Dena Moss, Joffrey Ballet School, New York

Night School

What it takes to open your doors to adult students

BY MARY ELLEN HUNT

"I'm a little nervous," murmurs a woman sitting with her legs carefully folded together in the lobby of San Francisco's Academy of Ballet. Another woman next to her smiles with a sympathetic nod as they peek through the door to watch a group of teenagers soar through a grand allégro. "Looks hard."

Though studios often build their core reputation around the training of young pre-professionals, many schools are discovering the benefits of expanding their adult programs, bringing a love of dance to generations of students who once thought the ballet bus might have passed them by.

At the Academy, where I teach, what started as a morning stretching class for women some 23 years ago has since morphed into a lively and bustling program serving some 150 adult students, with class levels that range from absolute beginner to advanced intermediate.

"When we first offered basic beginning classes, we never realized it would be that popular," says Zory Karah, co-director of the school. "We used to start a new beginning class only once a year, but we had long waiting lists every time, so we began them twice a year. Now it's so popular that we start new classes every September, February and July."

Some sign up because they did ballet when they were kids. Some always wanted to but never thought they could. And the demographic mix is wide-ranging. A beginning class I once taught included a software engineer, a rector of a local church and an OB/GYN—all successful professionals willing to shed their well-earned outer layers of competence to start at a humbling square one at the ballet barre.

"They teach me as much as I teach them," says Dena Moss of the Joffrey Ballet School in New York and the co-author of a book about adult ballet

education titled *The Joffrey Ballet School's Ballet-Fit*. A practicing lawyer herself, Moss points out the enormous energy and therefore serious motivation that it takes to work all day and then take her class in the evening.

Like many teachers, Moss started out teaching children, but over the past 20 years she has gradually developed her own methods of training adult beginning students. The Joffrey Ballet School in New York, which recently expanded to include a second location for its studios, has had an adult program in place since the 1960s, says director Chris D'Addario. He adds that the program has grown 150 percent in the last year as the school has added weeklong seminars and intensive dance workshops into their curriculum. "We looked at a lot of other models," D'Addario explains. "For instance, what does a gym do to attract clients?"

There are programs throughout the day—morning and early afternoon time slots are generally given to the children's program, but adult classes are primarily in the evenings from 6:30 to 9 pm, when people get off work—a typical schedule for most studios with adult programs. And the school gets the word out through e-mail lists and social review websites like Yelp. Ultimately though, says D'Addario, much of the success of the adult program is teacher-driven. "Just like you have personal trainers whom you love," he says, "we find that successful adult classes are personality-driven."

"A big part of teaching adults is like performing onstage," says Acia Gray, the director of Tapestry Dance Company in Austin, Texas, which sees some 300 adult students regularly taking classes in their academy. "You have to be really on. With kids you can be a little more academic—they're used to being professional learners. With the adults there has to be an element of entertainment."

A combination of double frappés has caused minor chaos at the barre. Students are gritting their teeth with concentration, but the coordination of flex and pointe is just eluding them. "Well, it's not . . . bad," I begin slowly, and there are giggles from around the room as if they were kids. "But I definitely think we can make that one better. Shall we see how we can improve it?"

Teaching adults, observes Karah, requires a high degree of sensitivity. "This may be the first time in a long time that they're being challenged," he says. "It's in front of other people and it's physical. So you have to make sure that you keep them feeling that it's constructive and not personal criticism."

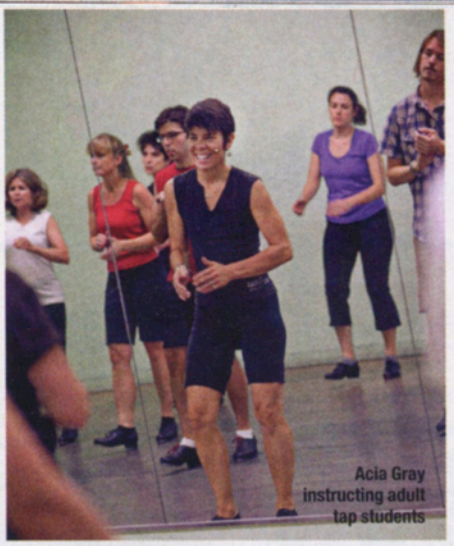
"Ballet can be extremely infantilizing," says Moss. "We call everyone boys and girls; teachers are always telling you what to do. But adults have an intellectual awareness that's different from young dancers and you have to keep that in mind."

Paramount of importance in adult classes is making sure that students are working safely. "With adults students, every body is different," says Richard Gibson, who co-directs the Academy in San Francisco. "An 8- or 9-year-old child is still pliable, but an adult must not be forced beyond what they have. So a teacher must know what flexibility they have and what rotation they have. Now, they may not be in that same place in a year, but you should know where the adult student is, and then strengthen them so they can go beyond. An adult body can evolve, but each one will be at a different pace."

