

# Ballet Is No Longer Province of Young

By BARBARA GERBASI

**W**HEN Claire Gordon of Rockville Center was growing up, her sister studied ballet. Young Claire was steered toward the piano. "The message was that I wasn't graceful enough," Ms. Gordon said, "but it didn't stop me from wanting to dance."

When she was in her 40's, Ms. Gordon decided her dream had been denied too long, only to discover that most ballet schools were hesitant to take on a beginner of her age. When she finally found a school, the instructor limited her participation. "I mostly worked at the barre," said Ms. Gordon as she pulled on leg warmers at Hannah Kroner School of Dance here, where she takes three classes a week. "Jumps and turns were out of the question. They were afraid I'd get hurt."

In a recent Tuesday morning class, her slim body lifted from the floor, turned and ended in a low but perfectly aligned arabesque. "That's nice, Claire," said the teacher, Patty Maraldo, 38. A smile lighted Ms. Gordon's face as she adjusted the clip anchoring her dark hair. She still harbors a dream. "Just once," said Ms. Gordon, now in her 60's, "I would like to do a triple piroquette."

Ballet, once the province of the young, is attracting an increasing number of adults. At an age where professional dancers start to think about hanging up their shoes, many nonprofessionals are tying theirs on for the first time.

"People are in better shape today," said Carol Riley, director of Hannah Kroner, where four adult ballet and two point classes were recently added. "They go to the gym, they do aerobics. When they want something more, ballet is often the answer. Not only is ballet an art form, it's also the perfect exercise. In addition to being aerobic, it builds



Unlike aerobics, ballet requires intense concentration, discipline and skill, said Danny Holdstein, director and owner of Two Worlds Dance and Fitness in Greenvale, where the adult ballet classes each morning and evening draw many women who studied ballet as girls. "They are very dedicated and come every day," Mr. Holdstein said.

Maxine Geller, of Bellmore, was 35 when she started. "Ballet is addictive," she said, swinging her 53-year-old leg onto the barre and starting to stretch. "It's something you never completely learn no matter how many classes you take."

At American Theater Dance Workshop in New Hyde Park, a veteran group often crowds the narrow dressing room. Many are former professional dancers or dance teachers determined to hone their skills; others are younger professionals and

upper age range is high. Tunics and long T-shirts over tights are popular attire. Neither can hide the dancer's gracefulness and finesse once the music, played by a live pianist, starts.

The accompanist is a rarity in Long Island. Even rarer is the slightly built but muscular man doing jettés among the women. John Ferrantino, 33, looks like the gymnast he was 20 years ago when he studied ballet as part of his training. He resumed taking classes in 1997. Last year, on sabbatical from his job as an elementary school teacher in Manhattan, he was spotted by /



## E R T A I N M E N T



Photographs by Maxine Hicks for The New York Times

At the adult ballet class at the Hannah Kroner School of Dance, a student laces up her slipper, far left, while Claire Gordon, background, prepares for class. Evelyn Novick, left, and other students, from left, Claire Gordon, Gail Levenson, Beryl Rimalovski, and their teacher, Patty Maraldo, at class.

Ballet, who asked him to perform with the company. "I thought all of this was over," he said, gesturing around the mirrored room. When one of his friends called recently to see what he was doing, he said: "Can you believe it? I'm dancing in a ballet."

Ballet is also part of the repertoire in some gyms. The New York Sports Club offers ballet workouts, combining elements of ballet training and athletic conditioning, in Garden City and Long Beach. Ms. Maraldo, a certified ballet workout instructor who also teaches at other schools, said classes had tripled in size since they began last fall.

Maria Felix, 48, of New Hyde Park, a painter who grew up in Portugal, started dancing when her daughter took lessons. "Dancing feeds my art," Ms. Felix said. "When I see dancers on the stage, my soul leaps

work."

Ballet has a mind-body connection that seduces. Beryl Rimalovski, 54, of Brookville, who dances tango with her husband, thought that a few ballet lessons would help her with the tango's intricate turns and footwork. Four years later she finds herself planning her week around her ballet classes. "I'm addicted to it, the music, the grace, everything," Ms. Rimalovski said. "It's a whole other world. It makes you more aware of your body and how you move, your posture. Even on the supermarket line, I'm standing straighter."

There's an easy camaraderie and little trace of the often fierce competition prevalent among younger dancers. At Hannah Kroner, each birthday is celebrated with a low-fat muffin topped with a candle. The women at American Theater Dance travel together to Manhattan for ballet performances.

In the studio at Two Worlds before the rest of the class arrived, Blanche Goldman of Roslyn had a black velvet leotard pulled taut against a flat stomach and a purple sweater tied above a narrow waist. With both hands on the barre she leaned back and slowly rolled her head. "I have to warm up carefully," she said. "I'm almost 90 and I can't always do what

music starts I forget everything else."

Ms. Goldman began dancing in her late 80's. Even though she had to have a heart valve replaced, she still displays enviable flexibility.

"Teaching ballet to adults is inspiring," Ms. Maraldo said. "Their hard work and dedication inspire me. They are self-motivated and as their technique, stretch and stamina improve I become increasingly motivated and excited about their progress."

"Pique turns across the floor," Ms. Maraldo told the group of women clustered in a corner of the studio. One by one each turned quickly on one leg with varying degrees of proficiency. Some whirled effortlessly across the room, others moved unevenly and stopped in the middle. Her expression neutral, Ms. Maraldo appraised each one, "Point your toe, don't forget to spot." Gail Levenson, 57, a newcomer to the class, stood to the side, pushed her silver bob behind her ears, and looked a bit intimidated. When her turn came, she shook her head. Ms. Maraldo ran over and grabbed her hand. "Don't turn, just do the footwork and shift your weight," Ms. Maraldo said. Ms. Levenson followed the instructor's lead and on the next round did it