

Pilates and Dance

Corinne Viola

Joseph Pilates was not a dancer. He did, however work with several dancers like Mikhail Baryshnikov, George Balanchine, Rudolf von Laban, Hanya Holm and many more. The reason why so many people associate Pilates with dance is because Pilates took off when he moved to the states, opened up a studio next door to the New York City Ballet and close to several others. Dancers would turn to Pilates to assist with their training.

Both Pilates and dance use the whole body in their movements. For example, dancers can use *rondejambe* at the barre. *Rondejambe* interprets as “Circle of the leg” in English. Even though only one leg is moving, the standing leg has to be turned out and engaged. The weight of the standing leg has to be evenly distributed (not too much on the heel or the ball of the foot). Even if there are no arm movements choreographed, the arms have to be rounded in first or second position-recruiting the back muscles to get involved.

This same “*rondejambe*” is also used in Pilates, yet typically on the mat. If it is used lying on just one side of the body, the same exact principles apply.

By using the mat, executing the same circular movements, similar muscle groups are working, but the body does not take as much stress lying down.

Unlike other exercise, Pilates and dance keep muscles long and lean. After consistently participating in other sports, one may find themselves bulking up in only certain areas of their body. Pilates and dance are quite the opposite. The weight that dancers lift is the weight of their own body or limbs. Unless lifting a partner, most exercises are facilitated through restraint and resistant exercises. Therefore, all muscles stay long and lean. The whole body receives attention typically because one muscle helps participate in activating the other.

The mind is unarguably the most important ingredient when training in both Pilates and dance. The mind is capable of allowing the body to do almost anything. After learning the basics of technique, the body understands the core concepts of general movement. With these tools, more and more vocabulary can be taught, allowing the body to naturally move with ease, heal and tone. Without the mind understanding the vocabulary to its maximum capacity, the body will not be trained properly.

When Joseph began experimenting with equipment designs, he was using springs on hospital beds. Most of his patients could barely get out of bed.

Through his exercises, his patients gained more strength which gave them motivation to get out of bed. Joe’s book “Return to Life,” concentrates heavily on the connection between the body and the mind. The observations he makes in his book help the reader deal with everyday stress, allowing in more mental and spiritual health. Joe called physical fitness “the first requisite of happiness.” When the mind is in touch with the body, it is a lot happier.

Stress is one of the leading causes of death among Americans today. Both Pilates and dance free up toxins, promotes respiratory and circulatory function and force nerves to relax. Other forms of exercise put strain on the back, knees and hips which can often cause injury and decreased enthusiasm to be active.

Often times, Martha Graham and George Balanchine would send their dancers to Joseph Pilates for injury rehabilitation. Dancers like Romana Kryzanowska, Kathy Grant, and Carola Trier also turned to Joseph with knee, ankle and back pain. Every one of them were not only relieved from their pain after a few sessions with him, but also allowed them to continue pursuing their career. After their treatments they were all very active in giving back to the Pilates community.

Other expectations of similarities between dance and Pilates include: strength, flexibility and posture. Through training, this dancer has simply applied each of these ingredients.



If back posture is good, as illustrated here, the spine allows for shock absorption, extra flexibility, and range of motion to movement. Having evenly developed back muscles and strong abdominals helps support the spine. But if there is too much or too little curve in your spine, your posture is poor, which can lead to structural problems and back pain. Starting the training at a young age develops the back muscles early and allows abdominal muscles to support good posture, strength and flexibility. A strong emphasis in the core (or interpreted in Pilates vocabulary-“powerhouse”) gains an unbelievable amount of capabilities to apply towards both dance and Pilates.

Understanding the positive similarities between Pilates and dance encourage both to only improve. Receiving training in Pilates prior to dance will only make a better dancer. On the contrary, as learned, several dancers become excellent Pilate’s instructors. Satisfy the world by choosing both.

About Corinne Viola

Corinne has 25 years of dance experience. Throughout her childhood she trained in ballet, tap, jazz and gymnastics. Corinne was given fantastic opportunities to travel and work with several professional dancers. When she was 14 she attended a workshop and took her first Pilates class. She was immediately intrigued. Corinne decided to pursue a career in dance, focusing mainly in Modern. While attending the University of Illinois Corinne was exposed to Feldenkrais, Laban, Alexander, Yoga and Pilates. She gained more knowledge and interest in each of these but pursued a stronger interest in Pilates and Yoga. She continued taking classes which incorporated both Yoga and Pilates but decided that it wasn't enough. In 2005, she finally decided to get certified in Pilates through PhysicalMind. She loved the opportunity to learn more about it with others who shared the same interest. Since then, she has been teaching both Pilates and dance around the Northwest suburbs. She plans to continue broadening her knowledge and passing it on to others.