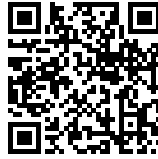




"WHY BALLET?" QUESTIONS FROM IRAN

Posted on April 1, 2023 by Julie Cronshaw



This very interesting exchange between an Iranian, Esfandiar, and Julie Cronshaw on the topic of ballet, points to the importance and necessity of the arts to properly cultivate the ground of culture so that it may yield good fruit.

Julie Cronshaw is a graduate of the Royal Ballet School's Teacher's Training Course and has danced professionally in ballet companies in Germany, the United States and Russia. Currently, she is the Artistic Director of the Highgate Ballet School in England. She gained her Cecchetti Teaching Diploma in 2009 and Fellowship (the highest teaching award given by the ISTD) in 2010. Julie guest teaches regularly in Paris. She is a founding member of the Auguste Vestris Society, a non-profit, Paris-based teaching organization which is dedicated to promoting classical ballet, particularly the work of great ballet masters such as Enrico Cecchetti and August Bournonville.



Esfandiar (Es): Hello Miss Cronshaw. This is Esfandiar here in Turkey but I am from Iran. My friends in the Lebanon have told me about your film *Ballet's Secret Code*, on the teacher Enrico Cecchetti, and that now it has 460,000 views after two years on YT.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGT4g7FHSvA>

We have no ballet in Iran since 1979 but I like it. I feel happy when I see the people dancing to that beautiful music and I would like to do it too. Also, the Russian people here always talk about ballet and their favourite dancers. I read about it, I have learnt names for steps and watched many films. These are my questions to you about Enrico Cecchetti.

Julie Cronshaw (JC): First of all, thank you for taking the time to write to me.

It has been quite a surprise, to follow the rise in audience figures of *Ballet's Secret Code*, since its release in January 2021. The project evolved from a 'light-bulb' moment which distilled the Method of Cecchetti's [Days of the Week](#) into a few simple principles, and which I felt needed to be shared. When the project was finally finished I could say to anyone who asked: if you want to know, it's on film and the

information is freely available to all.

What has been even more of a surprise is to receive and read the hundreds of interesting comments and questions from across the world. There have been some lively debates on aspects of ballet as an art form and how the principles relate not only to other kinds of dance and sports, but also to society in general.

Es: What is the difference between what they teach in Russia today, and Cecchetti ? Is Cecchetti too old-timer for stage-dancing now?

JC: To be honest, the only ballet classes in Russia that I have seen recently are on the internet and the last time I watched a Russian ballet company live in London was when the Bolshoi Ballet visited a few years ago. Their dancers are so superb technically and artistically, and the love, reverence and understanding they have for the art form is palpable, I don't wish to criticise...that would be petty and small-minded of me! Cecchetti -and a decade or two before him, August Bournonville- were not wrong when they said that the light of Terpsichore would shine again in Russia when it had dimmed in Europe.

Still as we say here, 'A Cat may look at a King' and when I watch a Russian ballet class sometimes it is interesting to see how the dancer's anatomy is pushed far beyond what I believe to be aesthetically and morally acceptable. This is a personal observation! I state it clearly on the documentary, a dancer's body is their instrument, don't trash it! Do you not wince in empathic pain when you watch unnecessary contortion and the extreme stretching? This is in their classes and onstage as much as it is in so many other companies and schools around the world.

Also I notice the 'international style' combinations one sees in so many ballet classes everywhere (Jean-Guillaume Bart of the Paris Opera refers to them as 'McDonalds' ballet') are creeping into some of their company classes too.

When I danced briefly in Russia in 1994, the company classes were full of ballet steps I recognised from my Cecchetti ballet training and had not otherwise seen for a while - I was living in the USA at the time and not studying Cecchetti Method. The Vaganova style is different but the principles are the same, exactly as they were back then, as far as I experienced for the short time I was there in that company.

The Russian dancers are otherwise so fabulous and they deliver what an audience expects these days, which would be a short answer to the second part of your question: is Cecchetti too much of an old-timer for today's stage dancing? I fear "Yes, at the present time". This could all change and hopefully for the better, because we can all see how the Western world is descending into a very dark place at a very fast pace.

