

Shmanners 509: Ballet Class

Published April 3rd, 2026

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[theme music plays]

Travis: Hello, internet! I'm your husband host, Travis McElroy.

Teresa: And I'm your wife host, Teresa McElroy.

Travis: And you're listening to Shmanners!

Teresa: It's extraordinary etiquette...

Travis: For ordinary occasions! Hello, my dove.

Teresa: Hello, dear.

Travis: I just fought off a yawn so hard, because—

Teresa: Oh! Say that word a couple more times and maybe I'll do it.

Travis: But I'm a professional. You don't even know. I got the roar in my ears and everything, but I was like, don't show it. No. It was a completely inward yawn, which probably took years off my life.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: I have to assume. Yawns aren't supposed to go in. It's trapped somewhere in my body now.

Teresa: You know, I once had a dance teacher that said that she could tell who wasn't, like, a three day, four day a week dancer by how many times they yawned at her. Because apparently when you are out of breath, a yawn is another way that your body, like, pulls in a lot of oxygen. And so the dancers who are maybe a little more winded, or sometimes people hold their breath when they dance on accident—they don't think that they're doing it, but they do it—so then she would get a bunch of people yawning at her.

Travis: I think it would be fun to be a person in that class now where, like, I could tell the people who aren't three or four day dancers. And also, Travis, are you okay? Do you need to lay down? You seem... on the precipice of just full body collapse.

And I'd be like, "We haven't even started yet."

And she'd be like, "Yeah, but I can just see, like, your whole health situation from here."

And I'd be like, "Yeah."

Did I ever tell you about the time that I was in voice diction class and I was probably a junior, and I told the teacher I hurt my back, and so I wouldn't be able to fully participate in class.

And she said, "When do you ever?"

Teresa: [gasps]

Travis: And it was one of the sick—and she was right! She was right. 'Cause I didn't want to be silly and stuff. I thought it was all dumb. And look at me now: a professional voice person.

Teresa: Wow.

Travis: Yeah. Anywho.

Teresa: You have an award for that.

Travis: She burned me real good, and you know that's true 'cause I don't have a great memory, but I remember that burn like it was yesterday.

Teresa: Sick.

Travis: It got me so good. And she was a full-grown adult and I was, like, 20 years old. And I wanted to be like, "Hey. That's not fair. You've had a lot longer to get good at zingers, and I haven't. How dare you."

Teresa: Did you tell her that your prefrontal cortex was not completely developed yet?

Travis: She probably already knew that too.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: I don't think I needed to tell her. That was probably pretty obvious. But speaking of classes...

Teresa: And dance.

Travis: And dance classes.

Teresa: Let's talk about ballet class.

Travis: I never took ballet class. I took modern.

Teresa: You didn't have to take ballet as part of your MFA?

Travis: BFA.

Teresa: BFA, yes, correct.

Travis: I wish I had a Masters.

Teresa: I meant BFA.

Travis: Oh my god. No, I—as my BFA, I took modern.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: Because I was not in the musical theater program. I was in drama. And so we had to take a dance class, and I felt that modern would probably have more uses for me.

Teresa: Yeah. Maybe.

Travis: But what I learned in that class is that I have very little awareness of my body in space.

Teresa: Oh!

Travis: That, like, if there hadn't been a mirror there, at any moment, if you had froze the time and said, "What are you doing right now?"

I'd be like, "I can't see my hands, so I don't know."

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: They're somewhere. My legs are somewhere doing something.

Teresa: Wow.

Travis: Does that surprise you in any way?

Teresa: I mean—

Travis: With my—with my ADHD, bumping into every corner and knocking everything—just Shreking around?

Teresa: I guess when you put it that way, no, it doesn't surprise me.

Travis: The world exists around me. Space and time bend to my will as I move through them. They do not touch me.

Teresa: Well, for my program we had to do ballet and tap, and then musical theater dance styles.

Travis: But you also took ballet, like, as a kid.

Teresa: Oh, yes. For a very long time. I did 15-ish years at a private studio.

Travis: Damn, girl! Did you start when you were two?!

Teresa: Uh, yeah!

Travis: Oh, okay. Cool, man.

Teresa: Like, two or three.

Travis: Oh. That makes—okay. Yeah, that makes sense, I guess.

Teresa: And I wanted—

Travis: That just seems wild to me. I don't think I started anything when I was two, except maybe potty training. I don't know, maybe! [holding back laughter] But nothing I still use today!

