



Ballet Without Barres

Kids say ballet is boring? A different approach might keep them in class.

By Karen White

Eileen Juric has loved ballet since she was 7, when she caught sight of New York City Ballet principal dancer Maria Tallchief gliding across her TV screen. As a student, one of her favorite parts of class was barre, and when she became a teacher, Juric loved teaching hour-long barres. Yet about seven years ago she found herself facing bored students in studios where scheduling and other pressures meant there was never enough time for ballet. So she created an entire ballet curriculum that—hold onto your hats!—gets rid of the barre.

"I honor ballet, and it's incomparable," says Juric, a former ballet dancer with Lyric Opera of Chicago's now-defunct ballet company. "It's not that I'm trying to dumb it down or water it down, [but] I see ballet barre either being not done at all, or done in a shoddy manner. For me, this is a mission—how can I make kids enjoy ballet? How can I keep ballet alive so that the children will see how it helps

their jazz, helps their lyrical, helps everything that they do, and they will embrace it?"

Thus was born her BalletBarreNone curriculum, which replaces a traditional barre with ballet-based exercises, some done lying on the floor and others in center. The exercises are designed so that students are constantly shifting weight and working both sides of the body. Time usually spent on running through the traditional sequence of barre exercises is saved when steps are combined in center exercises (for example, a tendu exercise peppered with quarter turns). The solo nature of the barre is tempered as students work with partners to retain interest. Use of flat arms such as airplane or table arms keep shoulders and backs from curving.

Every exercise is designed to get the students to feel—the muscles working, the groundedness of a correct plié, expansiveness when opening the arms—and works against some

students' misconceptions that ballet is just about hitting poses.

"In some studios, we have so little time to get this across to these kids. I wanted to give priority to the movement quality from the inside out," Juric says. "Then when they go to the barre when they're older, things just click and they have a different awareness. 'My arm is on the barre, but I still feel that side of my body. I still feel that it's active, and the whole side needs to be active.' We teach so piecemeal with so little time; it's so hard to get the ballet job done."

Juric has documented the first three levels of BalletBarreNone in a DVD series, *The Children's Hour of Power*. Each disc (for ages 3–5, 5–7, and 7–9) is designed as an effective one-hour-a-week ballet curriculum. "It is a very bare-bones approach that refines and zeros in on the most important aspects of ballet needed for a good foundation and for good technique," she says. The emphasis on center movement appeals to recreational students of any age, she



BalletBarreNone creator Eileen Juric believes it's her mission to help students of all ages and technical abilities enjoy ballet. OPPOSITE: BalletBarreNone students strive for correct alignment and good balance without the aid of a barre.

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BalletBarreNone replaces a traditional barre with ballet-based exercises, some done lying on the floor and others in center.

says, and because the exercises target correct alignment, they can supplement advanced students' training as well.

Ballet has been in Juric's life since the day she caught Tallchief's TV performance and announced to her mother that she too wanted to dance. Her family lived in Manhattan, and her mother found a studio down the street that offered a coupon deal and signed her up.

When Juric was 13, a family friend caught a performance and urged her to audition for The Joffrey Ballet School. She did, and ended up studying on scholarship at both Joffrey and the School of American Ballet. In 1978, at age 18, she joined the ballet company associated with the Lyric Opera of Chicago and danced for one year under the direction of her "inspiration," Maria Tallchief, until knee problems forced her to stop. After some soul-searching, she turned her attention to teaching.

"I got to perform with phenomenal people, but maybe what I wanted was to be with children and really help them, because my teachers were such an inspiration to me," Juric says.

She singles out the Joffrey School's Meredith Baylis. "Meredith gave me so much more than just ballet class. She gave me a sense that I meant something. She also showed me that it wasn't only about the ballet, but that teaching is a vehicle that helps children feel good about themselves. To me, that was more powerful than getting up there and having an audience applaud for me."

A recuperating Juric found her way into a Zena Rommett Floor-Barre® class in New York City taught by Rommett herself. "I took the floor part," says Juric, "and then she



BalletBarreNone is designed to help students feel and understand correct use of muscles in ballet exercises.

said, 'Let's go to the barre.' I thought, 'Finally, here's what I do best.' We did pliés and tendus and she said, 'OK, we're done.' I thought, 'What's wrong with this woman?' But little by little I understood that I was getting more out of this than some of my ballet classes, because I was finding those core muscles. [Rommert's approach] allowed me to connect with my body in a way I never had before."

