



Beginner's Guide to Ballet

Welcome to our Beginner's Guide to the Ballet. If you've never been to see a ballet before and would like to give it a go, this guide will let you know what to expect when you get there and hopefully will answer any questions you have.



You might find it useful to read our Beginner's Guide to the Theatre first, as this gives loads of information (e.g. how to buy tickets, where to sit, dos and don'ts of the theatre, what to wear) that's also good to know when going to see a ballet, as these are mostly performed in theatres.

1. What's so special about ballet?

"It's a thrilling combination of dance, music and design."

"Ballet dancers are both superb athletes and remarkable artists."

"It's a spectacular, thrilling, magical, awe-inspiring, out-of-this world experience!"

2. What is a ballet performance really like?

Ballet has been around for hundreds of years, and not surprisingly there can be big differences between the more traditional ballets of the 19th century and those created and choreographed today.

To give ballet a fair try it is perhaps best to see two or three pieces from different eras and by different companies, as the styles can be so different that it is very hard to judge ballet on a single visit. You might find that you prefer the more traditional 19th century ballets such as Swan Lake or Sleeping Beauty, or that you enjoy the more recent dance styles of productions like 'Still Life' at the Penguin Café.

Newer ballets tend to tell the story in a continual flow, whereas the older ballets are much more 'stop-go' affair - part of the story is told, then everybody has a bit of a dance, followed by a bit more telling of the story etc.

Most ballets are told through music and dance alone, and whilst you may find at first the fact there is no singing or speaking strange, you'll find you can understand the story easily through following the emotions of the performers on stage.



3. It's my first time, which ballet do you recommend?

It's hard to say what your first ballet should be, as it depends entirely on whether you want something happy or sad, a ballet with a real story or just beautiful dancing, a full-length ballet or a series of shorter one-act ballets etc.

To get an idea of the storylines of some popular ballets, visit www.ballet.co.uk/contexts/first_ballets.htm Or pick up a programme for the local ballet company and give something a try. Swan Lake, Sleeping Beauty, Giselle, Coppelia and 'La Fille mal gardee' are favourites of many ballet attenders and appear regularly in local programmes.

4. What's the difference between a full-length ballet and a mixed repertoire?

A full-length ballet is generally based on a story that extends over the entire evening, with one or more intervals. Well-known ballets such as Swan Lake, Coppélia and Giselle are perfect examples of these.

A mixed programme will try and cater for all tastes in a mixture of three or four short, often unrelated works that make up the evening's entertainment. Short works of this nature are usually based on relationships or an idea that develops throughout the piece.

5. Is ballet suitable for children?

Some ballets such as The Nutcracker, Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella are ideal for children. Other performances may not be suitable for younger children, however staff at the box office will be able to advise on individual performances.

If you are taking children do try and get your tickets as soon as possible. If you can get seats in the front row of the stalls or the circle (see the beginner's guide to the theatre) they will have a clear view of the stage and will be less likely to get bored than if they can't see over the head of the person in front.

6. If I'm new to ballet, how will I understand what's going on?

You can normally telephone the theatre in advance and request a story/information sheet to read before the performance – ask the box office for details. If you have not been to a ballet before it can take a while to get used to understanding the plot, so it is best to buy the programme and read up on the storyline of each act before the curtain goes up. The programme is usually a glossy brochure full of interesting articles and beautiful photographs and also make a lovely souvenir of your visit to the ballet.

Occasionally you can book tickets to see a performance when there is also a pre-performance talk – these talks provide a user friendly introduction to the company and to the performance you are about to see as well as the opportunity to ask all sorts of questions. Again, ask the box office staff to let you know if any of these talks are taking place for the production you have chosen to see.

Remember you can appreciate ballet in just the same way as a piece of music. If there is a theme or a story, it will be made clear through the dance. Often there is no story and all you need to do is appreciate the shapes, patterns and skill of the dancers.



7. What do I have to do once I've booked?

Nothing, except turn up, sit back and enjoy yourself! It is recommended you arrive about 30 minutes before the performance starts. You can buy drinks and refreshments at the theatre before the show and during the intervals.

8. Do I have to wear anything special?

There is no dress code for ballet performances – although some people do like to dress up.

9. How do I know when to clap?

There are no rules about showing your appreciation of a ballet performance – the dancers and musicians get a huge buzz from hearing the audience applaud and even cheer! However, it is customary to applaud as the conductor takes his or her stand in the orchestra pit, both at the start of the performance and when the show starts again after the interval(s). You are also free to applaud during the performance whenever a solo dance has finished or to show your appreciation for the performance as and when you feel it is deserved, and naturally at the end for the performers as they take their bows at the final curtain call.

Adapted with kind permission of [English National Ballet](http://www.englishnationalballet.com) and www.ballet.co.uk.

Images kindly provided by [Stef Lewandowski](#) and [Birmingham Royal Ballet](#).

Image 1: Birmingham Royal Ballet at Birmingham Artsfest. Photo: Stef Lewandowski

Image 2: Birmingham Royal Ballet at Birmingham Artsfest. Photo: Stef Lewandowski

Image 3: The Firebird, Birmingham Royal Ballet. Photo: BBC Birmingham