Artists have always reflected the society around them and this includes its moral, cultural, philosophical and spiritual aspects. Whether one likes or loathes what a choreographer puts onstage, it usually reflects some of these aspects in his creations. I discovered just how prescient a well-known contemporary choreographer is, when I gave a presentation on ballet, ballet training and the arts in the summer of 2021 and showed an excerpt on video. I'm not sure if the piece was intended to be for or against trans-humanism and the war on women, but it was quite frightening and some of the audience asked me to switch off the video as it made them feel sick.

If one can be optimistic about the future of humanity then there is a place for Cecchetti's Method in the ballet companies of that world. Cecchetti's training is moral, as well as anatomically sound, and of great artistic merit. The old laws of England tell us: *Be honest, do no harm and cause no loss*. Cecchetti would surely agree.

Es: I do a lot of sports, but I would one day like to try ballet. I see that the Italian man in your film does not have today's special ballet physique. But he can do the steps. The ballerina is quite old and can still do all the steps. You are quite old and can do the steps, too. So, is it necessary to be young and have special ballet physique to dance Cecchetti correctly?

JC: How does one define "old"? When you watch those of us with maturity who can dance those Cecchetti combinations, we do not feel "old" because the *enchaînements* (step combinations) do not require us to push our muscles, ligaments and joints beyond their limits. We enjoy and appreciate the sophistication of these wonderful combinations, where younger dancers cannot, yet. And we do not need to compete with the ballet-gymnast who can kick up their legs for effect when we are instead, whether consciously or not, exploring the geometric shapes and Platonic forms within an adage set to a Beethoven sonata. There is of course a minimal necessary technical requirement and a very high bar is set for some of the combinations, but this is classical ballet and an art form to be studied for years, decades, not just a jog around the gym.

It is recommended that if one wishes to become a competent practitioner of anything, better to start when one is young - but Cecchetti Method does not preclude beginners who are adults or dancers with less than perfect physique. As it is a Method based on the efficient mechanical actions of the human body in motion, it can be taught to anyone who is willing and reasonably able to learn it.

Es: I notice that Cecchetti seems very decent, I think it's the word, compared to today's ballet. There seem to be more steps to the music, difficult, fast steps; it is less exhibitionist, less putting the body on show. In the Middle East, we don't like it when private things are shown in public. Cecchetti could be more popular in the Middle East because of decency. Do you think?

JC: Cecchetti lived and worked at a time when people were more modestly clothed and classical ballets favoured elaborate costumes, a story, and step combinations.

As the 20th century wore on, what became "acceptable" in society (or rather, it has been proposed, what has been thrust upon us by influential people intent on pushing their own agenda) also became acceptable on the stage. As I mentioned above, artists reflect what is going on around them, so ballet styles have changed too. Of course you can argue, times have to change, but one should always strive for better in any age, or leave that which is good and true to serve as a baseline from which to begin to explore the new.

The classical ballet can so clearly express the most noble expressions of humanity in form and movement and yes, simply through steps! It's a language.

We have now reached a point here in the West where we are scraping the bottom of the barrel culturally and morally, and it's in the arts as well. There is a profound disgust that many of us feel when we are subjected to the unmentionably vile ugliness of modern art. As spectators we must distance ourselves from it or we will suffer emotional and spiritual abuse, which causes us long term psychological damage and leads to societal moral decline and degradation.

Es: I study physics. You write on your Website [The Cecchetti Connection](#) that Cecchetti knew about the physical principles that he put into each day of class for one week. Why is that important? Instead of just thinking up nice moves to keep students happy?

JC: Without standing upon the basic physical principles of movement that correspond to natural law, dancers would, almost literally, not have a leg to stand upon.

The beauty of Cecchetti's Days of the Week is that each day concentrates both the dancer's body AND mind on a specific set of steps with similar movement qualities, and builds upon their complexity and variety as the dancer's competency and artistry develops. As a result, the dancer's competency and artistry also develop through the repetition and increase in complexity of the original basic step of the day—and the following week this step returns to provide the theme for that day's class.

Just as the ballet class is structured with a barre and centre work, Cecchetti took the structure and development of basic movement principles one by one, and taught them in their most obvious order, across six days of the week. They begin on Monday with the notion of aplomb and progress to the Saturday class of bouncing allegro.

