

BREAK YOUR BAD HABITS

The Shoulders

BY LAUREN KAY

The shoulders are one of a dancer's most useful expressive tools. Just think of a well-placed épaulement: An open chest and thoughtfully angled shoulders can exude confidence, playfulness, or power. But rolling the shoulders forward or pinching the scapulae together can read as just the opposite—timid, tentative, or tense. For advice on working through these tendencies and improving shoulder alignment, DM spoke with yoga practitioner, ballet teacher, and former Royal Ballet soloist Hilary Cartwright; master jazz teacher Patti Wilcox; and Alexander Technique expert Jane Kosminsky.

HABIT: Rolling the shoulders forward

Cartwright says this habit often develops in young dancers during growth spurts. "Accelerated growth can take them by surprise," she explains. "Sometimes they can't adapt to the newly gained height by standing tall and keeping their chests lifted, through muscular support along the spine." The cause can also be emotional, conveying a lack of self-esteem. "Rounding the shoulders can be a sign of sheer insecurity," she says. Wilcox adds, "It becomes a form of hiding."

→BREAK IT: Cartwright recommends this floor exercise for strengthening the upper back: Lie on your stomach, arms straight out in front of you at least shoulder distance apart. Keep the legs energized in a comfortable turnout, feet pointed and hips pressed to the floor. "Inhale, then extend one arm on an exhale to a slow count of 10. The head lifts *slightly* with each extension," Cartwright says. The arm will lift off the floor, "but the action should be lengthening, not lifting." Repeat three times alternating arms and three using both arms.

To open the chest, Kosminsky suggests visualizing the whole torso, front and back, as a wide "V" that starts narrowly at the pubic bone and fans out. This, along with tracing the clavical with the fingertips to feel its length, can improve awareness of the shoulders' full width.



HABIT: The shrug Tense shoulders tend to rise up toward the ears instead of dropping back and down. "Onstage this denotes stress and makes the audience nervous," Cartwright says. "Plus it destroys your line."

→BREAK IT: Kosminsky says that if you imagine releasing the shoulders out to the sides, they'll naturally drop away from the ears. "The shoulders actually move to the sides on the shoulder girdle, not down," she says, adding that you should keep in mind "Alexander's first concept of 'good use'—neck free, head forward and up." Cartwright reminds dancers to breathe rhythmically. "If you're holding the breath in the upper chest, the shoulders rise up accordingly," she says. "Use your breath with the action. During demi plié, breath out as you bend and in as you straighten." Be careful, though, not to take the idea of "dropped" to the extreme. Pushing the shoulders down aggressively—so that they have no buoyancy—strains the neck and shoulder girdle.

HABIT: Pinching the shoulder blades together This is a common side-effect of lifting the chest out and up. But it can cause (or result from) two other bad habits: hyper-extending the ribcage and overworking the back muscles.

→BREAK IT: Wilcox suggests exploring your full range of shoulder motion to find a neutral placement. In jazz class, be conscious of your alignment during shoulder isolations. "If you roll too far back, you'll end in a pinched position; too far forward, and you have the concave chest problem," she says. "Focus on which muscles you're moving—and how far."

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ACROSS THE FLOOR

Uniting Young Choreographers

"Try not to freak out," a staff member advised student choreographer Robert Binet. It was just hours before curtain at Toronto's Assemblée Internationale 2009, a week-long student festival hosted by Canada's National Ballet School last November on the occasion of its 50th anniversary. Binet's original work *Surge* would be performed that night, but a lead dancer had injured his wrist, forcing Binet to change the choreography. Meanwhile, another one of the 13 cast members had been felled by H1N1, and a third would perform with a 102-degree fever.

Many years in the planning, the Assemblée brought together 102 students from 14 ballet schools spanning 9 countries for a week of master classes, discussions, rehearsals, and showcases. Twelve student choreographers set their own work on peers from around the globe and presented it at NBS's Betty Oliphant Theatre. Each academy—among them London's Royal Ballet School, Cuba's National Ballet School, and the John Cranko School of Stuttgart—also presented a piece from its existing repertory. Students took class with a broad cadre of teachers, including Ramona de Sáa of Cuba and Elisabeth Platel of France.

Mavis Staines, artistic director of NBS, conceived of the Assemblée to strengthen connections between ballet schools worldwide. Having played a major role in the Prix de Lausanne in Switzerland, she saw how the dance community came together there. Assemblée encourages students to "broaden their comfort zones," she says. "At 16 or 17, they have to be able to work with everyone."

Ida Praetorius, a student from the Royal Danish Ballet School, marveled at how her piece had evolved over time. "The steps started in the kitchen with my little brother taking photos of me and grew up before my eyes here onstage."

In a closing address, Cuban ballet master Fernando Alonso said, "A dancer has to cultivate his mind, heart, and soul. His sensitivity, sophistication, and level of education will show onstage. So educate yourselves every single day of your lives. The future of ballet depends on you!" —Toba Singer