

Dancers Still Need Daily Class. No Barre? Just Grab a Chair.

We checked in with American Ballet Theater and New York City Ballet to see how the companies were keeping dancers fit, and together.

Carlos Lopez, a ballet master with American Ballet Theater, teaching an online class from his Chelsea apartment using Zoom. Credit...Celeste Sloman for The New York Times

By [Gia Kourlas](#)

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“Are we sweating a little bit?” the ballet master Carlos Lopez said leaning forward and squinting into computer screen. Above his image was a scrolling row of squares — thumbnail videos of dancers from American Ballet Theater — waiting for him to give instructions for the next exercise.

This is company class in the age of coronavirus.

Social isolation or not, ballet dancers need daily class, with its focus on posture and form. For a professional dancer, company class is a way to check in with the body and get it prepared for the day. It’s a vital morning ritual and group practice: Dancing with others is a way to grow.



Mr. Lopez's computer screen shows the Ballet Theater dancer Courtney Lavine, who was taking the class at an Airbnb rental outside the city. Credit...Celeste Sloman for The New York Times

“Your body lines up; your brain lines up,” said Craig Salstein, a former soloist with Ballet Theater who is teaching an online company class for members of New York City Ballet. And doing it together is important. “It’s like a whole orchestra playing one chord all at the same time,” he said.

Generally, ballet class begins at the barre, with a progression of exercises starting with pliés and tendus that mobilize the feet, legs, arms and back. Next comes adagio work, or slower sustained movements and balances, without the aid of a barre. Finally, there are jumps, big and small, and combinations that send dancers moving across the floor.

How does this work at home? Barre work can be done with the support of a chair or counter, but as a class progresses, the challenge is space — which is to say, apartment living. “I’m teaching the class from my living room, and I have to make the angle work so I can demonstrate,” Mr. Lopez said. “But the good thing is, if I can do it, they can do it.”



The Ballet Theater principal Herman Cornejo, taking Mr. Lopez's class at home in the Bronx. Credit...Maria Jose Lavandera

The Zoom app, which dance companies and schools are using, can't help with space problems, but it allows for something just as valuable: Teachers can watch dancers and offer encouragement and corrections. And that, Mr. Lopez said, keeps a self-isolated dancer engaged. "If you have in the back of your brain the idea that somebody is watching you, it just changes," he added. "You change."

And it can be strangely social. Unity Phelan, a soloist with City Ballet, said that one of the best parts of class is when everyone signs on, and you can hear snippets of voices. She also likes getting a glimpse of her colleagues' apartments: "It's like you get an MTV tour of their crib," she said, and "to feel the community again is really fun."

The only rule? Once class begins, put your computer on mute.

"What I like about the video conference is that I can see the dancers and they can interact with me," Mr. Lopez said. "I know them very well, and they know my classes. I'm doing this for them, obviously — dancers need to move, we need to be exercising — but also it's helping me. You wake up in the morning and I'm like, OK, let me prepare the class."

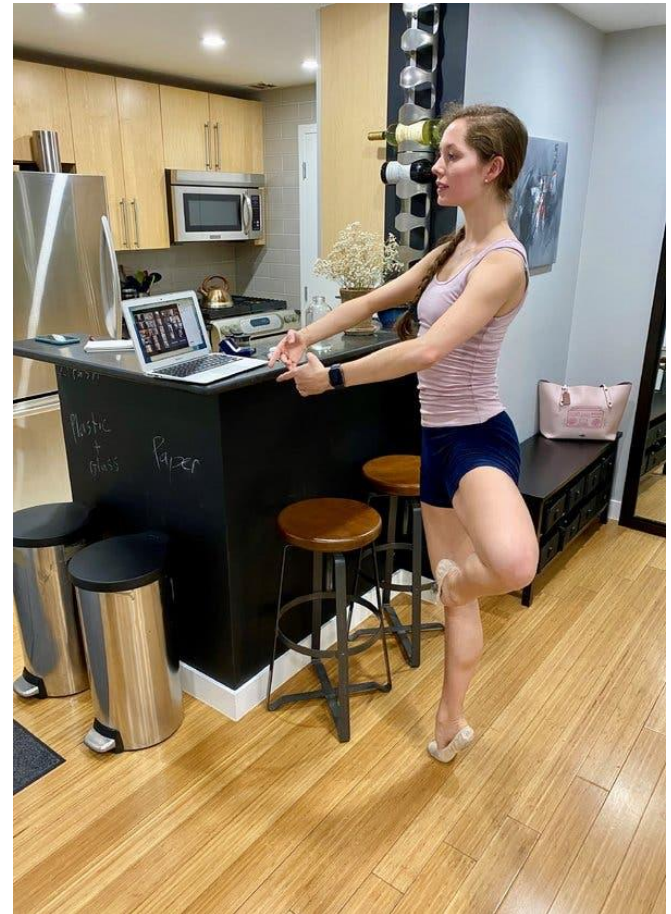
Mr. Lopez isn't completely new to the technology: He taught a class using Zoom for a school in New Hampshire last year. After Ballet Theater announced to its dancers that the company would be going on a layoff, he volunteered to keep its company classes going. (Initially, he said he had hoped to rent a studio, but that idea was quickly

abandoned.) His first online class, on March 15, was taken by four dancers. By midweek, it was in the double digits.

“We were very surprised at how well it worked and how much it lifted our spirits,” he said. “Just seeing everybody talking and seeing their faces. It was very overwhelming with all the pop screens. At one point I was like, where am I? I don’t see myself.”

Before the coronavirus pandemic, he said, he didn’t see a future in the technology for dance class. “You want to be able to feel what the person in front of you is going through and feeling,” he said. “It’s not just about technique. But we are in an extreme situation, and whatever I thought a few months ago now I cannot think the same.”

Mr. Lopez said he’s also had requests to teach on Instagram. Many dancers, including Tiler Peck and Ashley Bouder from City Ballet, are already doing that. (Ballet Theater’s Zoom company classes — which ABT Studio Company, the JKO School and Juilliard, among others, are also experimenting with — require a link and are by invitation only.)



Gonzalo Garcia of City Ballet, taking Craig Salstein’s class. Credit...Ezra Hurwitz
Unity Phelan of City Ballet, also taking Mr. Salstein’s class. Credit...via Unity Phelan



Maria Kowroski, a City Ballet principal, prepares for Mr. Salstein's class with her son, Dylan, 4. Credit...Martin Harvey

And the explosion of movement classes on Instagram in response to the pandemic goes way beyond ballet. Classes are being offered by the Merce Cunningham Trust, [freeskewl](#) — where teachers specializing in more experimental practices can be paid through Venmo — and by dancers at the Martha Graham Dance Company. James Whiteside, of Ballet Theater, offers [Jim Fonda's 80s Party Pump](#) (it's a vintage aerobics delight and for any willing body) and also teaches ballet with his fellow principal, Isabella Boylston using the hashtag #TheCindiesBalletClass.

During a recent week, Ms. Boudier broadcast her class from the Manhattan Movement & Arts Center on 60th Street; dancers from companies including Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo and Dance Theater of Harlem, spaced at a safe distance in the studio, took part. Those classes are available for viewing on [her YouTube channel](#).

But then everything changed; the studio is now closed so she is teaching from her apartment. "I want to offer whatever I can," Ms. Boudier said, "and what I can offer is ballet class and workout classes."

Ms. Peck — who is in Bakersfield, Calif., with her family — teaches Mondays through Saturdays, with a conditioning class on Sundays. (Her mother, Georgia Peck, directs Bakersfield Dance Company, where Ms. Peck started teaching when she was young.) She isn't able to see her students in real time, but they include children and adults, and she encourages them to hashtag their videos of themselves taking her class at #TurnItOutWithTiler.

She then can address technical issues, like the correct placement of passé, in which the working leg is bent so that the toes land in the nook just above the knee. She has seen too many that hover below the knee.

“It drives me crazy,” Ms. Peck said in an interview. “I’m like, ‘When you’re 80 years old, you can have a passé day that low, but until then literally *pick it up.*’”

Even her mother calls her tough.

Beyond [the clarity of both her body and her verbal instruction](#), which is as scrupulous as her dancing, what’s refreshing about Ms. Peck is her intention. Yes, the world is falling apart — and don’t think that she doesn’t want to wake up from this bad dream — but ballet to her is not frivolous, and it shouldn’t be to us, either. Her demeanor may be sunny, but her approach is no-nonsense: We’re going to focus on this ballet for the next hour, so get it together.

She starts class in her mother’s kitchen, then moves to the living room; that’s a choice. She doesn’t work out of her mother’s studio because, she said, she wants to show dancers that she is just like them, using what is available.



“I’m happy that it’s bringing a lightness to their day, but at the same time I’m taking this seriously,” she said. “If we’re going to be at home, we can’t just be sitting. That’s not healthy for anybody.”

She, for one, cannot sit still. She is also helping her mother out with online classes for her studio, including a jazz class, during which she will work on the dance she had intended to create during this time for this summer’s Vail Dance Festival. “With choreographing, this is a perfect time for me to do it,” she said. “I can test it out on people. I can really get connected with the music and not feel like I’m losing any time.”

And unlike at Vail, there’s no pressure. “I’m in my own house, I have no real professional eyes staring at me,” she said. “I have a bunch of kids who are just eager to be taking class.”

Mr. Salstein, who worked with Ms. Peck privately when she was [recovering from a neck injury](#), regards his class as a way for dancers to loosen up; he even includes a social dance section toward the end. One morning he played Whitney Houston; the next, Barry White. He cracks jokes and calls out dancers’ names, but all the while he is meticulous in his teaching. It is, Mr. Salstein said, about strengthening and dancing at the same time

“Did you dance, Miriam?” he asked [Miriam Miller](#) after a group jam to Barry White’s “You’re the First, the Last, My Everything.” Ms. Miller, glistening with sweat, nodded with a smile.

What’s harder in contained spaces is the full-bodied act of dancing, which is what the end of class usually emphasizes. But Mr. Salstein makes room for that, too, with steps that allow a dancer to sway and move. “I think if we incorporate this now, when we all get back to the studio, we’ll be feeling like we never left it,” he said.



Catherine Hurlin and Aran Bell of American Ballet Theater, taking Mr. Lopez’s class. (They may not be six feet apart, but it’s OK; they’re a couple.) Credit...Luc Yokoi

Mr. Lopez likened the current situation to being injured. Once, he had to take an entire year off, which taught him to take life day by day. He would tell himself that instead of preparing for a show, he was building stamina; his show would be the day that he was no longer injured.

“I will try to pass that to the dancers,” he said. “Now if you’re only thinking, ‘When am I going to dance, when am I going to dance?’ you just get crazy. If you’re injured and you think, ‘When am I going to get back?’ it won’t work. Your mind needs to be relaxed.”

“And patience,” he added. “Right now you have to have patience. That’s the No. 1 rule.”

Gia Kourlas is the dance critic of The New York Times.