It's a very disciplined and highly organised method of working that constantly scales up the dancer's capacity to improve technique and movement possibilities. Just kicking up the legs, doing multiple turns and throwing oneself across the floor with a few fancy circus tricks is not only hazardous, but also eventually stagnates the mind and will have the opposite effect on any thinking dancer whose level of artistry would otherwise grow with maturity, even as their pliancy and strength starts to decline.

Es: You are a Fellow of the Imperial Society of Dancing, Cecchetti branch. Someone told me that it is harder than getting a PhD, so many years of study and theory, and you have to dance all the steps well too. How did you learn all the things that you know about Cecchetti ? Who are the teachers who were your guides?

JC: I could not comment on a comparison of the difficulties of becoming a Fellow in the Cecchetti Method with the challenges of attaining a PhD! When one has danced classical ballet all one's life, and then teaches, at some point it becomes either an obvious or natural progression to study in depth the Method learned for so many years.

I am thankful to all my many ballet teachers for sharing their years of experience, knowledge and wisdom. I was not Cecchetti-trained as a child, and when I lived in the USA I was a professional dancer, working with my former husband, whose career was with American Ballet Theatre and the New York

City Ballet.

As a student at the Royal Ballet School, I studied with the internationally-renowned Cecchetti teacher [Richard Glasstone](#) and then trained on and off with him over many years.

[Roger Tully](#) has been the most [profoundly influential](#) ballet teacher I have ever worked with, and he taught a completely different style of ballet class, but always stated the principles.

It was because of his teaching that I put two and two together and realised the underlying principles behind Cecchetti's Days of the Week. In 2007, I was lucky enough to be asked to join the [Société Auguste Vestris](#), a not-for-profit teaching society in Paris, whose founder is a woman of exceptional intellectual and practical capabilities, Katharine Kanter. The extraordinary people that Katharine knows from around the world and has brought together—either to become part of the society or to give presentations and workshops—has stimulated a quest for knowledge, and for certain it sparked off a latent intellectual predisposition that sent me down the path I've been on ever since!

Thanks to Katharine, a series of lucky happenstances, useful contacts and the financial support from the AV Society, I was able to persuade two dancers to take part in the film and find the spaces and the time to rehearse them. Then the film itself gradually came together! I read all I could find on Cecchetti and his contemporaries. His life story often provides a background context when I am occasionally asked to write an article for a Cecchetti or other dance journal.

Es: I have watched many films from the 50s and 60s. For example, Margot Fonteyn and Michael Somes in [The Swan Lake](#), 1960. The music is very fast, faster than today. But she can do all the steps in time, very fast "inside" turns and very fast backbend, or else tilting sideways or forwards on one leg off-balance. She was old then, 40, but she doesn't seem worried. Her muscles are pretty; she doesn't look athletic. Today, the girls look like sportswomen with big muscles, they are tense and push the steps hard. Why is that? Is ballet a sport?

JC: Margot Fonteyn was not only an artist of the highest level but also a very special human being, according to the anecdotes of those who knew and worked with her. The artist reflects their state of being and doing through their art. Dancers today are not educated to think and act either inside or outside of the studio, in the way that Fonteyn did.

During the decades that Fonteyn was a *prima ballerina*, Cecchetti Method was still being taught extensively in London, for example at the Royal Ballet School even though the Founder and Director of the Royal Ballet company at that time, Dame Ninette de Valois, was already looking around internationally for teachers and dancers to enhance the technical level of the company, its prestige and global appeal. The style of the Royal Ballet, exemplified by the choreography of Frederick Ashton, showed intricate footwork, lyrical lines and fluid port de bras. It developed as a combination of the teaching of the first and second generation of Cecchetti trained dancers, Ballets Russes emigres, and other independent ballet teachers from around the world.

This style of dancing depended upon step choreography and gestures to convey a story or sometimes an abstract idea. It was the way things were done in those days, and it wasn't the fashion to dance onstage in one's underwear. Nor to kick the legs up and perform ballet tricks for sensational effect. This is maybe why dancers today push so hard and have the big muscles and dance like it's a sport: the training encourages effect and show, not so much anymore the crystallisation into form of an idea or ideal from the realm of the imagination, and projected through the highly contrived - and perfectly suited for it- environment of the theatre stage.

