

## Fourteen tips for going pro in the world of dance

With more than 100 students enrolled in pre-professional ballet classes across Calgary, it is evident that Calgarians possess a healthy interest in training to become professional dancers.

“Most little girls want to take ballet,” said Murray Kilgour, principal of the School of Alberta Ballet, who has danced and taught within professional companies worldwide since 1967. “It’s when the reality of it hits, the reality of the work behind it: the sweat and tears and the hard striving, then that’s when they find out if they really want to be a dancer,” he said.



Alex Potgieter, pre-professional student at the School of Alberta Ballet, warms up at the bar in a school studio. Photo: Samantha Thiessen /Calgary Journal

Kristof Starchevski, principal and teacher of Starchevski School of Ballet in Calgary and previous dancer for various international companies, can attest to the difficulties of taking ballet to a professional level.

“Even from the School of Alberta Ballet pre-professional division, there will be only a few (who) become professional dancers,” he said. “There is a limit of space where they can go in the companies.”

There are five major professional ballet companies in Canada, which accept on average one to two new dancers per year.

So what does it take to become a professional ballet dancer? The answer is a multi-step process that takes years to complete.

### **1. Start young**

Starchevski recommends enrolling children in ballet when they are about three years old – to catch some interest. Then begin serious training at age 10 or 11.

Alex Potgieter, 18, is in her first year of the pre-professional program at the School of Alberta Ballet. She started dancing when she was six.

“I think you have to start training before the body tightens up,” she said. “Things will usually come easier to you.”

### **2. Don't push**

Potgieter suggested that kids who were pushed into ballet when they were young are more likely to quit by age 18, which is also the ideal age to audition for professional companies.

“By the time they're my age, they've stopped because they're so bored,” she said. “You want to put in as much as you can and work hard, but you have to love it and you have to desire to do it.”

### **3. Get your basic technique down**

“The artistic director will be able to judge if your legs cross to the side, if there is a diamond shape in your legs, if you can hold your arms up properly or if your stance is nice,” Starchevski said. “You can tell a lot about a dancer by the way they stand.”

“They can see how fast your leg goes from point to point, if the turn-out is correct, how you handle pirouettes, jumps and fast steps,” he added.

### **4. Hone your extra abilities**

Kilgour suggested dancers become appealing to artistic directors and principals through possessing other skills beyond technique, like co-ordination and acting ability.

“Dancers should have freedom in hip joints which affects the line, nice balance, and strength in feet,” he said. “They should also have musicality, co-ordination, vitality and an alive personality.”

### **5. Compete**

When dancers compete, it becomes possible to obtain scholarships and opportunities to get noticed.

After travelling to Calgary from small-town Knysna, South Africa, Potgieter won the Adjudicators' Choice Prize at the 2008 Classical Ballet Competition. Kilgour offered her a full-year scholarship to train at the School of Alberta Ballet after the competition, which she is currently attending until June.

Nicole Caron, who has danced with the Alberta Ballet for eight seasons, outlined the benefits of competing outside your hometown.

“You could be the big fish in the small pond,” she said. “But going out there and seeing what the world has to offer and all the other dancers, it kind of humbles you. It got me working a lot harder.”

### **6. Become adaptable**

Once hired, each artistic director has their own dance style and body positioning that the professional dancers are expected to learn.

“I remember, in my first year, it was quite tough coming in and doing this style because I’ve never done it before; it took me about a year to get it down,” Caron said.

### **7. Be a quick thinker**

Just like any job, it is important to be able to memorize sequences and roles as a professional dancer.

“There’s that mental activity side that you have to understand, as well as physical,” Kilgour said. “You can be a beautiful dancer, but if it takes you three weeks to learn a solo, no one is going to hire you.”

### **8. Prepare to sacrifice your social life**

Being a professional dancer means hours of training, rehearsing, travelling and performing.

However, Potgieter said she is comfortable with the idea of living without a social life.

“For me, when I finally get into a company, all the hard work and everything you’ve sacrificed is worth it,” she said. “If you really want to succeed, you don’t mind not going out on a Friday night.”

Potgieter said that though dancing is hard work, she still loves it.

“When I don’t dance I don’t feel whole,” she said. “This is my first love and this is what I want to do.”

### **9. Be willing to travel**

Travelling long distances to perform a show is all in a day’s work for professionals.

“Sometimes we didn’t have a Christmas because we were doing the Nutcracker in another country,” said Starchevski recalling the years he danced for the Alberta Ballet in the ’90s. “Sometimes the dancer has to follow exactly what the company wants. You need to be there full-out.”

### **10. Build endurance and stamina**

According to Starchevski, some directors keep their dancers in training for eight hours per day, four to five of which is intensive work.

Caron said she's found that many dancers lose weight each year during Nutcracker season, when the ballet performs more than 30 shows in one month.

Potgieter suggests trying other forms of strength-building exercise, such as Pilates or yoga.

### **11. Work hard**

Practise makes perfect. Starchevski said a dancer must practice every day for a minimum of three hours starting at age 11 to be able to audition for a company at age 18.

"The work isn't always easy," Caron said. "It's tons of hard work and you have sore, aching muscles. It's a lot of blood, sweat and tears to get where you are."

Kilgour said striving and working hard in training sets the top dancers apart from others in his or her class.

"You rise to the top because of work and effort," he said. "Most of them have talent, but often it's those who have the will that end up succeeding."

### **12. Take care of yourself**

Kilgour said that sleeping well, being consistent while dancing, knowing how to treat injuries and eating right are the keys to being a successful dancer.

“You’ve got to eat the right things,” he said. “You have to have your protein, carbohydrates, sugars, but in a sensible balance.”

### **13. Maintain balance**

Potgieter said it’s important not to become completely obsessed with ballet, and to keep up with other interests a dancer could have.

“If ballet’s suddenly taken away from you, you won’t want to roll over and die,” she said. “Ballet doesn’t define who you are, it’s what you do. You can’t let it rule over who you are and how you feel about yourself. “

### **14. Love it**

To dive head-first into a time-consuming and taxing career, both Potgieter and Caron said dancers must have an intense love for ballet.

“To actually be here and doing it, I’m living my childhood dream,” Caron said. “I’m almost 26, and I’m still having a lot of fun.”

If you’re not ready to take your interest in ballet to a professional level, Starchevski said many students continue to dance for recreation.