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UP

Ballet

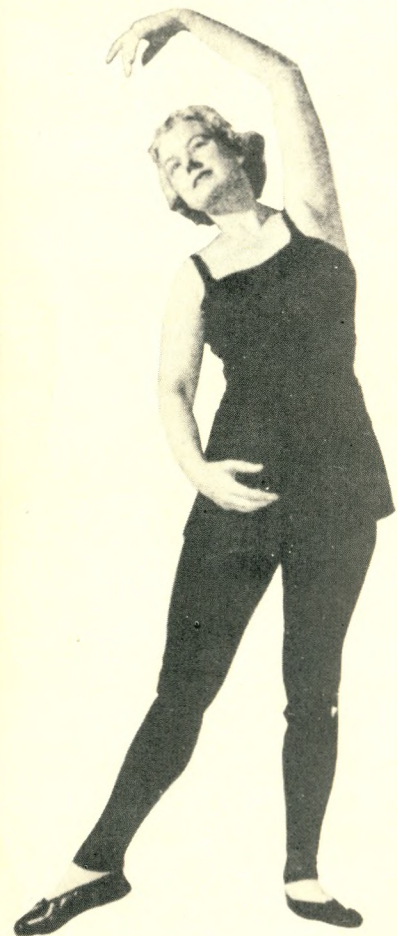


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They laughed when mother stepped up to the *barre*. They didn't know she could put her foot on it. No mean feat, hers—for the practice *barre* found in all ballet studios is waist-high and horizontal. And to see a forty- or fifty-year-old woman kick up to it without a creak is an experience that rates the word "inspirational." But this is what happens regularly two mornings a week when thirty-five mothers join Mildred Wickson at her dancing school in Toronto for an hour's lesson in

Here, Mrs. Ketchum does a "port a bras," a graceful carriage of the arms from one position to another. Although she takes just one lesson a week, Mrs. Ketchum finds that ballet has been helpful in trimming her figure and bolstering her vitality and general health. She's wearing a Bernadette Carpenter practice costume and soft kid slippers.



ballet. They don't, as some might imagine, just twiddle timidly around the floor on tip-toe. They work. And they love it!

Being normal women in every respect, they come in all shapes and sizes. They range in age from the late twenties to middle fifties—most of them mothers; a few, grandmothers. None of them expects even to make the back row of the *corps de ballet* in a professional troupe but all of them are having a wonderful time using ballet as a means of keeping themselves limber and trim at an age when thickening waistlines and soft muscles are more the rule than the exception.

Miss Wickson first started teaching mothers about thirteen years ago. Her original idea was to have an exercise class, weight-lifting gymnastics and so on, but after three of these, she switched to straight ballet. At first the mothers enrolled primarily to be able to help their children with their dancing. But it wasn't long before others decided to join in for more personal reasons. In the course of a few lessons they noticed definite improvements in their posture, figures and general bodily health.

In this studio there are two Mothers' Classes: the Beginning Beginners and the Advanced Beginners. The first are mostly new members. They are given simple *barre* exercises, elementary ballet steps and leaps, over all of which they toil mightily. There's a certain amount of heavy breathing in the Beginners' class which isn't apparent in the Advanced. The first three or four lessons, Miss Wickson claims, are the hardest. At that time, your feet scabble frantically to keep from slipping a beat behind. Knees won't straighten, toes won't point. But

it doesn't take long to get into the swing of what the others are trying to do and from then on, it's sheer fun.

The lesson begins with the class lining up at the practice *barre*. Grasping it firmly with one collective hand the class warms up with *pliés*, knee-bending exercises which incorporate all the five classic feet positions of the ballet. These are generally slow, simple and good for the waistline. From the *plié* they go into *battements* (kicking), then to bending and arm movements, and, finally, to the freedom of the whole floor where they are taught a step and perhaps a leap of the polka variety (these look important but aren't particularly difficult). None of the exercises or steps has been watered-down for the benefit of the beginners. They are essentially the same as those practised by professional dancers, the only difference being in individual technique and facility.

The Advanced Beginners' class is given more difficult *barre* and floor exercises, and it's surprising to learn, after watching the brisk rise and fall of unflagging limbs, that the ages in this group run more toward the fifties than the twenties. Without a doubt, Mildred Wickson's Advanced Beginners comprise one of the neatest ballet classes that ever graced a studio. Every pupil wears a tunic or leotard and smooth wool jersey tights, ballet shoes of course, and white ankle socks. And while there's seldom a moist brow in the lot, there's plenty of serious concentration stamped on their faces as they go through the routine. Each week they hope *this* hour workout will be a little more professional than last week's—and it doesn't bother these earnest

dancers one whit to realize they'll never have the applause of an audience to judge by.

Quite sensibly, Miss Wickson insists that all her adult students get a doctor's okay before joining a class. Several women have been sent to her by their chiropodists and masseuses when regular treatment has failed to help chronically tired feet and sagging muscles. One of the middle-aged pupils proudly announced after her fifth lesson that she could stand over her ironing board for a whole morning without fatigue. Before taking up ballet, her back would begin to give out somewhere between the pillow-cases and the shirts. And besides the fact that regular, weekly ballet sessions almost automatically straighten shoulders, draw in stomachs and tighten muscles, there is a noticeable vigor and vitality about women who go in for this form of recreation. The activity seldom leaves them gasping; instead it stirs up circulation, bringing color to cheeks and sparkle to eyes. All in all it's a very large return for one hour a week at a dollar per.

Benefits are also reaped aesthetically as well as physically. Most of the women in Miss Wickson's classes have observed that their appreciation of good music has broadened painlessly and considerably since they first entered the school. Their rhythm improves to such an extent that they can waltz cloud-like across a ballroom floor, happy in the knowledge that the blame for any stumbling can be laid at their partners' feet. And then there is the ballet itself. When they watch Margot Fonteyn execute an *entrechat* or an *arabesque*, a sympathetic bond springs from them to her. They know how it feels, because they can do it too!



Looking most unlike a grandmother (which she is), Mrs. Sydney Ketchum limbers up before her ballet lesson.



Warming-up stretch in front of the barre. In an hour members of the class will be on their way home to make lunch and clean house. But while they're here, under the critical eye of Mildred Wickson, they work as hard as rising Pavlovas.



Miss Wickson joins Mrs. Ketchum to execute a "temps leve," a gracefully impressive springing movement.

Housewives Take Up Ballet

Housewives Take Up Ballet is one of a series of interesting dance pamphlets prepared by Capezio, The Dancer's Cobbler since 1887.