

# But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

## Why do ballerinas wear ballet shoes?

April 4, 2024

**Jane** 00:20

This is But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids, from Vermont Public. I'm Jane Lindholm. I host the show. You send us your questions about the world around you, and it's my job and the job of my colleagues--my teammates--to search high and low for interesting people that we can interview so you can get answers. We love answering all kinds of questions. And it is so cool that technology allows us to talk to interesting people no matter where they are, right from where we are in Vermont. But when we get a chance to go on a field trip, we get really excited. Do you like going on field trips? Recently, we went to New York City, and our first stop in the city was in Harlem, a neighborhood made famous by an artistic and cultural movement called the Harlem Renaissance that took place 100 years ago. This celebration and blossoming of African American art and culture had profound effects on American society. And Harlem is still a place that supports and celebrates Black American dance, theater, writing and music. We were visiting Harlem to pop in on a professional ballet company called Dance Theatre of Harlem or DTH. This multicultural group of dancers was hard at work rehearsing and preparing for DTH's 55th season, launching in New York City just two weeks from the day of our visit. When we arrived at their rehearsal space, two dancers, Lindsay Donnell and Derek Brockington, were working on a duet, a dance with two people, that they'll be performing on stage. Being this close to professional dancers was impressive and intimidating to me. They are so strong, and they're able to move their bodies in such precise and beautiful ways, with balance and elegance and a calm look on their faces. Not at all like the intense concentration that would be written all over my face, or how sweaty and hot I would look! After they finished the song, the rehearsal director Juan Carlos Penuela stepped forward to give them some suggestions.

**Juan Carlos Penuela** 02:32

[Mentions a specific moment in the dance sequence.] Try to do it again and make it like you did before like easy. Go. Go ahead.

**Jane** 02:39

Juan Carlos didn't make up the steps the ballet dancers were doing. That's the job of someone called a choreographer. But he is kind of like a teacher or coach, to helping make sure they learn each movement and then put them together just right.

**Juan Carlos Penuela** 02:54

Good guys. There is a moment that you both do this position. If you do it at the same time. It looks nice to me. Yes, yeah.

**Jane** 03:07

Juan Carlos knows what it's like to be in these dancers' shoes, because he used to be a dancer with Dance Theatre of Harlem.

**Juan Carlos Penuela** 03:14

My job is to teach them the choreography. If they know the piece, I help them to make technically better, and make sure that they do the steps the way that they should be done. Technically, artistically, push them to develop more as an artist and as the dancers.

**Jane** 03:37

When they were done rehearsing, Derek and Lindsey pulled up a couple of chairs, and we sat down to get answers to your ballet questions.

**Wren** 03:44

My name is Wren and I live in Providence, Rhode Island. I am seven years old. Where did ballet come from?

**Jane** 03:51

Lindsey Donnell and Derek Brockington know their ballet history.

**Lindsey Donnell** 03:55

So, ballet started in the French courts in the 17th century. King Louis the 14th love to the spectacle of the dance and the entertainment. And he himself wanted to be on stage. So they based it off fencing, so everything is turned out. And it was to show off the beautiful rings, accessory, gowns and they would walk around on stage. In the next century, in the 18th century, the Russians took it and they started making big story ballets that we still think of today, like Swan Lake, The Nutcracker, some of those types of ballet stories.

**Derek Brockington** 04:32

I was gonna say we jump forward to George Balanchine, creating the neoclassical style, where it becomes more dancing for the sake of dancing. And so it's really great to see the evolution of ballet and what it can become.

**Jane** 04:46

What would you say ballet is today?

**Derek Brockington** 04:49

It can be anything you want it to be, really. I think we're opening it up so that everyone has access to it. It's not just meant for one group of people. It can be meant for anybody and you can do anything with it.

**Lindsey Donnell** 05:01

I think ballet is a form of expression. So you can move your body and express your emotions in any way you choose.

**Jane** 05:08

So for people who think, "No. Ballet is just people in tutus dancing to very old music that has nothing to do with the modern world," that's wrong? That's not how we should think about ballet anymore?

**Lindsey Donnell** 05:20

Definitely not. We think of ballet technique as a vocabulary for your body. So you can use just like we use English. And we can tell stories, or we could talk about the news. We use the vocabulary of ballet to say whatever we want to say. So it doesn't have to be an old story with classical music. At Dance Theatre of Harlem, we actually like to use music from all sorts of time periods and eras. We have a ballet to Motown music. So a lot of music that people relate to today, too.

**Jane** 05:55

When you think about ballet, one of the things you might picture is a dancer standing right on the tips of her toes, leaping, stretching or spinning. When a ballerina dances on the tips of her toes, she needs special shoes called pointe shoes.

**Kareem** 06:10

Hi, my name is Kareem. I'm seven years old. I live in Phoenix, Arizona. And my question is, how do you make pointe shoes for ballerinas?

