

Bravura vs. Basics

How to convince your students why flashy tricks must be balanced with solid technique

BY JULIE DIANA

Former American Ballet Theatre soloist Anna Liceica has been judging the Youth America Grand Prix since 2007. “Once in a while, we see someone who tries to do too many turns without good form or musicality,” she says. “We don’t encourage it, and that dancer does not place high.” Judges (and artistic directors in attendance) might appreciate the spectacle, but they take technique and artistry into account when assessing the overall dancer. “Of course it’s nice to do a lot of pirouettes and jump high,” says Liceica. “But if the rest isn’t there, the tricks mean nothing.”

In today’s world of instant gratification, it can be hard to make students and their families understand the value of consistent, careful training. By establishing a good foundation first, you enable a dancer to then tackle the flashiest steps. But many teachers fear they’ll lose students if they take the time to break things down and focus on the details that make up good technique. On the flip side, there’s no doubt that bravura sells tickets, boosts studio enrollment and might even earn some dancers a paycheck. For teachers, the trick is to establish a healthy and responsible path from the basics to bravura.

Don’t Try This at Home

Few people will argue the benefits of proper alignment, strength and a good understanding of the basics. “Technique makes you last longer as a dancer,” says master teacher Susan Quinn Williams.



One tactic: Post a statement on your studio’s website about your commitment to proper training, per master teacher Susan Williams, seen here at Gus Giordano Dance.

“Plus, it looks phenomenal.” Yet some students are in such a rush to do tricks—before having a strong foundation—that they risk getting injured. “You have to monitor your students and make sure everyone knows your stance on the issue,” says Williams. She suggests posting a statement on your school’s website about your commitment to proper training and printing up a pamphlet describing your training method as a handout for parents and students. “If they don’t agree with it, and they just want to flail around and have fun,” she says, “then it’s not the right place for them.”

While you want students to find inspiration at the theater, in videos and online, help them understand that the studio—under your supervision—is the best place to experiment. When Williams heard that some of her students wanted to buy a stretching contraption they found online, she stopped them in their tracks. “No way,” she said. “They were talking about strapping their bodies to gain flexibility and doing some aggressive exercises they saw on YouTube.

I explained that they needed to have a professional teacher guide them to stretch properly.”

Technique First

Jaime Randall Farnworth, owner of Bobbie’s School of Performing Arts in Newbury Park, California, tells students that simple steps are building blocks for solid technique. And since more and more competitions are rewarding dancers for beautifully executed performances, the results are helping to prove her point. “Soloists with 90-degree turned-out legs stand out, as opposed to the ones who get their leg to 180 by lifting their hip,” she says. “As a teacher, it encourages you to go back and refine your students’ technique rather than throwing them too much information at once.”

Liceica agrees that quality is key. “It has to be taught in class, from when they’re really young, that lines and execution are more important than quantity,” she says. She stresses the importance of things like using every



muscle in the foot, thinking about turnout and making clean lines. She also recommends taking pictures of students in class, rehearsal or performance to give them a visual tool of reference. “The young generation is so into photos and social media,” Liceica says. “Even if you don’t actually take a picture, ask them how they think it would look? Make them think that their position is about to be immortalized. The minute I say something like that, they’re all pointing their feet.”

Flash Can Be Fun

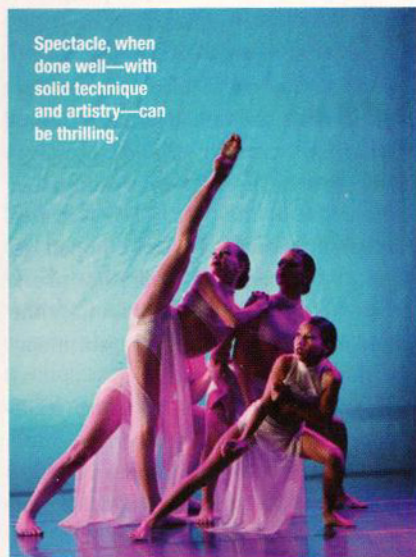
Every style of dance, from ballet to hip hop, presents an opportunity for showmanship and jaw-dropping feats of athleticism. Liceica encourages students to push for tricks if they can do them well and musically. “I wouldn’t want to hold anyone back, especially if there’s a natural ability,” she says. “I hope teachers encourage kids to hone their natural talents and still bring the artistry.” But if a student can do five pirouettes with no form or finish, for example, try pulling the reins a bit. Have them go back to three or four turns with correct placement before they start pushing again for more.

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—YAGP judge Anna Liceica

Bravura can get everyone in the audience on their feet. But like most things in life, balance is key. Spend time showing dancers how they can link steps beautifully, and make sure they do so with the right feeling and quality. “You want to inspire and motivate them, and show that artistry in their dancing touches people on a higher level,” says Liceica. “If they can connect with their audience and make them feel something, the audience goes home remembering it.” **DT**

Julie Diana retired from Pennsylvania Ballet in 2014. She and her husband Zachary Hench now direct Juneau Dance Theatre in Alaska.



Spectacle, when done well—with solid technique and artistry—can be thrilling.