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## [Classic] Simplified Speech #168 - The ballet

### Episode description

Do you like ballet? In this episode, Andrew and Suzanne talk about this unique style of dancing. They discuss its origins and characteristics, and explain some specific vocabulary along the way. Suzanne, a former professional dancer, shares her own story and what ballet means to her.

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Note: The transcript has been edited for clarity.

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**Andrew:** Hey everyone, it is Andrew here. The Culips team and I are taking a little time off for the holiday season. So, there isn't going to be a bonus episode this week. But instead, what we're going to do is replay a classic Simplified Speech episode that we first released in April this year about the ballet. Now if you listened to last week's episode, the Christmas one with Kassy and I, you'll know that I'm spending Christmas this year by going to see a ballet, The Nutcracker. So I thought it would be great for me to brush up on my knowledge of the ballet by listening to this episode again, too.

By the way, do you know that expression "To brush up on something"? I said I want to brush up on my knowledge of the ballet. Well, "To brush up on something" means to improve your knowledge, your skill, or memory, about something. So, let's brush up on the ballet together by listening to this conversation that I had with Suzanne, where she tells us all about this interesting form of dance. We'll make the interactive transcript for this episode free for everyone, a little Christmas gift if you will. So, just follow the link in the description to follow along with it while you listen.

And we'll be back a little bit later this week with our final episode of 2023 where Kassy and I recap our year and talk about our goals and our plans for 2024. So, stay tuned for that a little bit later this week, as I mentioned, but for now, it's time to talk about the ballet. So, enjoy this episode. And as always, Happy English studies!

Today joining me is my cohost, Suzanne. Hello, Suzanne.

**Suzanne:** Hey, Andrew. Hey, everybody.

**Andrew:** So, Suzanne, could you tell us what we're going to be talking about today? This episode topic was actually your suggestion. So I'll let you introduce it.

**Suzanne:** Yeah, absolutely. So, today's topic is the ballet. I recently went to a ballet performance, and I really enjoyed it. So I thought we could talk about this wonderful form of dance and expression together. And, yeah, kind of share our thoughts and opinions and maybe some about my experience with dance and ballet.

**Andrew:** Sounds great. I don't have too much experience with ballet myself. But I know you do, Suzanne, so I am excited to hear what you have to say. So, let's get started with our conversation about ballet now, Suzanne. And we do have a global audience and I think probably most people are familiar with ballet and what ballet is. But there may be some people who don't really know. So why don't we start with clearly defining exactly what ballet is?

**Suzanne:** Yeah, great idea. So, ballet is an elegant style of dancing. And it started back in the Renaissance times in Italy. It became refined and further developed in France and I also believe in Russia, as well. And it's characterized by precise and intricate movements, often accompanied by classical music. So it is also considered a classical dance, a classical way of dancing. And it's really performed by highly trained dancers who have undergone years of intense training.

You can even think of ballet dancers as athletes. They're really strong and work very hard. And they really have to train day and night, all the time. They eat, breathe, and sleep ballet. And sometimes ballet tells a story or shows emotions. And I would even say that most of the time, you want that bit of presence and acting ability and storytelling in a ballet, and not just the steps, right? You're also interpreting the music and the story. And the costumes and sets are also usually very classical and extravagant and beautiful as well.

**Andrew:** Right. I haven't seen the ballet too often. And it's kind of funny, I wanted to talk about that, we often say the phrase the ballet, right? I haven't seen the ballet. It's weird why we add the "the" there and we don't just say ballet, but I haven't seen the ballet performed too often. But, you know, I've seen the famous ones, like Nutcracker and Swan

Lake and, yeah, they tell a story, right? It's not just people dancing on the stage but there is an element of drama and storytelling on top of that as well. Suzanne, you mentioned at the top of the show that you recently went to see the ballet. So could you tell us about what that experience was like?

**Suzanne:** Yes, this year, I'm going a few times to the ballet. And the most recent was the Nutcracker. So that, like you said, is one of the most common ballets. And they say that it's kind of the entry ballet because, you know, for kids as well who are learning and beginning to train, that's where sort of, you know, they might start as well.

For me, it's just so inspiring to see the emotion, the strength, the intricacies, and the presentation of the work on stage. It's very exciting, right? And like the whole experience, you dress up, you get there, you sit in the comfy, like, velvety seats, and you have the proscenium, and the orchestra is incredible and it's grand. Well, I think in Montreal, it's called Les Grands Ballets. It's the grand ballet, so it does feel grand. And you really get sucked into the performance.

