

Kate Mattingly

Jul. 27, 2007 02:51PM EST

Teacher's Wisdom: Patricia Berrend

Patricia Berrend trained at the Washington School of Ballet before dancing professionally with Ballett Hamburg from 1972 to 1976. After a fracture didn't heal properly, she returned to teach at WSB and perform with The Washington Ballet. For 28 years she coached WSB students for competitions, and rehearsed Washington Ballet's Young Dancers, a second company whose alumni include principal dancers Jennifer Ringer of NYCB and Anita Pacylowski of Carolina Ballet Theatre. In 2004 she was honored with the Youth America Grand Prix Outstanding Teacher award. Currently she teaches at the Berrend Dance Centre in Olney, Maryland. Talking with Kate Mattingly, Berrend reflects on the priority she places on integrity and work ethic.

How does your training with Mary Day influence your teaching today?

When Mary Day was teaching in the 1970s, she'd tell me her ideas about technique: specific concerns about molding the foot by lining up the second toe with the ankle, and the idea of feeling as if a string is attached to the big toe when the dancer lifts her leg from tendu to arabesque. Day also stressed the use of the upper body and the feeling of breathing through the arms.

Something else I heard from her was about an inner quality. Dancing wasn't just about technique, but something inside that made you special. There's got to be some extra feeling in your movement, and this is expressed through musicality and phrasing.

What do you emphasize in your ballet class?

Obviously the barre is very important because you need to set up your core and your focus. I also stress the connection of movement. Everything moves in and out of a plié, so the plié must be useful. This is especially true in the center when students try steps like a glissade. If their plié isn't functional, they tend to brush the first leg, then crash the second leg to the ground. I remind them, "Plié!"

I emphasize a relaxed pli , which is different from a deep pli . I use the image of a bouncing ball to create the quality of a pli  that rebounds. Another image I use with my younger students is placing my hand on top of their head as they stand, and asking them to pli , but to remain as high and lifted as they were standing. This helps them understand that a pli  doesn't just bend the knees or drop down. Sometimes I tell students to imagine they are a big piece of elastic and that in order to stretch, the elastic must be held at both ends. If the top (the head) and the bottom (the legs) are not active, the elastic can't stretch.

Injuries played a role in deciding your return to the States and your plans to start teaching. How do you protect your students from injury?

A teacher has to be careful about when to put a dancer on pointe. I don't think it's an age thing because you can have a 10-year-old who has the muscle structure and is ready for it, and a 12- or 13-year-old who might never be ready. Before students can go on pointe, they must be able to feel the backs of their legs. I have some students today who were put on pointe too soon and I don't think they'll ever be able to feel those muscles behind the knee.

How do you train students to be performers?

One of the things we'd do in working with the Young Dancers group was called a "mini" Nutcracker. We'd take this to senior homes and hospitals for sick children. These opportunities helped the students understand that performing is not only about the dancer. At some of these outreach performances, the dancers would talk to the seniors or children and they started to realize what an impact they had on their audiences.

How do you handle auditions for student performances?

I try to put everyone into the role that's best for them, and cast according to dancers' abilities. You feel so bad when you see a student put into a situation where the role is too difficult. They know they are not dancing well and they are falling off pointe. They walk away feeling miserable. At WSB, only the most advanced students had an end-of-the-year performance. For the other students, there were visitor days or open classes held in the studios.

What do you look for in the students you select to compete?

I don't believe in taking a student unless they have an opportunity to succeed. I don't want a dancer to be destroyed by the experience, but I don't mean that they have to win. When I see some schools take 15 to 20 students and do an ensemble piece, and then each dancer does a solo

variation, this costs the students a lot of money, not to mention time. This not only turns the competition into something commercial, but also some of those students don't belong on the stage. You know it must hurt when they are eliminated, and if students are young, they may think that not placing means they won't make it into a company either. This is simply not true. I also don't understand how a teacher can successfully coach such a large group of dancers for competition. When I take a dancer, we have worked a little bit every day and have performed the variation as much as possible in the two months prior to the competition. For me it's about trying to promote quality, and I think the dancers at competitions represent the work ethic of the school they come from.