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: That wasn't meant to be a joke, and then I realized I just referenced potty training. And then was like, I—no, I—you know. You know.

Teresa: [laughs] I wanted to very much be a ballerina, a dancer, before I really wanted to be an actor. But there's a certain body type that some people just don't got, and that's me. I don't got it.

Travis: You're too beautiful to be a ballerina? Is that it?

Teresa: I mean...

Travis: They said, "Get outta here! You're too beautiful!"

Teresa: You know, our neighbor, she actually was a ballerina in Michigan. And you can tell. The body type that she has is very different from my body type. We are both beautiful ladies.

Travis: You've put me in a weird predicament here where I want to be really disparaging to ballerinas so I can compliment you, but I don't want to disparage anyone, so I'll just say, I think you are a beautiful ballerina to me, no matter what.

Teresa: Aww, thank you. I also have funky toes, so I wouldn't have been able to do—

Travis: I wasn't gonna say anything.

Teresa: [laughs] En pointe.

Travis: I always dreamed of being a ballerino. Except I didn't. I never— that's a—

Teresa: [simultaneously] No, you didn't.

Travis: Because I have no coordination.

Teresa: So, today we are going to learn a little bit about the history of ballet, the etiquette of class attendance and, you know, we'll throw some lingo at you.

Travis: So, ballet started in... the year... 1598.

Teresa: Hey, you know what? That's not bad.

Travis: How bad was it? Was it within 50 years?

Teresa: The Italian Renaissance. So... in about 100 to 150 years off.

Travis: That's bad. That's pretty bad.

Teresa: No. I mean, you could have said—

Travis: If someone said "What year do you think Travis McElroy was born?"

And they said, "1830."

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: You wouldn't be like, "Not bad! Pretty close!"

Teresa: In the whole history of humans, that is pretty close!

Travis: I mean, I guess!

Teresa: The Italian Renaissance. And I was very interested to learn that ballet is a play on the Italian word balletto, which means little dance.

Travis: Well, goodness gracious, that makes complete sense, doesn't it?

Teresa: It sure does, yeah.

Travis: Because so many ballet moves are about, like, very controlled, very kind of precise movements. I mean, there's lots of big movements too, but if you think about... I'm not saying that—

Teresa: I don't know if that's exactly what it refers to. Let me explain a little more.

Travis: Okay. But first I need you to tell me that I'm not... stupid.

Teresa: Sure. I mean, there are some very small, controlled movements.

Travis: 'Cause there's little, like, toe flicks! And you do very precision-based stuff.

Teresa: There are some of those, yes.

Travis: Like a surgeon. You're not just going in there swinging the scalpel around saying "Let's see what happens."

Teresa: So...

Travis: Ballet is the surgery of dance.

Teresa: [laughs] Okay, yes.

Travis: Tell me I'm wrong!

Teresa: You're not wrong.

Travis: Ballet...

Together: Is the surgery of dance.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Thank you.

Teresa: It originally served as a communal ritual in Renaissance. Italy that was a combination of social dance and choreographed display of pedigree. So, think about more like behaviors and indicators, almost. So, like, when we think about something like pantomime, right? Which is also Italian. We think about, like, the show of being about to faint, where you put your hand to your forehead, right? Or being scared where your hand comes over to your mouth, or things like that, right?

Travis: Gestus.

Teresa: Gestus.

Travis: It's called communicating big emotions through gesture.

Teresa: So what ballet started as is kind of like an aristocratic development of that. Right?

Travis: Yeah, I can see that.

Teresa: So it was like court behavior, courtly dance. If you've ever—have you seen the Versailles glide? Have you seen anyone ever show that?

Travis: No.

Teresa: So, in the French court there was a lady—a way of ladies walking where they didn't, like, bounce up and down as they walked. They kind of, like—

Travis: Oh, no, I have seen this. Yes, yes, yes.

Teresa: —glide across the floor with their feet—

Travis: [simultaneously] Like Dracula.

Teresa: —under the skirts. Yeah. Like—

Travis: Like Dracula does.

Teresa: Like Dracula. So there was a, quote, correct—

Travis: Dracula might've been at Versailles. That guy's been alive forever.

Teresa: Forever. Way before the Italian Renaissance.

Travis: About 150 years before.

Teresa: [laughs] The correct way of everyone to do things like bowing and stepping to taking someone's hand, or things like that, right?

