Why They Love Yoga

5 dancers’ favorite positions

BY SHAYNA SAMUELS

Yoga began as a path to spiritual enlightenment about 5,000 years ago in ancient India. It includes meditation techniques, breath control exercises, and a detailed set of ethical principles. It also involves a series of physical poses (asanas) that have become popular in the West in recent years. Dancers have discovered yoga as a way to relax between technique classes, rehearsals, and performances, while still maintaining flexibility and strength. Here several dancers explain how yoga benefits their bodies and their work.

FINDING YOUR CENTER STRING
Kellie Epperheimer, 23, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago
I started yoga after I sprained my ankle. It gave me a way to work a little more slowly. As a dancer you have drive, so the pace was really hard for me at first. The balancing poses especially helped me stabilize and find a nice center string to work from in my body alignment.

Now I appreciate having a slow hour and a half where my mind can go to a different place instead of having to think about a step.

FAVORITE POSE sirsasana (headstand).
“I feel my plumb line and all of my muscles lifting and being activated. It’s soothing.”

THE GIFT OF TIME
Paul McGill, 20, current Broadway revival of A Chorus Line
With yoga you can take your time and focus, unlike a dance class, and it’s changed my dancing. I don’t just jump and kick and turn anymore. My movement has more fluidity.

When I was younger I danced, but I didn’t know where the movement was coming from or what muscles I was using. With yoga you feel every little thing in your body. It’s very personal, very internal. There’s no one watching me, no one judging me. I can just be.

FAVORITE POSE parivrtta parsvakonasana (twisted side angle, with legs in lunge,

upper body twisting). “It helps me release my lower back, which gets really, really tight after each show.”

APPRECIATING IMPERFECTION
Briana Reed, 32, Alvin Alley American Dance Theater
Yoga helps me with life on the road. When I get to a hotel and pull out my mat, it centers me. I find that my hamstrings are more flexible. I am more steady on my feet. I’ve also learned to control my breath, so I’m not as tired performing.

In yoga there’s no such thing as a bad class because you’re doing it for yourself and you don’t have an audience or an artistic director to disappoint. You have the chance to be imperfect. It’s a huge relief.

FAVORITE POSE sirsasana (headstand). “This pose was the scariest thing for me and I had to learn to trust myself. I never imagined that I could stand on my head. Now I’m more willing to try things that I wouldn’t have before.”

AN UNEXPECTED ENERGY
Seth DelGrasso, 30, Aspen Santa Fe Ballet
I started yoga because I wanted to increase my flexibility, but after a few months I also noticed my mental focus had increased, and the breathing and relaxation exercises allowed me to connect with my muscles in a much deeper way.

Yoga has allowed me to understand more of that internal connection between breath and movement, which has given me more energy. I’ve learned to stretch by elongating rather than going into stretches too aggressively, which helps my body protect itself. Plus certain things throughout the day don’t bother me as much as they used to.

FAVORITE POSE padmasana (lotus).
“When I began my hips were very tight. To find calmness within this pose has allowed me to increase my flexibility tremendously.”

PREPARING TO PERFORM
Elana Altman, 25, San Francisco Ballet
Yoga’s a good way to stretch and relax and prepare myself for a performance. It’s not an aerobic workout. It’s about using the particular poses to get specific results in your body, like opening your hips or releasing your back or neck tension.

Ballet is all about turnout and extension—it uses the same muscles over and over. Yoga puts me into a different sort of alignment. It makes me very conscious of my body and that can translate into preventing injuries. When my body doesn’t let me dance anymore, at least I’ll have yoga!

FAVORITE POSE kapotasana (pigeon pose, where you sit on the floor with legs in a split). “This is a good isometric butt and hip stretch. Since ballet is all about turnout it’s great for dancers.”

Shayna Samuels is co-founder of the Mothership Yoga Lounge in Truth or Consequences, NM.

Briana Reed