

born to dance

It's never too late to chase a girlhood dream, even if it means donning a tutu.

By Sheryl Berk

I was five the last time I wore a tutu. There I am, a chubby kindergartner in a pink puffy tutu and silver ballet slippers. I remember twirling around my living room with my arms outstretched, practicing my pirouettes till I was dizzy. Every Saturday morning, my mother would take me to Suzy Gerko's Dance Studio in the town where I grew up. I was never quite as graceful as the other girls, and month after month, when it came time for the dance recital, I was passed over for a solo. On stage, I was always one in a crowd of butterflies, bluebirds, and buzzing bees. Madame Suzy never picked me for Queen Bee, so I gave up my ballerina aspirations and joined the Brownies.

Fast-forward to this past Christmas: My sister and I sit in the audience of the New York City Ballet, mesmerized by *The Nutcracker*. I watch as the Sugar-Plum Fairy daintily glides around the stage and wonder, Why can't I do that? Then it occurs to me: Maybe I can. What does she have that I don't have (besides mile-long legs, spaghetti arms, and the ability to walk on her tippy-toes)? I decide right then and there to take a ballet class.

After thumbing through the New York City yellow pages, I find Ballet Academy East, which offers beginner classes for adults. I sign up for five of them. I am delighted to find that at \$12.50 a session, it's a lot cheaper than my gym membership. I also shell out \$22 for a pair of pink Capezio ballet slippers (a must—it's tough to point your toes in Nike cross-trainers) but opt for my usual workout wear—a pair of bicycle shorts and a big tee. The dozen or so women in the studio are a bit more dressed for the part in leotards and leg warmers. I love that my classmates are all shapes, sizes, and ages—and all equally comfortable. I

choose a spot in the corner, as far away from the huge wall of mirrors as I can get, and take the barre next to a gray-haired grandmother type. I'm amazed that while I can barely touch my toes, she lowers her forehead to her knees in one fluid motion.

The room temperature is about 30 degrees, and I quickly learn why. After only five minutes of stretching (I mimic the other women who contort their bodies into pretzels), I am "glowing," and I think I've pulled a muscle in my groin. Nina, the instructor, claps her hands to signal the start of class, and a pianist takes the bench at the baby grand piano. "We will begin," she says, "with a simple combination." After that, it's as if she's speaking another language entirely (and she is—French). She instructs us to perform *battements tendus*, followed by a few *demi pliés*, *grand pliés*, and

port de bras (translation: point your toes, squat down, and swing your arms). As tinkly Tchaikovsky music is played in the background, I try to keep up. I teeter and totter on my toes and struggle to align my head and shoulders. "Imagine a string pulling you up—this should be your posture. Graceful, always graceful," Nina reminds us. But when I glance in the mirror, I look anything but graceful. I feel five all over again.

Before the next class, I do some homework: I

buy a book that outlines the lingo and the positions, and watch a few instructional videos. I invest in a pink leotard, tights, and a floaty chiffon skirt. I wrap my hair

into a tight chignon, the theory being that if I look like a ballerina, I will be one. And this time, when the piano starts to play, I can actually follow the combinations. By class three, I can do an arabesque (balancing on one leg with the other extended) without a wobble, and I find ballet creeping into my everyday life as well. In line at the supermarket checkout, I point my toes and do 10 tendus. As I reach for a can of crushed tomatoes while cooking dinner, I sweep my arm up to the top shelf of the cupboard. I hear the teacher's words echo in my ears: "Graceful, always graceful."

I practice every day, pirouetting around my puzzled husband, Peter, who, used to hearing me complain about looming deadlines, wants to know if I have "time for this." I explain that I don't think about work while I'm dancing—in ballet, everything moves in slow motion and time stands still. I am calm and relaxed.

By my last class, I notice a major change in me. As I do each step, I no longer worry about my balance—it's there, rock-steady—through every relevé. My flexibility has improved remarkably—I can not only touch my toes but also place my palms flat on the floor. After talking to some classmates, I realize we all have our own reasons for wanting to take ballet. One woman—six feet tall in her tights—yearned to feel more feminine. Another has two daughters in ballet classes and thought it would be a great way to bond with them. Still another wanted to shape up post-pregnancy.

My reason? Maybe I was longing to recapture a part of my childhood. But what I didn't bargain for was finding an exercise that strengthens both body and mind. I still don't think I'll ever be good enough to dance in *The Nutcracker* (note to Sugar-Plum Fairy: You can relax). But at least I finally feel like the Queen Bee. ■



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Renaissance Dancewear Leotards, tights, and unitards in a variety of colors and fabrics for sizes up to XXXL; 812-438-4114; www.renaissance-dancewear.com.

For information on ballet books, videos, and more, visit modemag.com.