And especially something as fun as the Nutcracker, right? You're, like, anticipating the holidays and it's a very festive and fun experience and you have so many different dances. You have like the little mice, when Maria or Clara, which they call it different depending on the choreographer. So, for example, if you're doing a Balanchine ballet, which I'll explain in a second.

George Balanchine choreographed the Nutcracker and his little girl was called Maria, not Clara, apparently. And so, Balanchine was the main artistic director and choreographer of the New York City Ballet. And he also came from Russia and brought a technique to the New York City Ballet that was, like, not just about strength and long lines, but also about speed, and quickness, and jumping and a lot of, like, explosion on stage, which is really cool, because it's different.

But I'll tell you what, he was actually influenced by a lot of African American women and men choreographers, and we should say that that wasn't only his doing, he was influenced by other cultures and brought that on to the stage. So that's really cool. Like it became his contribution to ballet, the New York City Ballet became known for that kind of quick and explosive movement. His Nutcracker has a lot more jumping and more quick movements. So, it's a little different than maybe your local Nutcracker.

**Andrew:** That's really cool. I didn't know that actually. And, yeah, that's one of the things that I love about America is all of these new art forms that developed because of the mixing of cultures, right? So you have these different influences coming together in one spot, and new art forms emerging. So that's really, really cool to learn about.

So you saw the Nutcracker most recently, but you said you're going to a few ballets. Are there any other famous ones that you're going to see that I would know? Or maybe some of our listeners may know?

**Suzanne:** Yeah, I think so. I'm going to Romeo and Juliet. So, it's like that famous Shakespeare play, Romeo and Juliet, most of you guys probably know and that's set to ballet. So meaning it's performed in a ballet as opposed to with words. And then I'm also going to see Cinderella, which is a classic tale as well, but in a ballet.

**Andrew:** Awesome. That's fantastic. And Suzanne, I also know that you were involved in dance yourself. You were a dancer, are a dancer, maybe at heart are still a dancer, I don't know?

**Suzanne:** I feel like that. Yeah, I definitely feel like at heart I'm still a dancer. But I started when I was very young. And that's usually how it happens, most of the time. I was maybe one and a half, I was walking. But then I was like, dance, dance, dance. And my mom was like, "What? What, like, you just learned how to walk. What are you talking about?"

And she had a friend, I think, who worked at this dance studio. And she took me to this studio to watch the dancers. And I was pressed up against the glass window, like my face was like, I want to do that. I want to do that. And the lady, the teacher was like, that's fine, but she has to be potty trained. So, what that means is you can go to the bathroom by yourself, and you don't go in your pants, meaning you don't have a diaper. You don't have, you know, accidents where you might pee in your pants. But you know how to use the toilet. So, my mom brought me home and I had to make sure I was potty trained. But she said I could start when I was two.

So before then, though, I was really anxious about it. I wanted to start so my mom would bring me once in a while to watch so I could watch them, like it was my favourite thing in the whole world was the days when we were able to go watch the dancers. So, I started at two, I got my tights. I got my leotard. I got my ballet shoes. And there it was, I started dancing at two and I danced almost every day consistently until I was about 15. And then I started doing more theatre. And then I danced again in college. And then actually I was in a dance company for a couple years after college. So, when I moved to New York, I did some professional dancing as well.

**Andrew:** Oh, you were a professional? Wow, I didn't know that.

**Suzanne:** Yeah, yeah. So, it was like a mix of contemporary and modern dance. With modern dance, you don't use ballet shoes or pointe shoes, right, that you normally see ballet dancers use. And the movements are a little bit more broken, you're not as classically in line all the time, your body is not necessarily long and in a line, you're more broken and it's a different kind of expression.

**Andrew:** OK, very interesting. Now, I didn't want to talk about this, because I don't actually know the vocabulary, but I think you will. And a lot of our listeners when we talk about a kind of topic like this, they like to know some of the specific vocabulary that's involved, just because I think it's interesting to know. And ballet does have some unique

vocabulary, especially to do with the clothing that you have to wear when you dance ballet. So, you mentioned before ballet shoes and pointe shoes. I've also heard of ballet slippers before. Are those all the same thing or are they a little bit different?

