

A GLOSSARY OF BALLET TERMS

adagio or *adage*. Slow, sustained movement: a section of the dancer's traditional ballet class will focus on movements of this kind. It can also refer to the opening section of a formal *pas de deux*, and to partnering in which the male dancer supports and displays his ballerina.

allegro. Quick, lively movement, often with jumps and quick footwork. A section of the ballet class will focus on movements of this kind.

arabesque. One of the best-known ballet positions. The dancer stands with his or her weight on one leg, the other stretched out behind with straight knee and pointed foot. In an *arabesque penchée*, the dancer leans down towards the ground, forming a diagonal line of torso and raised leg.

attitude. The dancer stands on one leg, the other leg lifted with bent knee and stretched foot. One arm is curved above the head, the other to the side. The pose is based on the statue of Mercury by Giovanni da Bologna.

ballerina. A principal female dancer. The terms prima ballerina and even prima ballerina assoluta are sometimes used to suggest higher ranks.

battement. A beating movement of the leg. In *battement tendu*, the dancer starts with both feet together, slides one foot until it is fully pointed, then slides it back.

beats, or beaten steps. Beating the legs together, or crossing and uncrossing the legs, while jumping (or while being lifted into the air).

bouffée, pas de. The dancer takes very small, fast steps, shifting his or her weight quickly from one foot to the other and back again. This can be a linking or a travelling step. Performed on *pointe*, a series of *pas de bouffées* can suggest the dancer is gliding across the stage.

character dancing. Term used for other dance styles, such as folk and national dances, performed within ballet. It can also refer to comic dances, or to roles focused on drama and mime rather than classical technique. Ballet dancers used to be divided into three categories: the 'noble', most elegant dancers, 'character' dancers who specialised in folk

or comic dances and, in between these two extremes, the ‘demi-caractère’ dancer. These distinctions are now rarely used.

corps de ballet. Group of dancers who perform as a chorus to the soloists.

divertissement. A self-contained set of dances, sometimes inserted into a larger work. *Divertissements* can have a loose connection to the ballet’s main plot – such as the dances in act 3 of *The Sleeping Beauty*, where fairytale characters come to dance at Aurora’s wedding.

enchaînement. A sequence of steps, created for the classroom or the stage.

extension. The dancer’s ability to raise and hold a leg high in the air. In the late twentieth century, dancers developed high extensions that were nicknamed ‘six o’clock positions’ – because one leg pointed down and the other straight up, like the hands of a clock.

feet, five positions of. The basic positions of the feet in ballet. The dancer stands with legs turned out from the hip, so that the toes point to the sides rather than to the front. In first position, the heels are together, toes pointing out. In second, the dancer stands with the feet a step apart. In third, the feet are placed one in front of the other, so that the heel of the front foot rests against the instep of the back foot. In fourth position, one foot is placed in front of the other, the feet a step apart. In fifth position, the feet are placed one in front of the other, so that the toe of each foot is by the heel of the other. Some systems, such as Serge Lifar’s, have added extra positions to the standard five.

fouetté. A turn in which the dancer raises one leg to the side, then whips the foot into the knee while turning. In the coda of the ‘Black Swan’ *pas de deux* in *Swan Lake*, Odile spins thirty-two *fouetté* turns.

mime, or pantomime. Dramatic gestures, often used in story ballets. Nineteenth-century ballets use a formal mime language, with recognised gestures, such as pointing to the ring finger to indicate ‘marriage’.

pas d’action. A setpiece that moves the story forward through both dance and mime, such as the Rose Adagio in *The Sleeping Beauty*.

pas de deux. A dance for two people. In the nineteenth century, a formal structure developed for the classical *pas de deux*: an *adagio* or *entrée* in which the male and female dancer perform together, usually in slow tempo, a variation (or solo) for each and a final coda, in which they dance together, usually in fast tempo. This structure could be expanded into a grand *pas de deux*, in which the central couple are supported by other dancers, who perform group dances or more solos.

plié. Bending the knee or knees, often in preparation for a jump. As an exercise in itself, it is usually the opening exercise of the traditional ballet class.

pointe. To dance on *pointe* is to dance on the extreme tips of the toes. Dancers wear specially made *pointe* shoes which help to support the foot.

sissone. A jump in which the dancer takes off from both feet, and lands on one foot.

terre-à-terre. Ground-skimming dancing, with few jumps.

variation. Solo dance.