Travis: So it basically was like, we're gonna choreograph this, right? Was it meant as, like, a means that you learn it?

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: Through the choreography? Or you demonstrate how good you are at it?

Teresa: Both.

Travis: [gasps] Oh my goodness.

Teresa: There were rules stating what was appropriate to wear and where you could walk or sit in relation to the rank of yourself and the highest person in the room. So, this way of moving and presenting oneself became a central element of aristocratic life, right? And the study and adoption of these highly specific behaviors were so fundamental that your grasp of them could literally make or break your career as a courtier.

Travis: Isn't it weird that in, like, US society the, like, day to day, like, hierarchy, where you sit, what you do, that doesn't really come up a lot unless you're in an orchestra.

Teresa: Hm.

Travis: 'Cause then it's all about chairs. Right? And your position in it. But if I go over to our friend's house for dinner, no one's like, "Travis sat three chairs down from the front of the—" that doesn't happen.

Teresa: President Bartlet says nobody sits when the President stands.

Travis: Well, yeah! President Bartlet was our last great American President, and he wasn't real, so.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: I would stand if he walked in the room.

Teresa: I mean, that's the thing. Nobody sits when the President stands. So that's one.

Travis: I'm not saying there aren't rules!

Teresa: That's definitely, like, a aristocratic kind of courtly thing to do with rank.

Travis: Do you think I could start making the kids stand when I walk in the room?

Teresa: [laughs] No.

Travis: I've already gotten 'em to start saying "Heard, chef."

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: When I ask them—when I tell them things.

Teresa: Occasionally.

Travis: Well, you pointed out that I said, like, "Okay?" too much, and I was like, okay. I'm gonna stop saying that when I'm doing telling the kids something. And be like, "Blah, blah, blah. Okay?" So instead I just say, "Heard, chef?"

And then they're like, "Heard, chef."

Sometimes they do it very dramatically, in a way I'm not prepared for. And then I feel like, "Oh, we really had something then. We really connected."

Teresa: [laughs] And so this is when ballet starts to become French. When it travels over to France with... Catherine de' Medici.

Travis: I've heard of them!

Teresa: You sure have. That girl. She had a rough go of it. In fact, one day we'll do an entire episode on her, because her powerful family, the Medicis, basically shipped her off to marry a dude who was already in love with somebody else.

Travis: Bummer.

Teresa: And so she was pretty much exiled to France, and no one at home would—really cared about her being gone. So.

Travis: I need to look up if the Medicis were the one that people thought were vampires, or if I'm making that up. That might have been the Borgias.

Teresa: But Catherine brought so much culture with her to France. These things included tobacco, high heels, pastries, and ballet. So French parties were extremely elaborate, and because of their increasing decadence, the dance became elaborate, too. So much so that the courts began to employ dancing masters to teach these steps to these young nobles. This—

Travis: Well, of course I wasn't asking if they're really vampires.

Teresa: [laughs] Thanks, internet.

Travis: Internet! No, they weren't. I wanna know, did people think they were vamp—okay, doesn't matter. [sighs]

Teresa: He tossed his phone. Dejectedly.

Travis: It's just, I talked about Dracula. I talked about Dracula, and I thought it would've been a really fun tie-in, and I thought it was like, another family people thought were vampires. But then, as often happens, I looked for five seconds and didn't immediately find the answer, so then I stopped caring about it.

Teresa: Yeah. That does happen sometimes.

Travis: But I brought it up already, so now I have to make a big deal out of it, seem really upset about it.

Teresa: So, this is where storytelling gets added to ballet, as a part of, like, making it more of a dance and less of, like, a gesture, behavioral kind of thing, right?

Travis: Did we talk about how we took our kids to see The Nutcracker this Christmas?

Teresa: Oh, we did.

Travis: And, like, ten minutes in, Dot was on one side of me, Bebe's on the other. Ten minutes in, Dot leaned over and said, "Why aren't they talk—why aren't they talking?"

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: And then, like, five minutes later, Bebe, who had not heard Dot, leaned over to me and said, "Why aren't they talking?"

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: And then another five minutes later, Bebe said, "Ohh, this is a ballet."

Teresa: Yes. [laughs]

Travis: 20 minutes in, at that point. Really—yeah. This is a kid who takes ballet classes.

Teresa: I kind of feel like we told them in advance.

Travis: That's not the same thing as they heard us say that.

