

Rebecca Davis – Journey in Russia
Journal Entry #5 – November 12, 2004

**Ballet in Fifth Position:
Comparing Pedagogical
Approaches to Ballet Training**

Fifth Position: Пятая Позиция

In classical ballet, there are five different positions of the feet. Almost all dance steps start and finish with your feet in one of these basic positions. The most common position is *fifth position*. One stands with his feet close together, one in front of the other with the toes pointing outwards. The heel of the front foot touches the toe of the back foot and vice versa. This is classical ballet's famous "fifth position", and it is not that easy to master!

The American System: Американская Система

Studying under multiple teachers in Canada and the United States, I learned the basic ballet positions at an early age. Almost all of my teachers (and there have been a lot of them) showed a similar approach to training young dancers: "this is the ideal fifth position we try to create with our feet, but of course, normal human bodies can't do it. Therefore, we try our best, but if it's not perfect, that's okay." This style of teaching I have found to be more accentuated at the university level: "you will damage your body if you perform this position exactly as it is described in theory. You must adapt it in practice. Otherwise, you will get injured." Consequently, my fifth position was far from picture perfect when I arrived in Russia to start my training here.

The Russian System: Русская Система

Now compare the teaching of the same position of the feet with the Russian system. When a student stands in a position that does not look like the theoretical position that we see in the photos of famous ballerinas, she might hear the instructor say something like, "Horrible. Rebecca, what position is that? Did you hear me? I said *fifth position*." Seriously, I receive a "correction" like this in almost every class, whether it be at The St. Petersburg Conservatory, The Mussorgsky Opera and Ballet Theater, or with my private Russian coach. The picture perfect standards are expected, not simply strived for or taught in theory.

Why the Difference in Ballet Training? (В чем различие систем?)

Well, this small example reveals a great deal about the difference in standards between the American and Russian ballet schools. In the United States, there is an increasing emphasis on developing students "at their own rate." This means that some young dancers progress quicker than others, and it also means that there is great emphasis placed on "healthy training." The findings of scientific studies of anatomy and kinesiology have spilled over to the Western world of ballet training. Teachers are skeptical to push children to increase their natural flexibility if this could eventually lead to injury.

In contrast, the standard practice in Russia is to accept nothing less than perfection from every student standing in tights and a leotard. If you are taking up precious space at the ballet barre, then you better be performing up to the standards that are expected at a professional level. These standards apply to everyone, regardless of whether you have horrible natural flexibility, long legs or short arms, or a difficult time understanding Russian language!

Which System Works? (Какая система лучше?)

The contrast in pedagogical approaches I have experienced raises an important question: which training methodology is better for an aspiring ballet dancer? Of course, I am far from discovering the "absolute truth", but I have already formed an opinion. I believe the Russian

methodology is ideal for a certain type of student: a young boy or girl (perhaps 7-10 years old) who has the genuine desire to take ballet class five to six times a week and wants to become a professional artist. Training under the Russian system, I believe this child will receive an excellent education in classical ballet and be presented with the opportunity to become a professional dancer, given that his commitment and dedication are maintained. This *demands*, however, that he starts at a very early age, leading me to another opinion I have formed. I do not believe that a dancer who has surpassed his prime development period (13-18 years) should switch to a purely Russian style of training. The Russian system requires a young body to be formed in a particular way. If a dancer has already developed different muscles and kinesthetic coordination, I think it is near impossible to switch to the Russian system and excel.

Both the American and Russian pedagogical approaches are valid, but they require different ages and attitudes from the students. As I continue my studies here in St. Petersburg, I expect to form more, and perhaps different, opinions about the question that has perplexed the dance world for decades: how do you teach a child to become a dancer? I have a feeling, however, that it has to do with *fifth position*.

To Learn More About Rebecca Davis' studies and travel experiences, visit The Rebecca Davis Dance Company website at www.rebeccadavidance.com or email davis@rebeccadavidance.com

To Read About Rebecca's dance experiences at The St. Petersburg Conservatory, join "The Journey in Russia" listserv. Sign up for the listserv at www.rebeccadavidance.com.

To see more photos of Rebecca training in Russia: <http://www.rebeccadavidance.com/studio.html>



***Rebecca Davis
Training in St. Petersburg, Russia***