Juric took this revelation with her when she opened a studio, Basically Ballet, in Forked River, New Jersey, in 1991. She tried to fit as much ballet into the students' schedules as possible, and yet it never seemed to be enough. "Very few of us have those perfect students that SAB has; they pick the cream of the crop," she says. "That's how ballet was intended, but nobody I know has many of those [students in their schools], so how do you deal with the students who are struggling?"

After 15 years of studio ownership, tired and burned out, Juric sold the school, moved to North Carolina, and sought a slower-paced life of freelance teaching. She began to note that students at the barre were doing tendus that looked like tendus, but she could see that they were merely mimicking the teacher rather than working from

the inside out, with an understanding of which muscles should be in use. Schedules jammed with competition and recital rehearsals meant few studios were able to offer the multiple 90-minute ballet classes that the students needed in order to improve—and without seeing improvement, she says, students lost interest.

Soon the seeds of what would become BalletBarreNone began to sprout. "The first year I was teaching very traditional ballet, but then I started to modify it. I thought, 'Am I really connected to the kids? What do they need from me?' I took my knowledge of the way a ballet class has to be and instead of putting that first, I put the needs of the students first," she says.

To do that, she relied heavily on information gleaned from her years at Joffrey when she assisted Dorothy Daniels Lister, head of the Children's Department, as she taught her pre-ballet curriculum. Juric also drew from lessons learned in Rommert's classes—"she gave me permission" to look at teaching differently, Juric says about Rommert—and from other master teachers. One was Juilliard's Lawrence Rhodes, who "constructed his class at The Joffrey Ballet School in such a way that everything built upon itself"; another was Jacques d'Amboise, whom she watched work with students in public schools in Harlem when she volunteered with the National Dance Institute in the '70s.

What Juric concocted was a curriculum that focuses on root exercises—pliés, tendus, degagés—done both on the floor and in center, adding in the basic elements of more complex technique, such as turning the head throughout an entire exercise (to introduce spotting). At all times Juric teaches students how to self-correct by asking, "What happened?" or "What did you feel?" and explaining the "why."

She peppers her lessons with fun quips—"You're either flying or dying!" or "Give me your dancer stance, not your Wal-Mart shuffle." Steps are done forward, backward, sideways; arms are added, arms are taken away. Ballet becomes dynamic and stimulating for both the students and the teacher, she says.

"I don't feel the pressure that ballet teachers feel having to get through every single frappé, every rond de jambe en l'air. I don't feel pressure about the 'what'—I'm more focused on the 'how.' If the kids feel and understand where stuff is coming from, they can achieve a movement quality in their other classes," she says.

One BalletBarreNone fan is Boleyn Willis-Zeger, director of Legacy Studios for the Performing Arts in Durham, North Carolina, who met Juric in 2004 when they were both teaching at a studio in Chapel Hill. Even then Juric's ballet classes "were never what other people would consider traditional," Willis-Zeger says, with barre combinations that were filled with weight transfers and movement transitions (such as sliding the front foot from first to fifth and back while still in demi-plié) that never allowed the

students to forget they had two legs.

One of the biggest challenges for ballet students, Willis-Zeger says, is the transference of skills learned at the barre into center. "Suddenly the security blanket is gone, and there is a disconnect that happens," she says. "With Eileen's classes, as long as I've known her, you were dancing as soon as you hit the barre, and now she's moved away from the barre altogether."

BalletBarreNone dovetails nicely with the American Ballet Theatre curriculum—which doesn't include barre work for students younger than 8—that Willis-Zeger and her teachers follow at Legacy. Beginning in center instead of at the barre, students "learn how to stand," she says. When students are then introduced to barre at an older age, they approach it as a tool—not as "monkey bars"—and can understand its function.

Willis-Zeger's pre-professional students take ballet class both with Juric and traditional ballet teachers. If an older student is struggling to find a particular muscle group or needs a movement broken down further, Willis-Zeger will offer a BalletBarreNone exercise that addresses the challenge. The floor work, she says, helps students understand what correct alignment and good placement feel like. It's particularly helpful for students new to her studio who have bad habits or physical challenges such as hyperextension.