Teresa: [laughs] Alright. So.

Travis: And another thing about having kids! They say the darnedest things.

Teresa: These dance masters used these story elements to connect the moves to each other, okay? So instead of just doing one particular move for one particular thing, it became kind of like a flow state, right? So this elegant movement, right? Shifted from this performance to now theatrics, okay?

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: So everyone at the court was performing their duty, right? But then it became something that we watch people do.

Travis: When you go to see a ballet, how much, percentage-wise, brain effort are you putting into, like, figuring out the story and what's going on? Be like, "Oh, so I think that guy's this, and they're doing this."

And how much of it is like, I'm just watching 'em and appreciating the art?

Teresa: Um... I would say that it's probably about 70% the first one, because I do want to know what the main characters are and what they're doing. But I also know that a lot of ballet is just, "Look at this pretty thing!"

Travis: Okay. Unfortunately for me it's, like, 95-5.

Teresa: Oh.

Travis: Because I want to figure out the—I want to solve it, like it's National Treasure. I'm looking for the clues. I'm figuring out the story. And then it's like, cool jump! And then I keep going back to—and I want to be—don't get me wrong! I want to be able to just watch it and appreciate the art. I wish my brain would shut up.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: But every time a new person comes on I'm like, "Now, who are they? Maybe... "

Teresa: We're doing a lot of "Into the mind of Travis McElroy" today.

Travis: It's the only mind I've got.

Teresa: [laughs] Okay. So, now, talented movers were soon dancing on a raised platform so that everybody could see them. Then this became a full stage. And then you've got sets, and curtains, and all kinds of stuff, right? So we're watching the ballet being born in the way of—where we're just taking this prescribed set of movements to us actually watching people do them.

Travis: Oh, it's like, you could watch a time lapse of it and watch, like, a ballet form around it.

Teresa: Yeah, kind of.

Travis: That's cool.

Teresa: So things really got rolling when Louis XIV got involved, because he christened himself the Sun King, right?

Travis: I was gonna say, the Sun King, yes.

Teresa: And he was an absolute monarch, which means, like, dictator with a crown. His hand was in every pot, okay?

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: And the way that he gave himself the Sun King moniker is because he...

Travis: He owned the sun.

Teresa: No.

Travis: Oh.

Teresa: Was a very accomplished dancer, and so when he was 15 he danced the role of Apollo in a lavish golden costume, right? And, like, so you have what many people believe to be the divine ruler, right? This divinely chosen ruler, dancing as Apollo, turning himself into the Sun King.

Travis: The exact same story, but a different way, if I was like, "I'm gonna tell you a story about a guy who, when he was high school age, played a role in a production, and then let that define his whole personality for the rest of his life."

Teresa: Totally.

Travis: And you'd be like, "Oh, I know that theater kid!" Like, he was in Rent Junior when he was, like, 15, and then he was like, "I am Roger," for the rest of his life. Like, "No, actually. It was Louis XIV." Kind of sad.

Teresa: So, ballet, right? Started as kind of like a political commendation, right? So—affectation, excuse me.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: And then it moved so solidly into politics and the monarchy and such like that that it almost kind of, like, came out the other side of something instead of, like, that people needed to do to appease, now they want to watch because he does it. And it's very interesting.

Travis: It reminds me a lot of when we talked about orchestra.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Of this thing of like, orchestras coming from, like, "I am very rich and I can afford to have, like, 40 people on retainer who play at my party," right? "Who play at my whatever, gathering, and show off all the money that I have," right?

And what they kind of both remind me of in that way, too, of like, ballet doesn't have humble origins. There are a lot of, like, art forms where it's like, it started as, like, street performance, then eventually became this thing. Or, like, you know, you talk about Shakespeare, right? And it's like, the groundlings were there, you know? Just drunk people enjoying theater, standing on the ground.

And yeah, there were people up at the top, but it wasn't really for them. Right? And it's like, eventually, then Shakespeare became, like, hoity toity, as they say. The clinical term.

Teresa: Clinical term.

Travis: But, like, ballet was like, from the beginning, this is about, like, "I have the means to learn how to do this thing."

Teresa: Exactly. So much so that the Sun King founded the Royal Academy of Dance in 1661. Which is probably his greatest contribution to the art form. So, before the Academy opened its doors, the dancers at the time

were run by guilds, right? So, once they went into the theater of kind of ballet, you've got the guilds taking control, right? But then Louis XIV grabs back at it and says, "No. This is still mine." Right? And so now it becomes back into kind of the court of dance.

