

## First Person Singular

# Ballet lessons

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// Dance teacher, choreographer

INTERVIEW BY KK OTTESEN

I start dancing at 6 years old. In Russia, before perestroika, they have special ballet schools. Parents pay *nothing*, just bring kids. And from, like, 200 girls, they [admit] one. These girls supposed to be perfect: legs, body, arms — everything. You live in this school eight years. Every morning, you wake up, go to ballet barre and spend eight hours in ballet class. Russian ballet teacher very hard. In America, you pay money and teacher say, “Good job! Good work.” (Continued on Page 4)



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Everything “good.” In Russia, it was free, and teacher tell you truth. We cry almost every day. But if you graduate, you’re professional ballerina, like me.

When I become an American I think, *I not dance anymore, it’s okay*. I dance 20 [years] professional, plus school. My body’s tired, it’s good to wake up and not go stand in first position every morning. One month I’m sitting around: Good. I’m sleeping, I’m learning English, I’m walking around. Second month: Start boring. Third month: [My husband] opens the door, and I’m sitting crying. I miss my friends, I miss my work. You can’t whole life dance and exercise and one day just stop. I decide: I have to come

back and do something.

So I open dance classes for women, all different styles — samba, cha-cha-cha, tango, city funk, “Hava Nagila.” And from nothing — people who never dance — I make company: Four Seasons Dancers. Most women are 40, 50, with children grown. At first, they say, “It’s hard. We can’t remember.” But I say, “I don’t want to make it for you [too simple]; you will feed stupid, and your soul not open.” Some people give up. But the people who do continue, I can see these people love it, just love it. It’s something you do for yourself, something special. Not just: Work, home, kids; work, home, kids.

One student, she says her life change for 100 percent. Seven years

ago, she came into my class, and I look at her: old lady. But after six months, she open her shoulders, she lose weight, her clothes different, she walk different. Now, nobody tell her she’s old woman!

It doesn’t matter how old you are — 20 or 40 or 50 — when you dance, you feel younger. You know, sometimes I think: *Oh, my back hurts*, or, *My head aches, and I don’t want to move*. But open door, come in ballet room, it’s gone: your headache, work problem, kids problem, family problem — everything, for two hours you forgot. You move, and you start to feel good again. So, in my classes, I always say, “Forget that you’re grandmothers! When you dance, you’re girls.”