**Lindsey Donnell** 06:21

Ooh, that's a good question, Kareem. There are pointe shoe makers. And it's is put together kind of like paper mache. So it's a layer of material, a layer of glue, another layer of material around a sort of molding. And then you let it dry. We cover it in satin, and then it's ready for us to wear. So it's a, it's a long process. And then the pointe shoes, as we wear them, our feet sweat, and we work in them and they break down so they actually don't last very long. And a dancer can go through up to a pair a day sometimes. Because that glue, as it gets hot and wet, it breaks down.

**Jane** 07:00

Typically, or historically, only female dancers wear pointe shoes. But sometimes that has been changing. And sometimes people decide they want to go en pointe, even if they're male dancers. How do you decide who's going en pointe and when? And "en pointe" means dancing on your toes in those special shoes.

**Lindsey Donnell** 07:19

Well, first, it's very important that you build the strength in your legs before anyone goes en pointe. And so usually around the age of 11, that's when your bones have finished developing to a point that they can support your body weight, and that you can learn enough technique in order to go en pointe. These days. I think it's a matter of interest. If you want to do it, you can do it whether you're a boy or girl.

**Jane** 07:42

Derek, do you ever go en pointe?

**Derek Brockington** 07:44

I have not been en pointe, no. But there are so many things about it--that it strengthens your feet. and there's so many great things that you learn from it. And it's really a great skill.

**Harper 07:54**

My name is Harper. I am five and a half years old. And I live in Raleigh, North Carolina. And my question is, why do ballerinas wear ballet shoes?

**Jane 08:08**

Can you talk a little bit about what you put on your feet and how that assists you to do your job in dancing? Derek, we'll start with your shoes.

**Derek Brockington 08:16**

Well, for the men, we have our flat shoes. And they really operate just as a tool that we can use to enhance our dancing. And it has a little pads on the bottom so that we don't get stuck to the floor. And they come in various styles. They have canvas shoes, leather shoes. And it's really cool because you can get custom so that fits directly to your feet. So it's really just about making it the best for you and how you want to how you want to dance.

**Jane 08:43**

And does it help you not to slip on the floor?

**Derek Brockington 08:45**

Yes, it makes it very sticky enough to not slip.

**Jane 08:50**

Lindsey, what about you? You have a couple different kinds of shoes that you can wear.

**Derek Brockington 08:53**

I do. I usually start in the morning in my ballet flat shoes. And that's to make sure that the muscles in my feet are nice and warm. And then, once we get halfway through class, I like to put on my pointe shoes and start warming up my toes and getting ready for my rehearsal day. And we wear pointe shoes because of the reinforced sides, it helps us stand on our toes. So it's not as hard as if you had no no support. So it still, sometimes it takes a little practice. Sometimes it's a little painful, but it definitely helps to have pointe shoes.

**Jane 09:28**

Hang on a minute. You just said class and I think sometimes we feel like once we have practiced and practiced and practiced as kids and then we become professionals, we don't have to have class anymore and we don't have to practice, because we know how to do it. Are you telling me, even as professional dancers, you take class and you practice and practice beyond just rehearsals?

**Lindsey Donnell 09:50**

That's right. We take class every day. We consider it our warm up to get our muscles into shape and ready to go. That way we don't injure ourselves in rehearsal. And we're always trying to get better as ballet dancers. So class is the place that we do it.

**Miles 10:05**

My name is Miles, and I live in Chicago and I am five years old. How does practice make you better at things?

**Lindsey Donnell 10:13**

I think, especially with dance, there's something that we call muscle memory. So you're trying to make your muscles do it without you having to think about it. And so that's why we practice so much. And that's why it works. So, because when you do it over and over, it becomes a pattern in your brain that then you can just do it.

**Derek Brockington 10:33**

Yes, I would say that repetition is key, but also that you are going to have bad and good days, it goes up and down. But just know that when you're doing it every day or you're practicing it, you're gonna keep getting better. And you will have downs but your your highs are going to be way higher.

**Lindsey Donnell 10:50**

We were thinking about it earlier. And we were like, "It's like tying a shoe!" Because I remember when I first started tying my shoe, it was really difficult. And it took me a long time and I had to think about it really hard. And now I'm to a place I don't even think about it.

**Jane 11:04**

Coming up: is dance a sport?

**BREAK 11:07**

BREAK

**Jane 11:08**

This is But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids. I'm Jane Lindholm. We're at Dance Theatre of Harlem today, learning from dancers Lindsey Donnell and Derek Brockington. One of you had a question about the incredible strength and skill it takes to do ballet, and whether dancers should get more credit as athletes.

**Maren 11:28**

Hi. my name is Maren and I'm 12 years old. I live in Eden Prairie, Minnesota. I want to know: are dance and gymnastics sports? And if so why, doesn't the general public think of them that way?