Travis: That's so interesting. 'Cause, like, guilds, one of the things I think about with guilds is a lot of apprenticeship, right?

Teresa: Right.

Travis: Of like, how does a person learn how to do this skill, this thing? Well, they learn from a mentor, right? Who's been doing it beforehand. And so you would end up... like, if you're looking at tradesmen, right? If you're looking at, like, blacksmiths or silversmiths or whatever, there was, like—you could see the evolution of styles as they branched out, right? This is a thing they talk about in antiques a lot. Of, like, and then they learned from this person how to make furniture, so you can see the evolution of that thing.

And then when you take it to schools, what you get is a very narrow—like, we have perfected a way of teaching it, and that is what everybody learns. Even if the teachers are there, we have a syllabus that they teach. We have a style that they teach. And it becomes more uniform, which I think you would want in a ballet company. But less, like... "And this person evolved into this, and you could see the way that this followed this way."

Teresa: And one of the teachers that Louis XIV put in charge was Pierre Beauchamp. And we've talked about him before, because he collaborated with Jean-Baptiste Lully, right? Remember him?

Travis: No.

Teresa: The symphony episode.

Travis: Yes! Now I do, yeah. 'Cause I talked—I just referenced it.

Teresa: You just referenced it.

Travis: I don't know names!

Teresa: Anyway, anyway. So—

Travis: What am I supposed to do? Remember things?

Teresa: Beauchamp—

Travis: I only remember when teachers insulted me real good.

Teresa: [laughs] He is the one who started the positions, right? First position through fifth position. Which, if you have seen ballet, it's the way that your feet are positioned, where your heels are together and your toes are out. That is first. Second is your same foot position, but your legs are apart. And then third are your legs kind of crossed, but still apart.

Travis: Is third when they're, like, you know, kind of, like, one's in front of the other and one's in back of the other [crosstalk]?

Teresa: Wait, so, no. Third is one is in the middle of the other one, where one heel is kind of, like, touching the arch of your foot. Fourth is feet in that position, but legs apart. And then fifth is heel to toe, but still, your toes are pointed outwards.

Travis: Okay. And now they've got up through, like, 19.

Teresa: Nope. Nope. Just still those fifth.

Travis: It goes all the way around. You rotate your feet—

Teresa: [simultaneously] Just still those five.

Travis: —a full 360 degrees until they're back at the front.

Teresa: Just still those five.

Travis: Okay. Let's take a quick break.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: For a word from another Max Fun show.

[theme music plays]

[ad break]

Travis: Okay, we're back.

Teresa: Alright. So...

Travis: Act 2.

Teresa: Act 2. We've got the Royal Academy of Dance. We've got the Royal Academy of Music.

Travis: [simultaneously] RAD, they call it. RAM.

Teresa: We've got Beauchamp and Lully.

Travis: B&L.

Teresa: All those people. And then we get Molière in there.

Travis: M.

Teresa: Who writes kind of like stories for the dances.

Travis: Molière was writing ballet stories?

Teresa: Yeah. Just not like you think about, like, Tchaikovsky, but sort of. Sort of that way. He gave the kind of, like, the characters and, like, "We're gonna make—these two people are the lovers, and this is the villain," and stuff like that.

Travis: Yeah. I like the idea of Molière just being like, "And then you come in. I don't know. Kind of glare at that guy for a while and wiggle your feet.

You guys'll figure it out. I'm not the dance guy here. You guys are the dance guys. But you get it, right? You come in and you kind of grimace at him and let people think, like, 'Is that the bad guy, or is he mad? What's he mad about?' But then you jump real high and everybody's like, 'Forget about that! That was cool!'"

Teresa: And together from 1664 to 1671 they collaborated on 11 comedy ballets as well as a tragedy ballet.

Travis: People still doing comedy ballets?

Teresa: Oh, sure! There's—

Travis: I think you could do a lot of good pratfalls in a comedy ballet.

Teresa: Oh, not that kind.

Travis: No?

Teresa: By comedy I think it's the traditional—

Travis: Ends in a marriage.

Teresa: Ends in a marriage, yeah, that kind of thing.

Travis: Either it ends in a marriage? Comedy.

Teresa: Or everybody dies.

Travis: Or everybody dies? Tragedy.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: One person can die. Listen. In a comedy, people can die. Does it end in a marriage? There could be marriage in a tragedy, but is everybody dead, right? This is the question you must ask yourself.

Teresa: So, here is the next big hurdle that ballet actually makes it through.

Travis: Hurdles.

Teresa: The French Revolution.

Travis: Okay, that makes a lot more sense.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: Can you imagine if you added hurdles to ballet, though?

Teresa: [laughs] That would be sweet.

Travis: That would be so sick! And then, like, a high jump aspect. Maybe a pole vault.

Teresa: Hm. Yeah, I could see that.

Travis: Or a long jump.

Teresa: Long jump, definitely. Definitely.

Travis: Okay, wait. We're onto something here. TM, TM, TM.

Teresa: So there's the political upheaval, but because ballet is seen more is an art form, right? Now at this point—

Travis: Eh, bougie.

Teresa: Yeah, but it's not inherently of the aristocracy at this point.

Travis: I bet that that is—because as a lot of things that were, like, entertainment for the aristocracy was like, yeah, listen. We might elevate your status socially by doing this thing for us, but it wasn't, like, somebody who was, you know, the daughter of a noble would be like, "My dream is to be in a ballet company."

Teresa: Sure.

Travis: She might study ballet and do ballet, right?

Teresa: I mean, not everybody can be the Sun King.

Travis: Sure. Some people just gotta be the Moon King.

Teresa: Ooh.

Travis: Right? Or the Earth King. Well, I guess that's just the king of the Earth.

Teresa: That's just the king.

Travis: I bet that would be wilder if the Sun King—and a guy walked and was like, "Well, I'm the Earth King. So you should go to the sun. 'Cause this is mine."

And he was like, "Oh my god, this is so embarrassing. I didn't even realize. I'll go to the sun. Wait a minute!"

Hilarity ensues.

Teresa: So, ballet in France is still cool, but it's starting to kind of fall off. And at the same time, Russia is starting to take off in ballet. And that has to do with Peter the Great. One of Peter the Great's things was, like, "I'm gonna take old Russia and modernize it. We're gonna get rid of the way that we dress. We're gonna change political stuff. We're gonna do economic changes."

Travis: "And we're all artsy now."

Teresa: "And we're gonna become Westernized. And one of those ways that we're gonna do that is ballet."

This dedication to creating Russian masterpieces continued through the mid-1800s, right? So we've got a little bit of a decline in the prestige in France, but then the latter part of the 19th century there's, like, a renaissance of

ballet in Russia. And this is where we get Tchaikovsky, right? Sleeping Beauty, Swan Lake, Nutcracker. Big deal.

Travis: Your classics.

Teresa: Classics. And even when Lenin took over, right? Into Soviet culture, he initially wanted to close the Bolshoi Ballet, because it was, like, another trapping of the aristocracy, right? But because the commoners continued to enjoy and fill the seats, he was like, "Hey. Instead of that, maybe we can use this as part of, like, Russian propoganda, and let everybody see how great the Soviet empire is." Right?

Travis: Yeah. Like chess.

Teresa: The musical?

Travis: I mean, yeah. I meant, like, the act of playing chess.

Teresa: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. The did that too.

Travis: [simultaneously] But also the musical.

Teresa: Yes, but also the musical.

Travis: But also in the musical I think there was a lot of, like, "We're sending this guy out. We're sending Josh Groban out to sing about how great Russia is and play chess." I don't know who else was in it. I've just seen Josh Groban sing that one song.

Teresa: Right.

Travis: You don't have to say "Right." Nothing I just said was germane, or maybe even true. You don't have to say "Right." I understand.

Teresa: I'm just playing with you in the space.

Travis: Not really! You were more acknowledging that sound came out of my face.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Which I appreciate. Listen, it's nice to know that you can still hear the dumb, dumb, stupid stuff I said.

Teresa: Okay. So... Lenin wanted to use ballet as part of the propaganda machine, but there were a lot of artists who weren't interested in doing that, right? So we get this influx of Russian immigrants in the early 1990s, and one of those being George Balanchine, right? In 1933.

Travis: Here to America?

Teresa: Here to America. Opening the American School of Ballet in 1934. If you recognize that name as well, he was a big character in Maria Tallchief, from the New York City Ballet, who we talked about, like, last year. This is all kind of mixing together.

Travis: It all connects!

