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Stepping up to the Barre

For older adults, ballet has benefits

By Susan M. Sippelle

On a recent October afternoon, dancers plied (squatted, gracefully) and jeted (jumped, lightly) in an adult ballet class at Broadway Dance Center, on West 45th Street between Eighth and Ninth avenues. Dorit Koppel, ballet teacher and dancer, urged her advanced beginners to create beautiful lines with their bodies.

Some complied more easily than others. Scattered among the flexible 20- and 30-somethings in her class were a few older dancers.

"It's never too late to reap the benefits that come with taking ballet," said Koppel, who has been performing and teaching for more than 25 years.

"I'm a terrible dancer," said Bill Youmans, 50, an Upper West Side resident and actor who is currently performing in the Broadway show, "The Farnsworth Invention." But he takes Koppel's class whenever he can because he finds ballet inspiring. "Ballet is like yoga," Youmans said. "It opens up my creative sensors and I feel a lot more on in my acting." He has also found that ballet improves his posture, strength and balance.

Research bears out Youmans belief that dance has both physical and mental health benefits.

"In a recent study, we showed that regular social dancers had better balance and gait than non-dancers," Dr. Joe Verghese of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine of Yeshiva University wrote in an e-mail. Verghese is the clinical director of the Einstein Aging Study, a longitudinal research study on aging funded by the National Institutes of Health. Although he is not aware of any research that focuses solely on ballet, he wrote that observational studies also show that regular social dancing is associated with reduced cognitive decline in older adults.

"Ballet keeps me from feeling like an old lady," said Lynne Miller, 62, an Upper East Sider who takes Koppel's class three times a week.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends regular exercise to reduce the risk of developing chronic diseases, including heart disease, to aid in the management high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity or high cholesterol, and to improve the ability to function and stay independent.

Miller has discovered that ballet helps her maintain her youthfulness by improving her grace, flexibility and stamina.

Peter Hamparian, 76, a violinist who has been taking ballet classes and lifting weights for more than 20 years, agrees.



Joseph Gonzalez, 56, holds a position at the barre in ballet class at Broadway Dance Center. He loves the discipline and rigor of the art form.

"Ballet contributes to a complete feeling of well-being," he said, "and improves my agility and flexibility."

Stretching, integral to the discipline of ballet, does improve flexibility, according to the Mayo Clinic. Other benefits include the enhancement of joints' range of motion, which lessens the risk of injury from falls—especially important for aging adults; improved circulation, which speeds recovery from muscle injuries; better posture by keeping muscles from getting too tight; and stress relief through muscle relaxation.

Joseph Gonzalez, 56, an editor and writer, has been taking ballet classes for nearly 30 years. He values ballet's health and socialization benefits, but he also appreciates the discipline and rigor of the art form itself. "What I love about taking class is the simple joy of moving to music in a manner that has been polished and handed down from generation to generation over four centuries," he wrote in an e-mail.

"I think any activity that keeps people moving in this day and age is absolutely essential," said Dr. Marilyn Moffat, professor of physical therapy at the New York University Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development and author of "Age-Defying Fitness." She added that it is important for aging adults to get involved in exercise activities that they love because then they are more likely to continue to participate.

Gonzalez has clearly found the exercise activity that he loves. "There is nothing quite like the moment at the beginning of every class when the chatter stops, the music begins, you assume first position, and you're transported to another, more exquisite world," Gonzalez wrote. "It is a pleasure I hope to continue as long as my body allows." ■