**Suzanne:** Yeah, so pointe shoes are not ballet slippers, even though I think people might see pointe shoes and say ballet slippers. But ballet slippers are the ones that are soft, the ones that have like the elastic band, those are like made of leather, those are like a little bit softer. And they're pliable, and you don't go up on your point. The pointe shoes are different because they have a hard bottom and a box at the toe that is very hard so that it's protecting your toe when you're going up on the point, the tippy, tippy toe of your foot. And when you get them, this is what's funny, and I think confusing to a lot of people. But when you get new pointe shoes, you have to break them.

**Andrew:** Oh, break them in?

**Suzanne:** Yes, and literally break the shoe. So, you have to step on the box. So, on the box, you have to like step on it and push down and you'll feel it kind of breaking a little bit. And then you have to literally break the arch so that it can like be flexible for your foot. You also cut the elastic, and you burn the edges. You literally take a lighter and burn the edges and then you like sew it in the place where you want it. And sometimes they're already detached so you just burn them. By burning them, it just makes sure that they don't fray, right.? It's like an elastic, so if you're sewing in elastic, it can fray or kind of come apart. So, this way, you burn the edges, and you want to break them in and then you can start using them. Usually after like 2 weeks, maybe, it's like perfect.

**Andrew:** So, it's just like kind of any other specialized shoe. Like, I know when I go running, I never want to wear a brand-new pair of shoes like the day before I run a race or something. Or like hockey players will want to break in their ice hockey skates and make sure they're like really feeling comfortable before they play a game in them. What about

some of the other clothing? You mentioned a leotard earlier, what is a leotard for listeners who don't know?

**Suzanne:** Yeah, leotard is, it kind of looks like a bathing suit, like a one-piece bathing suit, right? It's just like something that is connected at the crotch but also like covering your whole torso. Sometimes it's long sleeve. Sometimes it's short sleeve.

**Andrew:** I guess it's nice and flexible for dancing, right? So you can move really easily in it. And then of course, there is the tutu. Did you ever have to wear a tutu when you were a ballerina?

**Suzanne:** Yeah, sometimes you have the tutu. And it's actually funny, like they really stick out straight from your hips. And it's actually kind of interesting because it helps you to see your line. Like you'll see if you really dig deep or if you're a dancer yourself, you know all about the line, OK? This is what they talk about all the time, your lines. Your lines must be long and straight and perfect. And so, your posture, everything should be "perfect," right? I'm making air quotes. And it's, the tutu kind of helps you to see your posture and whether you're kind of sticking out this hip too much or moving too far back on your heels. It kind of gives you like a visual measure, almost like you know when you're putting up a shelf and you have a level, and you have to like make sure the shelf is in line with the wall and it's straight? Well, a tutu kind of helps you see if your posture is straight.

**Andrew:** OK, so all this time, I thought it was just for aesthetics, but it's kind of like a cheat as well, right? You can get your line nice and straight.

**Suzanne:** Yeah, I want to say, though, also that, you know, as we evolve and realize that the line is not always so healthy for everyone. Like, for example, my body is not very tall. I don't have long, lean legs. I have pretty muscular, like, strong legs. And so I wasn't accepted into the ballet world after a point. You know, after I was like, 12, 13, they said that I was kind of too big, which is not true, you know, if—I was perfectly fine. And, you



know, nowadays, we are accepting different body types more and more and it's important that we include different shapes and sizes within an art form and not just, "You must look like this and if you don't look like this, you shouldn't do this art form." You know, it's not really fair.

**Andrew:** I agree. And I wanted to ask you about that, actually, because ballet does have this reputation of being very elitist, and also very harsh, right? You hear lots of stories of ballerinas starving themselves to try and make their body fit the exact perfect kind of body that's needed for the dance, or maybe not needed for the dance, but that some dance choreographers or some production companies expect, right? And so, you have this kind of very idealized standard that is pretty much impossible for most people. And as a result, that leaves so many people out from being able to dance ballet. So it sounds like that was a problem, an issue when you were dancing as a teenager. Do you think it's gotten better these days? Is ballet more inclusive now?

**Suzanne:** I think it's slowly getting better. I think it is becoming more inclusive. For the time that we're in, like, that it's 2023, it's not much different. So, yeah, it's kind of a bummer, you know?

**Andrew:** It's kind of a bummer, especially at the teen levels. Like, you know, it's not even like a professional level, like, I'm sure when you were, what did you say 12, 13, 14, that age, it's like, you still just want to have fun and do what you love, you have a passion for it, right? So to be excluded or to say you can't do this is just ridiculous in my opinion. We should let everybody just have fun and dance and enjoy the art form when they're that age.