As a side note, one cannot say that dancers from those mid 20th century decades could not do the tricks, like the fouettés and so on, of course they could, but there was another aesthetic that took precedence over the effects. Technique was used as a means to an end not its end. **Ballet is an art not a sport.**

Es: I have also watched the Russian ballet films from the 50s and 60s. I enjoy to see the girls like [Svetlana Efremova](#) or [Gabriela Komleva](#). Other girls are good too. They could do anything, jump high, criss-cross very fast with the feet, also doing very hard steps on their toe-tips. They seem better than the girls today, stronger, telling about the music, and also, making it look easy. Why is that?

JC: They are fabulous yes aren't they? The technique taught in those days was more likely focused on step combinations and different kinds of steps rather than stretching and effects, as I've tried to explain in replying to your previous question! When one takes up more time in class stretching at the barre, obsessing over the height of an arabesque, hitting those numbers for pirouettes and wondering how one is going to look wearing not much more than a leotard or shorts that evening onstage, it must surely change one's approach to training!

I have a theory that the rampant narcissism in society and especially in the ballet, is in no small part, brought about by the ongoing unpleasant cultural changes being forced upon us at all levels, the abusive, un-education system, the horrendous global situation, political lawlessness and the pervading sense of uncertainty in the world that dancers pick up upon because they are artists and reflect that which is around them.

Es: I have watched films with American men dancing classical ballet now. Their leg muscles seem bulged up, especially the quadriceps, and they seem to put the weight to their toes. I am a sportsman and I don't put the weight on my toes. The American men are thin but they look heavy. Why is that?

JC: The body is a heavy and solid object! When one puts weight over the toes the direction of force is directed downwards and the effort required to shift it is more than when the weight is distributed about the central axis - and where the musculature in the torso can be more efficiently directed.

When the legs do more work proportionately to that of the torso it becomes obvious that the muscles in the legs will develop disproportionately to the muscles in the torso.

Es: Does Cecchetti have special steps, special training, for men ? Do the feet have to be pointing outwards as much as in modern ballet which is 180°?

JC: There are lovely combinations for the male dancer including long, sustained adages, some choreographed and complex others using simple repetition of movements and poses in the basic directions of the body. There are slow adagio pirouettes (turns) and fast, virtuosity pirouettes, for which the Maestro was renowned in his dancing years, and all sorts of jumps, not just the big leaps across the stage but bouncing combinations (in the style of Bournonville), petite and grande batterie (criss-crossing the legs in beats close to, or farther off the floor)) and unusual, off-balance combinations that wouldn't look out of place in a contemporary class!

No, the feet do not have to be turned out to 180 degrees, and Cecchetti's 5th position doesn't over-cross, which helps to keep the legs turned out at the thigh and facilitates speed.

Es: I saw your "Tips for a Ballet Teacher." You talk about *renversé* (bending strongly and turning upon oneself, either towards (*en dedans*) or away (*en-dehors*) from the standing leg). I don't understand how

you can hold off-balance like that while moving downwards or turning. You don't fall down. Is it special muscles you use? Or is it the move that helps you?

JC: It's the momentum of the turn generated by the torso, the correct carriage and use of the head as it's heavy, and the coordination of the legs and arms, all of which are vital for carrying the momentum of the *renversé* and enabling the recovery, especially if it's into a position of extension *en l'air* (the gesture leg is fully stretched and held in the air), as in *renversé en dedans*.

Es: I saw that Lebanese teenagers have sent you a video of a ballet they made up, to honour Cecchetti, after they watched your film. Please tell about that.

JC: The YouTube video made by this couple (who were young but not teenagers, if I recall!) was made during one of the Covid lockdowns. They rehearsed and produced a *pas de deux* in the summer heat, in a ruined building which was little more than a shell, and the piece they created, was very simply and honestly done, sincere and very artistic. I was contacted through the Ballet's Secret Code e-mail address and sent the link. It reminded me of what Roger Tully used to say in class sometimes, and it would be said not in irony, but as a high compliment:

"It could almost be dancing!"

Featured: *Anna Pavlova in the Ballet Sylphyde*, by Valentin Serov; painted in 1909.