**Lindsey Donnell 11:39**

Well, I'll speak on dance first, because my dad was actually a coach, so I always wanted it to be considered a sport as well. And it is very very athletic in the sense of how we train and how much effort we put in. But it's also an art form. And that comes back, I think, to the expression. And we're not

necessarily competing for who will win or beat the other team. We're doing it for the love and the beauty. And I think that's what makes it an art form. But push people to recognize how athletic it is for sure, Maren.

**Derek Brockington 12:16**

And the thing about dance is we're doing the same thing that maybe football players are doing, where we have this huge audience watching us. And we have to make it look easy. And that is one of the big things that I think dance separates itself from. So I think it can be both sport and an art form. It's just different qualities.

**Jane 12:36**

Maren is a dancer and a gymnast and feels like they don't get enough credit for that. And that people are often telling men like that's not a real sport. And it doesn't feel great to be told it's not a sport, because it sort of feels like they're not respecting how strong you have to be and how much you have to practice and what skills you need to have. Do you feel like you get respect for the strength and athleticism that you have in this profession?

**Lindsey Donnell 13:04**

Well, I have tried to stop thinking about what other people think and do it just for me. Because, usually, when I focus on other people's opinions, it leads me down a hole that isn't necessarily healthy. And so if I enjoy it, and I'm doing what I want to do, then that's what I go with.

**Derek Brockington 13:23**

I agree.

**Julian 13:25**

My name is Julian, I am seven years old. I'm from Cambridge, Massachusetts. And my question is, why do people dance?

**Lindsey Donnell 13:35**

People have danced since the beginning of time, since we recorded, like, the cave drawings. There were pictures of people dancing around a campfire, or something, you know. So you can dance out of celebration, out of joy. They used to do it to, like, call the rain, or those kinds of things. So there's many, many reasons you can dance. I think for me, I dance because I love it. When I hear music, and I hear that beat, it's the only thing I want to do. And I think life is about doing things that make you happy too. So that's why I dance.

**Derek Brockington 14:09**

People can dance for a multitude of reasons. There's so many. And I think that, for me, I dance because it is a way that I can express myself. I don't always have my way with words. So dancing is a great way for me to get out what I want to say or to make somebody else feel something, and I think that is super important as to, like, why I do what I do.

**Jane 14:29**

What do you feel like you're expressing when you're dancing?

**Derek Brockington** 14:32

I am expressing my my own emotions. I'm expressing intention for my work. And I am also just doing it so that other people can see that they can do it too. I feel like that's part of my dancing is not only just for myself, but I'm doing it so that people who are watching there can believe that they can do it too.

**Jane** 14:56

Can you tell us a little bit about what you were rehearsing that we just watched a minute ago and what you're preparing for right now?

**Derek Brockington** 15:05

So we were working on William Forsythe's "Blake Works IV (The Barre Project)". And that was the opening pas de deux And we are getting that ready for our New York season at New York City Center. It is one of the opportunities that Dance Theatre of Harlem gets to perform in New York City. And we look forward to it. A lot of our friends, other companies can come and it's just a really big event. And so that is kind of what this all of these dancing all these rehearsals are for.

**Jane** 15:35

Do you get nervous when it's time for a big performance?

**Lindsey Donnell** 15:40

Sometimes I do. I think because I want to do well, then that makes me feel a little nervous and a little jittery. But I try to tell myself that that's the reason and use that extra energy to just help me shine brighter.

**Jane** 15:54

Lindsey Donnell had one more thing she wanted to make sure all of you listening, understand.

**Lindsey Donnell** 16:00

No matter who you are, what color you are, how tall or short, what kind of hair you have, no matter who you are, if you have something and you apply your love for it, you can make it happen. So just keep believing in yourself. And I think the world is becoming a better and more inclusive place every day. So maybe you're the person out there to make change in the world.

**Jane** 16:26

That's it for today. Thanks very much to Dance Theatre of Harlem and especially Derek Brockington and Lindsey Donnell for exploring questions about ballet and dance. Now, if you have a question about anything, send it to us. Have an adult help you record yourself asking it. You can do it using one of the free apps on an adult's smartphone. Then have your adult send your audio file to questions at [butwhykids.org](mailto:butwhykids.org)? Or go to our website, [butwhykids.org](http://butwhykids.org), to upload the file directly. We know it can be really frustrating when your questions aren't answered right away. But it's really helpful to hear from you, because getting your questions helps us understand what kids around the world are curious about

and it guides what topics we do next. And if you haven't listened back to all of our episodes yet, we have more than 200, check through our archives to see if your question has already been answered.

**Jane** 17:22

Our show is produced at Vermont Public by Kianna Haskin, Melody Bodette and me, Jane Lindholm, and it's distributed by PRX. Our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. Special thanks this week to Joey Palumbo, who came along with us to produce some videos of our visit to Dance Theatre of Harlem. You'll be able to find those videos on our social media channels. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious!