



A New Jersey native, **Diana Byer** studied at The Juilliard School in New York City. She worked with Margaret Craske for 18 years at the Manhattan School of Dance, while performing with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, Manhattan Festival Ballet and New York City Opera. Two years before Craske's Manhattan School of Dance closed, Byer formed the New York Theatre Ballet in 1978 and opened Ballet School NY to continue Craske's legacy. In 1989, Byer founded NYTB's LIFT Community Service Program, which travels around the city to teach homeless and at-risk youth. Byer has been a guest faculty instructor at Cornell University, New York University, SUNY Purchase, the Martha Graham School and the Cecchetti Society of Canada, in Toronto. She is on the board of directors for the Dance Notation Bureau, and as répétiteur for the Antony Tudor Ballet Trust, Byer has staged Tudor work for schools and companies nationwide, including American Ballet Theatre in 2008.

Byer teaches the *renversé* with NYTB principal dancer **Elena Zahmann** and Ballet School NY students **Izzy Hanson-Johnston**, 13, and **Victor Rosario**, 11.

# Diana Byer

How I teach Cecchetti

BY JENNY DALZELL

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATTHEW MURPHY  
at Ballet School NY

Detailed woodwork frames the walls of a cavernous dance studio, housed on the grounds of an early-19th-century Baptist church. It's the home of Ballet School NY and New York Theatre Ballet, a company dedicated in part to preserving classic ballet and modern dance works, and artistic director Diana Byer uses the Cecchetti syllabus to train her dancers. Though it's one of the oldest existing systems of ballet pedagogy, she stresses that it is not an antiquated method as teachers continue to breathe life into the training. It's an ideal syllabus for students who also study modern and jazz dance and perform a wide range of choreography. Its unadorned qualities train students to move strongly and purely, without stylistic idiosyncrasies.

Enrico Cecchetti (1850–1928) was one of the most acclaimed ballet pedagogues in the early 20th century. After an illustrious career onstage in Italy, he was invited to teach at the Imperial Ballet School in Russia. His students included

Vaslav Nijinsky, Anna Pavlova and Agrippina Vaganova, and from 1909 to 1918 he worked with Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in Paris. For the last decade of his life, Cecchetti taught ballet in London. His syllabus was continued through his students, Ninette de Valois and Marie Rambert, and passed to more contemporary figures like Margaret Craske and Antony Tudor.

Byer, who studied with Tudor at Juilliard and Craske at Manhattan School of Dance, follows Craske's system of Cecchetti training. The traditional syllabus operates with a set class schedule, and although Byer doesn't follow those guidelines, she does see the value in set exercises because they allow students to concentrate on technique, rather than remembering new combinations. She also refers to the Cecchetti books to see what the classes are. She says: "I compare that to what I think my students need."

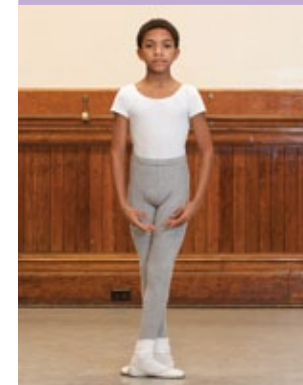
Byer's children's classes all begin in the center, with a spine-corrective exercise

developed by Craske that helps students strengthen and stretch their backs. Next, students practice folk dances, like the country waltz or polka. "While simple, these dances are very rhythmic and teach children how to use their eyes onstage," Byer says. "We work on aspects of performance within the dances."

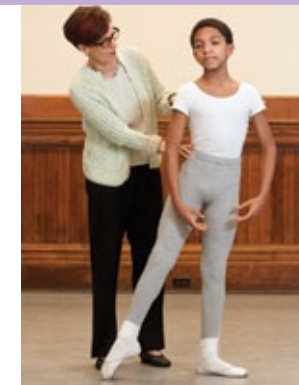
Then comes work at the barre, which uses minimal port de bras—arms are primarily kept en bas, and the use of épaulement is simple. "The head only follows the action of the shoulders," says Byer. "There's no affectation at all." Students create pure lines, working within their natural abilities. "You have to respect the body and remember that you're teaching dancing, not just ballet."

Here, Byer and her students teach a *renversé* in the Cecchetti syllabus, which is a bit different from the *renversé* one might see in other vocabularies. But no matter which version of the step you choose, *renversé*—meaning, "to upset," in French—stems from the use of épaulement.

## Beginner Level: Develop the use of épaulement.



**1.** Start in a fifth position en face. Arms will be held en bas the entire sequence.



**2.** Tendu your right leg à la seconde. As your foot brushes out, your shoulders follow the line of the leg. Your head also tilts, because it reacts to the movement of the shoulders. Do not drastically incline or turn your neck; it should be subtle.

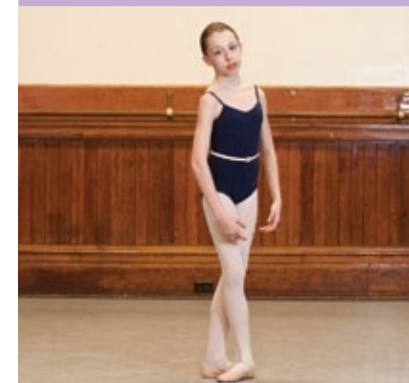


**3.** Brush your right leg back in, to close in front. Your shoulders and head should again be facing forward.

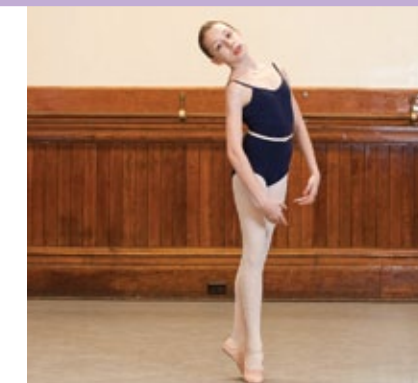


**4.** Tendu your left leg à la seconde, and allow your left shoulder to move with the leg. Keep your hips square to the front—they should not move. Your head follows the line of your shoulder.  
**5.** Close back to fifth position, en face.

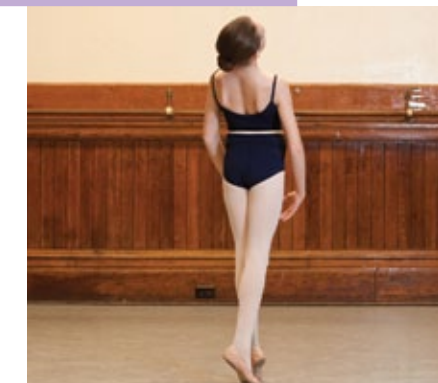
## Intermediate Level: Practice the upper-back bend of a renversé, while turning.



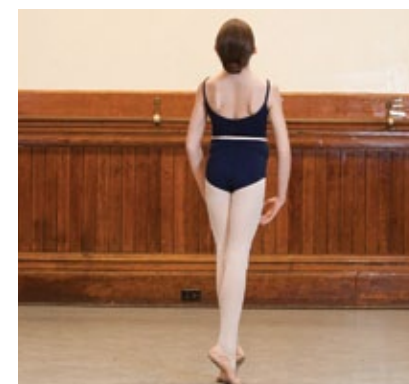
**1.** Begin in fifth position, with the right foot forward, facing your downstage left corner.



**2.** Relevé to 3/4-pointe. Bend your upper spine to the back. Because there is a slight twist in your shoulders, your head continues that line over your right shoulder.

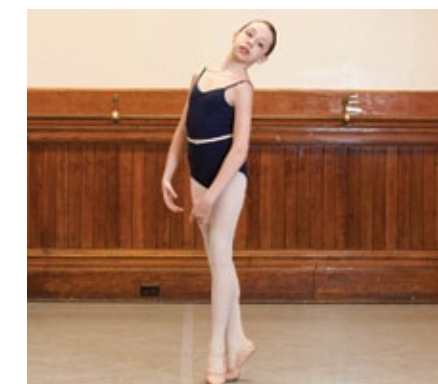
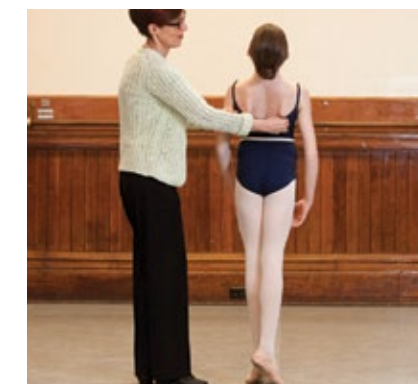


**3.** Keeping your head in the same place, begin to bourrée around to the back, turning to the left.



**4.** Continue this spiral while keeping your head in the same place. You should not sink in your lower spine—the bend is just under the shoulder blades.

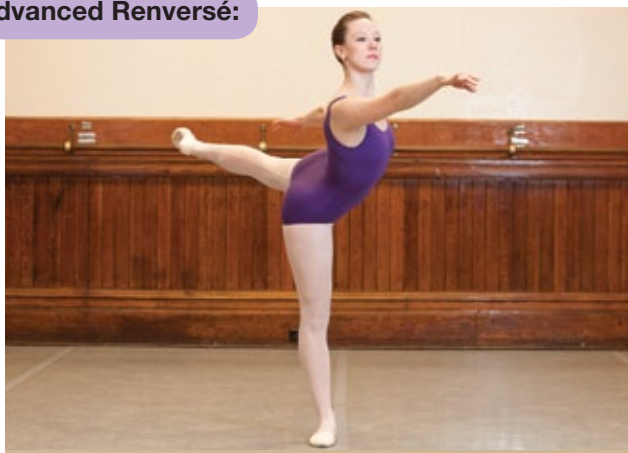
**Note:** A student is not ready to move on until she can continue this spiral the entire revolution, without swaying her lower back.



**5.** As you reach the downstage right corner, your head should be on the same plane as before, now tilted to the right. Remember: The movement happens in the shoulders and upper spine—the head follows. Plié, and finish.

# technique

## The Advanced Renversé:



**1.** Begin in fifth position, arms en bas, facing the downstage left corner. Chassé your right leg forward and lift your back leg to a first arabesque, croisé.



**2.** In one swift motion, lift your left knee to bring your left foot into retiré, and lower your arms. Bend your torso toward your knee. (Up next: By scooping your left shoulder around to the back, your body will quickly rotate to the right.)



**3.** Use your shoulders to rotate your body. Push off from a straight right leg and rise to 1/4-pointe for the turn.

As in the intermediate level, keep your head in the same place.



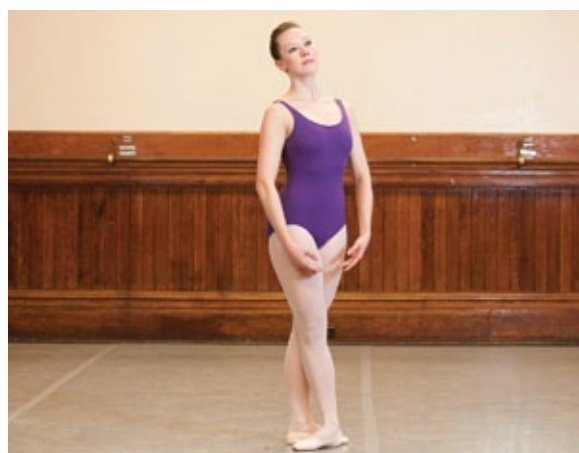
This is the position you are in when you're rotated to the back.



**4.** Sweep your arms to fifth position en haut as you continue to turn back to the downstage left corner. You are still on 1/4-pointe. Notice the épaulement.



**5.** Still on 1/4-pointe, extend your left leg à la seconde, and your arms open to an extended second position, with the hands directed downward. (In the Cecchetti syllabus, there are three positions of the hands.)



**6.** From there, assemblé and close your left leg behind.

To watch Byer and her students demonstrate the renversé, visit [www.dance-teacher.com](http://www.dance-teacher.com).