schoolwork during the car ride. When she arrives, she warms up and rehearses her solos, and then takes the daily class from 10 am to 2 pm. From 2 pm to 4 pm, she has private rehearsals for competitions. Then, she takes a second class with the students who attend regular high school from 6:15 to 8:30. Though this schedule is more specific to students homeschooled for dance, students who attend normal school have a similar level of dedication to ballet. After classes, students write down thevir corrections, visualize their dances while listening to music, practice in empty studios, and do cross-training exercises. Even students not aiming to become professional dancers are doing everything they can to improve, both inside and outside of classes.



Chloe Helimets, BBA Student

Ballet class is inherently meditative, despite being physically and mentally rigorous. It is required for all professional dancers daily, usually in the morning, to prepare them for rehearsals. Many dancers think of technique class as their daily "medicine": a cleansing of the body and the soul. As Bayer puts it, "Ballet is about the body. It's like a regimen. You have to eat correctly. You have to sleep. You have to stay warm [to protect your muscles]. You're always stretching. You concentrate on your body more than everybody else." Ballet has a reputation for encouraging obsessive dedication. This is because ballet requires an all-consuming commitment to be successful. To be taken seriously as a professional dancer, you have to dedicate your entire life to the art. For this reason, many BBA students sacrifice other extracurricular activities, and give up all their free time to ballet.

Maya Belomoina is a student in the Pre-Professional division at Bayer Ballet Academy. From a young age, she knew she didn't want to become a professional dancer. However, she has dedicated as much time and energy as any student who plans to pursue dance. Going to a serious professional ballet school and putting all your effort into training every day while knowing that you will probably never become a dancer is difficult. Students who don't plan to continue dancing professionally have a very different relationship with ballet than those who do. "It's a little bit bittersweet because I've put in so many years, and I'm not going to become a professional. I have to remind myself that it's about the whole journey of my life. The goal isn't to become a professional ballerina. It's just to dance." (Belomoina). It can be challenging for dancers who have put so much effort into their art to let go of the dream of pursuing it at a higher level, even if they know that the success may not be worth the sacrifices they would need to make to achieve it. Maya is just as passionate about ballet as any student who is aiming to become a professional. She is not trying to make a career out of ballet, but she works hard in her dancing each day. It is not only the performances and competitions that are fulfilling. Every day is a chance for her to prove herself.

Dancers like Maya, who love dancing but don't plan on becoming professionals, often struggle with comparing themselves to the students who train full time. "When you go to a good school surrounded by talented kids, it's hard not to feel like you're falling behind. You're constantly failing to meet your own expectations. But ballet teaches resilience… You improve and you become better. Sometimes, you will surprise yourself when you continue to work hard." (Belomoina). By continuing ballet despite doubting herself and feeling discouraged, Maya has developed perseverance and grit. To avoid unproductive comparison, she has learned to focus on herself and the joy that ballet gives her.



Maya Belomoina, BBA Student

Today, classical ballet no longer has the cultural significance that it once had. Ballet companies are straying away from traditional ballet and towards modern dance, which appeals to contemporary audiences. "As a result of modern ballet, classical ballet suffered a slow decline. In the present day, many of those knowledgeable in classical ballet have died. Familiarity with the art is almost nonexistent. Artists of today appear conflicted between the past and the present" (Perry). Fewer students who graduate from top schools are becoming professional dancers. Ballet requires extreme physical exertion, so careers in dance are very short. Furthermore, ballet dancers are paid very little, and even less as company funding decreases. The future of ballet is uncertain. No one can be sure of where it is headed or how its popularity will change.

Though ballet is slowly declining, it will continue to be valuable through its teachings, which are passed down to its students. Ballet may not stay popular as a professional art form, but it will always exist as an artform for people to test the limits of their physical abilities and work to achieve mastery of a discipline.

Classical ballet is very strict, with a set dictionary of movements, which is why it is often seen as stiff and more reserved than other styles. Emotion is not expressed as forwardly, and there is rarely any interaction with the audience. Ballet creates the illusion that the audience is peering into an ethereal, imaginary world, rather than watching a performance being put on for them. This is part of the magical quality that ballet has.

In their training, ballet students develop the ability to work well with others. "[Dancers] learn how to work together, because so much of ballet is non-verbal. The whole corps de ballet (ensemble dancers) have to move in unison, without speaking to each other" (Helimets). Ballet students learn to persevere through the support of their team. In most ballet schools, classes stick together until graduation. The students overcomes challenges together: exams, competitions, performances, and galas. This creates a lasting bond between the students. They learn to support and encourage each other.

Many students join Bayer Ballet dreaming of becoming professional dancers. Upon graduation, some change their minds and decide to pursue other career paths. However, the lessons they learned in ballet and their identities as dancers stay with them forever.

Going forward, Bayer Ballet Academy aims to uphold the high standard of ballet education they have provided for many years. Inna Bayer says, "A ballet school is a living organism," meaning it will always change and grow depending on the people (teachers, students, and choreographers.) Bayer Ballet's mission is to continue the art of classical ballet by producing skillful and successful dancers.



Chloe Helimets is on the track to becoming a professional dancer. Earlier this year, she competed at the Prix de Lausanne, a highly regarded ballet competition in Switzerland, where she won a scholarship to attend the Paris Opera Ballet School next school year. She will be moving to Paris in August and will begin studying at the school in the fall. Helimets shares her hopes for the future: "A decade from now, I hope to be dancing in a company. I hope to be a soloist, possibly a principal dancer in a company." (Helimets). Chloe has put in many extra hours to get to where she is now.

Maya Belamoina is currently a junior in high school. She plans to continue dancing in college through the dance programs that are offered. "If they don't [offer any], then I would probably start my own club. I don't want to stop dancing once I graduate high school." Maya's future is bright, no matter what career path she chooses.

In many ways, today's culture encourages people to "just get by." Children learn to do the bare minimum in school, sports, and other activities. Not only is this an unfulfilling way to live, it also means they miss out on opportunities to grow. Ballet goes against this way of thinking. Ballet dancers are conditioned to put their maximum effort into everything. A common phrase from ballet teachers that many dancers will recognize is: "you're not working hard enough." Ballet requires so much effort that even students who think they are trying their best will be told that they need to give much more if they want to improve. Furthermore, children who care deeply about a craft will inevitably experience moments of failure, which are crucial for development. Ballet students are always striving for perfection, to reach the unattainable standard. There is no endpoint for ballet dancers, it is constant effort and work. It takes hours each week just to maintain the technique that you have, and a lot more to improve. The work ethic that ballet cultivates in its students is not only significant because it will aid them throughout their lives, but also because hard work is meaningful in and of itself.



About the Author



Mia Staulo is a Film Student at Freestyle Academy. She has had a great first year at Freestyle so far, and can't wait to continue learning and create more fun projects. Mia has been a dancer since she was 4 years old, and she currently dances as a part of the Dance Spectrum program at Mountain View High School. She also enjoys dancing (and singing) in the school's musical theatre productions, including Hadestown and The Prom. Outside of school Mia loves hiking, painting, swimming, and spending time with her friends and family.

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