If she sees her advanced students "looking a little too reliant on the barre," she'll forgo it in favor of a Juric-flavored center sequence. The students love it. "They spent a lot of time at the barre going through a traditional sequence," says Willis-Zeger. "If we start in center, they know they're going to do more of the fun stuff for longer, with no repeats."

Christy Curtis, owner of CC & Co. Dance Complex in Raleigh, North Carolina, hired Juric four years ago after hearing raves from dancer friends who had taken floor-barre classes with her. Juric teaches BalletBarreNone to both recreational and advanced students from ages 8 to 18 at the school, and Curtis reports success with all ages and levels. (Her serious students take ballet with both Juric and traditional teachers.)

Getting those trained in traditional ballet to try Juric's approach "does take a bit of a leap of faith," Curtis says, but she saw enthusiasm grow in her younger students and then watched as those same students arrived at advanced levels with a better understanding of which muscles are working and why.

"The barre is very necessary, but a lot of times students don't have to think about what everything else is doing in their body when that hand is on the barre," she says. "With the exercises Eileen developed you have to think, and if you're not using the right muscles, it's not physically possible to do the exercise. At the barre, you can sometimes relax on one side, and you're still going to be OK."

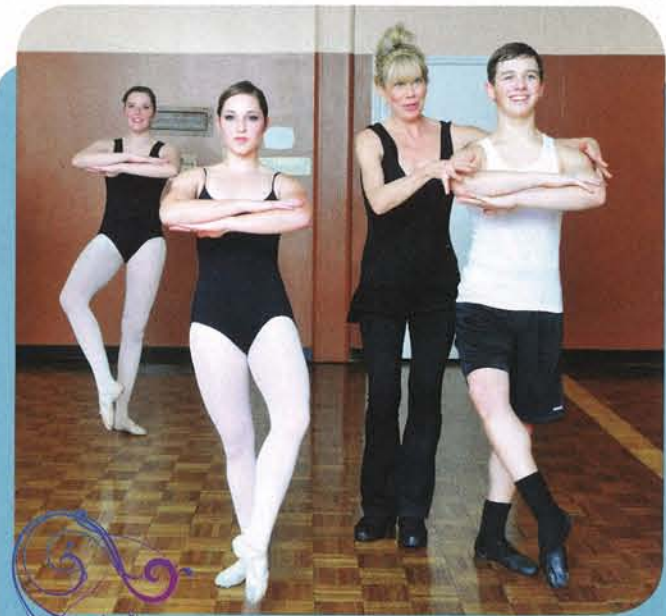
"For advanced dancers, they have the hardest time

executing some of these exercises because they work muscles they haven't worked before."

Her teachers use BalletBarreNone exercises in their tap or jazz classes to work on a particular skill (like turning), or say, "Now, what ballet exercise could you use?" when a student is struggling with a transition or a step. "They see that what they are doing in ballet is helping," she says.

Students at her studio, Curtis says, are also less likely to drop ballet as they make the transition from creative-movement-type ballet classes to more advanced ballet training. "Sometimes studios lose a lot of kids because they say, 'Oh, I'm not that serious.' But with this curriculum, ballet is still fun and they want to learn more," she says. "Eileen doesn't want the art of ballet to be lost and for kids to be disinterested. She doesn't want to miss any kids who would probably love it if we could only approach it a bit differently."

Juric also teaches at The Massey School of Dance in Zebulon, Cary Dance Productions and North Carolina Theatre Conservatory in Raleigh, and The Dance Center in Knightdale, returning to New Jersey each summer to teach



Juric's advanced students often take traditional ballet classes as well as her BalletBarreNone lessons.

at workshops and seminars. She plans to expand the DVD series by adding levels for older/advanced students and has recently started a training class for teachers in her area.

But will this ballet maverick ever return to the barre? "I'm so inspired and stimulated by the results in my students that I don't want to go back," she says. "They don't need more barre; they need something that makes them honest. And the only way to really change something I see in technique is to give the students a different way of doing it." ♦