**Suzanne:** Right. And it's something you can't control, right? That's just the way you were born. Maybe you're shorter, or you have, you know, more muscle in this area of your body. So, it's not something someone can actually control, you know. So I think there's some things that ballet can improve upon, I would say.

**Andrew:** Suzanne, before we wrap things up here, I do have one kind of rapid-fire question that I'm going to throw at you. And that is, in the Winter Olympics, we have ice dancing. And in the Summer Olympics, there is gymnastics and rhythmic gymnastics. What about ballet in the Olympics, because there's so much athleticism involved in performing it. I feel like it could be almost like an Olympic sport. Do you think it could be an Olympic sport one day?

**Suzanne:** I totally think so. I think that could maybe help change things because you might have to be, you know, more focused on your strength than what you look like, you know? So, yeah, yeah, that'd be cool.

**Andrew:** That would be cool. Could you imagine like winning a gold medal in ballet?

**Suzanne:** I know, that would be so cool.

**Andrew:** We've decided to keep our conversation going just a little bit longer here for all of our members as a way to say thanks for supporting us. And, Suzanne, I've got a couple of rapid-fire style questions here for you. Should we get started?

**Suzanne:** Yeah, that sounds great. Let's do it.

**Andrew:** OK, this is a would you rather question. These days, like not in the past, but like right now, 2023, when we're recording this, would you rather be a famous ballerina or ballet dancer? Or would you rather be a famous hip hop dancer? Which one would you pick and why?

**Suzanne:** Ah, that is a really hard question because I love both of those things.

**Andrew:** I feel like if you were a hip hop dancer, you could be really famous on TikTok or something, but maybe not so much if you were a ballerina. Is that the word that I should be using, ballerina or is it ballet dancer?

**Suzanne:** Ballet dancer. Ballet dancer, I think, well, yeah, I think they say ballerina too these days. But I don't know. I feel like I follow lots of ballerinas on TikTok. Yeah, but then I might be able to like dance with Rihanna at the Super Bowl. So that would be really cool.

**Andrew:** I'm gonna say hip hop personally, my answer is hip hop, yeah.

**Suzanne:** I think if I continued to dance and I didn't have, like, health setbacks and things, I probably would have loved to have stayed in ballet and pointe. But I feel like hip hop is definitely a little easier on the body, as far as, like, the feet are concerned. So maybe I would go hip hop too.

**Andrew:** And I think hip hop is also more inclusive of many different kinds of bodies, shapes and sizes and types of people, which is cool, hip hop's awesome for that.

Last question here. Do you think ballet is too old-fashioned or does it still have relevance today? Is it still popular and relevant today?

**Suzanne:** I think it's becoming more and more relevant with social media because I think things are mixing and changing. Like I follow this one prima ballerina in the New York City Ballet called Tiler Peck. She's really cool. And she's doing this neat performance or collaboration with these singers and tap dancers that's in London this week. And it's so cool to watch their process. It almost looks like they're tap dancing with pointe shoes, but they're not. It's awesome. So I think that they're breaking the norms more and more and sort of keeping the classical way, but then messing with it, you know? Like keeping the structure but then breaking the structures here and there. And I feel like it's creating new ways of looking at ballet, which is cool.

**Andrew:** It's evolving still.

**Suzanne:** It's evolving, yeah.

**Andrew:** Excellent.

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**Suzanne:** I think as long as you evolve, you have relevance, right?

**Andrew:** Sure.

**Suzanne:** Like if you try to stay in one spot forever, I don't think it really is going to be interesting. But I think as it evolves, it does bring interest.

**Andrew:** Awesome. Well, everyone that will bring us to the end of today's episode. Thanks for listening, and great job on completing an English study session here with Suzanne and I today.

**Suzanne:** Yeah, and now we'd like to throw things over to you. You've heard what Andrew and I have had to say about the ballet, but we'd really like to know what you think. Share your opinion with us and the Culips community by leaving a comment on our website, Culips.com. Don't be shy because we really, really like to hear from you.

**Andrew:** All right, everybody. Take care. We'll talk to you next time. Goodbye.

**Suzanne:** Bye-bye.

**Andrew:** That brings us to the end of this lesson. Talk to you next time. Bye.

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## Episode credits

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