

French Ballet Terms Explained

Anyone can enjoy a performance of ballet. Those who watch the dancers appreciate the beauty of every move. Not everyone, however, understands the vast amount of terminology that shapes every ballet performance.

Let's say you've just seen a performance of the classic "Romeo and Juliet". You likely didn't realize that it was a "pas de deux" performance. Romeo made an "avant" towards Juliet, and she responded by jumping "arriere". Both dancers were "virtuoso".

These terms sound foreign, because for the majority of the world, they are. Modern ballet as we know it has evolved from roots planted in 17th century Europe, so most of the most of the terminology is French. However, whether you're in a Canadian studio or on a Russian stage, the instructors and dancers will use the same terminology. It is used and understood universally.

In order to grasp a better understanding of ballet performers and performances, here is a selection of commonly-used French ballet terminology:

- * en Arriere # (ah na-RYEHR): this term, meaning "backward", indicates that a dancer is executing a step away from the audience.
- * en Avant # (ah na-VAHN): a French ballet term is another direction of step execution, used to indicate that the dancer is moving forward, toward the audience.
- * Battement degage # (bat-MAHN day-ga-ZHAY): this phrase translates to "disengaged battement". Linked to the Cecchetti method of dance, the battement degage is similar to the battement tendu, but is done at twice the speed. The working foot rises about four inches from the floor with a well-pointed toe, and then slides back into the first or fifth position. Performing battements degages strengthens the toes, develops the instep and improves the flexibility of the ankle joints.
- * Bras bas # (brah bah): with arms low or down, the dancer is "at attention". The arms form a circle with palms facing each other. The back edges of the hands rest on the thighs. The arms should hang quite loosely, but should not allow the elbows to touch the sides.
- * Changement de pieds # (shahzh-MAHN duh pyay): this French ballet term refers to a change in feet positioning. In actual practice, the term is often abbreviated. A "changement" is a springing step in the fifth position. The dancer changes feet in the air, and alights in the fifth position with the opposite foot in front. This step may be performed "petit" (small) or "grand" (large).
- * sur le cou-de-pied # (sewr luh koo-duh-PYAY): meaning "on the neck of the foot". This term means that the working foot is placed on the opposite leg, on the part where the beginning of the ankle meets the base of the calf.
- * sur le demi-pointes # (sewr lay duh-mee-PWENT): meaning "on the half-points", this French ballet term indicates that the dancer is to stand high on the balls of the feet, and under part of the toes.
- * temps developpe # (tahn dayv-law-PAY): this term means "time developed", or refers to a "developing movement". Through common usage and modern convenience, this term is commonly used in its abridged form of "developpe". In this movement, the working leg is drawn up to the knee of the supporting leg, and then slowly extended to an open position. Once "en l'air", the extended leg is held with perfect control. Hips must be kept level and square to the direction in which the dancer is facing.
- * Ecarte # (ay-har-TAY): Meaning, "separated" or "thrown wide apart", this term refers to one of the eight directions of the body. From the Cecchetti method, this position requires the dancer to face either of the two front corners of the room. The leg nearer the audience is pointed in the second position "a terre" (on the ground), or raised to the second position "en l'air" (in the air). The torso is held perpendicular, while the arms are held "en attitude", with the raised arm being on the same side as the extended leg.
- * Effacee # (eh-fa-SAY): a French ballet term that refers to one of the directions of "epaulement", in which the dancer stands at an oblique angle to the audience so that a part of the body is taken back and almost hidden from view. In the French method, this direction is termed "ouvert". Efface is also used to qualify a pose in which the legs are open and not crossed. The pose may be taken devant (frontward) or derriere (backward), either a terre or en l'air.

This is just a sampling of the dozens of words and phrases used in ballet training and practice. If you are already a fan of the ballet, you'll appreciate it even more with your new understanding of the French ballet terms.