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# ↑ HEAD-TO-TOE ↓ BAD HABITS — AND — HOW TO FIX THEM

FOUR MASTER TEACHERS WEIGH IN ON THEIR APPROACHES  
TO COMMON PROBLEMS. →

**BAD HABITS**—they're enough to drive any dance teacher batty. Seeping into a student's technique, their routine, almost involuntary nature makes them extremely difficult to break. *Dance Teacher* asked **Finis Jhung, Irene Dowd, Sheila Barker** and **Pamela Pietro** for their advice on conquering common bad habits they see in class.

BY AMY BRANDT

PHOTOGRAPHED BY KYLE FROMAN



From left to right:  
Irene Dowd, Sheila  
Barker, Finis Jhung  
and Pamela Pietro

## technique

### ARCHING THE LOWER BACK

Arching the back is another poor postural habit that consequently releases the stomach muscles and tilts the pelvis down. When Barker sees dancers habitually sink into their lower backs, she recommends this floor exercise to help strengthen their abdominals and lengthen the spine.



Lie on your back, with knees bent and feet flat on the ground, hip width apart. Lift the arms overhead, keeping the shoulders and ribs down, and feel the stomach engage into the lower back. Take a deep breath and exhale.

Point the feet and inhale. On the exhale, bring the knees into the chest. Without arching the back, lower the legs down, keeping the feet pointed.



On the next exhale, lift the knees again and bring hands behind the head. Inhale, and on the exhale curl the upper body in, bringing the elbows into the knees. Holding the position, take another deep breath. Relax any tension in the neck.

On the next exhalation, extend legs to 90 degrees, elbows still reaching toward the knees. Hold for two breaths. "You're not bouncing," says Barker. "You have a continuous flow of energy just breathing and holding."

Flex the feet, lengthening through the legs and maintaining the upper-body curl with elbows in. "Feel the energy going out and up," says Barker. Hold for two breaths, and release.

### HIKED WORKING HIP

A common bad habit (noted by master teacher Finis Jhung) occurs when students hike the working hip during passé and développé. In an effort to pull up in their supporting leg or to lift the working leg higher, they neglect their hip alignment, resulting in a tilted pelvis. "It's a bit hard to pirouette like this," says Jhung. "It's really easy to fall over, though!"



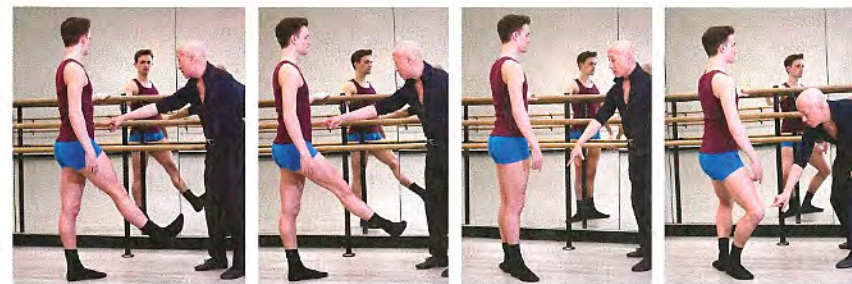
To help identify proper hip alignment, have students execute a simple grand plié in first position, preferably facing a mirror. Point out the squareness of the hips at the bottom of grand plié. "The knees are level with the hips, and your pelvis is not tilted," says Jhung.

With that added awareness, have them try passé, keeping the hips as level as possible. "You want to keep yourself always in the center of the body, balanced and square."

## technique

### KNEES NOT ALIGNED OVER TOES

When students measure their turnout based on the position of their feet, they often wrench them past their natural hip rotation. As a result, their knees don't align over the toes (especially in plié), putting them at risk for injury. "The foot rolls in, the knee collapses and there's no support or muscular control," says Jhung.



To help students determine their true range of rotation from the hip, start by having them stand in parallel facing a mirror, with both hands on the barre. Lift the right leg to 45 degrees, keeping the foot flexed.

Turn out the right leg, making sure not to move the hips, and lower.

Repeat with the left leg, finishing in first position. Do not bend the knees to force turnout at the ankle. "This is your personal position," says Jhung.

Plié sideways to the mirror to ensure that the hip, knee and toes are in alignment. Feel contact with the floor and a muscular connection between the hips, knees and toes.



### HOLDING TENSION IN THE FEET

"This habit drives me crazy," says Pietro. "Students do not use their feet to the fullest expansion, so the toes start crunching." She cites over-pointing the foot as the source of tension. "Aesthetically it's a great line," she says, but dancers often neglect to release the foot as it articulates through the floor, especially while attempting to find their balance or move rapidly. "I like them to feel the extension of the foot drawing into the floor, so that they're using the entire foot—the top, the bottom and all the way around."



To find the full surface of the foot on the floor, imagine the space between the ball of the big toe, ball of the little toe and the inside and outside edge of the heel growing wider, while the fascia underneath the foot spreads out.

Additionally, elongate through the toes and create space between the metatarsals.

"Think of big, spongy feet—what I call 'platypus feet'—pressing into the floor," says Pietro. **DT**

Troy Herring and Ashley Haiger, both 21, are senior dance division students at The Juilliard School.