At Joffrey, Moss has developed a one-hour introductory class format adapted from her children's curriculum. "We start on the floor with pointing and flexing the feet—we isolate the feet, the hands, the arms, the shoulders, to get them to feel what it's going to be like when they stand up," she explains. "We learn how to pull up without the pressure of doing it standing. They come to understand what turnout is, they learn how to isolate the hip, essentially they learn how to work correctly. Then when they stand up, they don't look at their feet and say, 'Oh, I'm not turned out'—they can feel it from the correct place."

Strengthening the core and protecting the joints is even more important for adults than for youngsters, and many teachers prefer longer barres, often

Zory Karah, Academy of Ballet, San Francisco



Acia Gray instructing adult tap students

paced for a slower warm-up. "You want an emphasis on strengthening," says Karah. "So, by the time they start doing jumps, their stomach is strong and there is less impact on the knees. The adults in our classes won't do anything high-impact until perhaps their third year of training." (He starts with jumps on two feet and gradually introduces jumps onto one foot or off one foot. Grand jetés are reserved for the beginning intermediate level.) "That's longer than would be the case for kids," he says, "but we're trying to create an instrument that is intelligent, so they know how not to hurt themselves."

Which is not to say that those beginning years need be boring—quite the opposite, in fact. "To keep it interesting, I teach some combinations that aren't going to hurt them or give them bad habits if they don't do it perfectly right away," says Gibson. "I give them simple waltzes, more like a triplet, and balancés, chassés, steps to get them moving and thinking about coordination."

And connecting personally with the students keeps the interest-level high. "Try to get to each and every one of them individually," says Moss. "Every student has something they do well, and everybody has something that needs correction. Learn their names and try to get the pronunciation right. They feel their names are them and it helps them feel special and welcome in the class."

For most studios, the ideal class size will depend on a variety of factors, including the space available and the level of the class, but most of the directors agree that you don't want to have too large a class. "We don't want it to be an en masse experience," says Gray (Tapestry Dance's average class size is around 20 people). "We want everyone to feel like they've got their own space and one-on-one attention."

At Tapestry, Gray notes, the price for an adult class runs about $5 less than the price for children, whose coursework demands more paperwork, more evaluations and an end-of-year demonstration to administer.

Gray, who has experimented with scheduling classes for moms coordinated to classes for their young children, says that understanding the needs of your market is key. Gibson, for instance, notes that the nature of San Francisco is that people are transient, often changing jobs or moving, meaning that new students may not stay for long. Thus the Academy's classes change in size, and starting new adult beginning classes frequently helps keep the number of students in the program high. D'Addario also tracks seasonal trends, observing that in warmer weather adult enrollment is lower—"people would rather be out in the park, or on vacation spending time with their families."

"The key is that we want to have a safe place for adults to train," says Gray. "It takes a lot of guts just to walk into an adult dance class. They're not coming to just learn the technique of a dance—this is their 'me' time. They don't want to be pushed to the limit where it's not fun."

My student looks dubious, maybe even slightly panicked, as I take her hand and we break down a balancé.

"Let's do this all together," I say to the rest of the class. The group-sway sweeps up the single student and suddenly her eyes light up as she realizes that she's got it.

"It should be a comfort zone—no pressure, low stress," says Moss warmly. "It's a lesson—maybe a hard one—that you don't have to excel at everything to enjoy it. The process itself can be enjoyable, and if it's satisfying to them, I'm perfectly happy."

Former dancer, now teacher, Mary Ellen Hunt writes about dance and the arts for the San Francisco Chronicle *and other publications.*

Adapting to Adults

Teaching adults requires a slightly more nuanced approach than teaching youngsters. Richard Gibson offers this advice: "I encourage the child within. I don't speak down to them, of course—adults are more intellectually developed—but I find that same innocence and desire to do things as you would in a child."

Richard Gibson

Although you might find yourself using the same imagery and approach, here are some do's and don'ts to consider for older students.

- **Appeal to the intellectual side of adults by recommending enrichment. Adult students enjoy getting book recommendations or advice on performances to see.**
- **Don't push adult students, especially beginners, to perform steps that are stressful on joints, such as grand pliés or large jumps. Adult joints do not have the elasticity and ability to recover of younger bodies.**
- **Encourage them to release tension through breathing and coordination, especially while doing an exercise or combination.**
- **Don't criticize, but do correct. Adults are much more sensitive to tone than kids and can tell the difference between criticism and correction.**
- **Don't let disparaging remarks among adult students breed negativity in class. Many teachers agree that they'd rather ask a student to leave than allow them to create an unfriendly environment in the studio.**
- **Keep the atmosphere in the class light and encourage a sense of humor in students.**

"Make dance a positive, enjoyable thing, not an unattainable goal," says Gibson. "To some degree, every person can attain something and they should feel that." —*MEH*

Photo at left by Melisa Ackermann, courtesy of Tapestry Dance.