Teresa: So, now we've got ballet, which is still a well-respected and ever-evolving art form, right? Which people still recognize as not only a beautiful thing to study, but also a beautiful thing to watch, no matter what Timothy Chalamet says.

Travis: Yeah, no. He can eat farts. So, here's my question for you. And I—because I have no idea. Honest question.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: If you were to say, like, okay. These four ballet dancers—one from Russia, one from France, one from Italy—like, studying today—one from America—are going to perform the exact same dance for you, or whatever. You know. The exact same piece. Would someone be able to, like, watch a—someone who knew very well be able to watch that and say, "Oh, they're the Italian one. They're the French one. They're the Italian one. They're the Russian one." Right?

Teresa: Um, I think that you would be able to tell in the artistry. Because the moves could be the same, but very much like you can kind of see in a figure skater who's from Russia and who's from, like, Japan, right? Just kind of the way that they do the moves I think would be something that you could tell. For example, my impression is that Russian ballet artists—there's a lot of, like, feats of strength and flexibility. Where with maybe, like, the French ones, it's more about, like, emotion, almost. That's just my opinion, I think. I think that you would be able to tell, but not because they were doing the moves differently.

Travis: Okay. That was my—yeah, that was what I was wondering.

Teresa: Well, what if you want to take a ballet class, Shmanner fanners?

Travis: Oh, okay. I thought you were gonna say me.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: And the problem is, I think that there would be, uh, what's the word I'm looking for? Kind of a paradox of the level I would need to start at... but the age that I am would make it awkward that I'm 39 years older than every other child in that group.

Teresa: There are—

Travis: And, reminder, I'm 42.

Teresa: —adult beginner courses available in most cities.

Travis: I'm not going to.

Teresa: I know.

Travis: I have so many other things I've begun and never finished. Why add ballet to that list?

Teresa: [laughs] So if you want to join a ballet class, here are some general things that you need to remind yourself of. This is an exercise class. It is a

high impact cardio activity, okay? So you need to wear deodorant, but probably not perfume. You also shouldn't wear much jewelry. You might be able to wear, like, a chain or, like, some studs in your ears, but this is not, like, a fashion thing.

Travis: Don't show up with, like, the toe shoes. Your pointe shoes.

Teresa: Oh, yeah.

Travis: Don't show up with those. That's, like...

Teresa: Unless it is specifically a pointe class and you have—

Travis: But if you're just starting...

Teresa: No, not if you're a beginner.

Travis: This is what I'm saying. You're starting off at your first class, you walk in there with, like, your pointe shoes. You're gonna get laughed out of that building.

Teresa: No.

Travis: That comes after years of practice.

Teresa: People won't laugh at you. But your teacher will recommend that you not put those on.

Travis: Your teacher will say, "You spent a lot of money on those and you absolutely did not need to." And you gotta break those in real bad. Cowboy boots and pointe shoes.

Teresa: [laughs] That's true.

Travis: I know are the two things you should not wear new to work the first time. You will have a terrible day. Cowboy boots and pointe shoes. One's very pointy. Ironically, not the pointe shoe.

Teresa: You're right.

Travis: The cowboy boots are very pointy. Pointe shoes are very flat on the bottom. You got you.

Teresa: You did. Also, your hair should be pulled away from your face.

Travis: Like a bun head.

Teresa: Sure, a bun works.

Travis: [crosstalk] bun heads.

Teresa: Bun heads. Standard ballet is usually leotard, tights, and skirt for female-presenting people. For male-presenting people, it is white t-shirt, black tights, and a dance belt, should you require that for the support of your anatomy. And if you're—

Travis: Also, don't wear your dance belt for the first time at your first class.

Teresa: Yep. That's true too.

Travis: Give yourself some time to get used to it. If you've never worn anything like that before, it's an experience. I've never done ballet, but I've done traditional Shakespearean tights and dance belt. It takes a little bit of getting used to.

Teresa: If you're not into that traditional wear, I'm certain that a teacher wouldn't mind you wearing a close-fitting tank top and leggings. The point is that the teacher needs to be able to see the line of your body. It's very important for the positioning, right? So loose-fitting clothing outside of, like, warm ups, right?

So you might the first 20 minutes of class or so wear, like—you could wear warm up pants or a sweatshirt or something when you're warming up your muscles. But for the actual bar and class, you would want to have something that was very form-fitting to the body.

Travis: Is bar something that, like, if you show up for, like, a basic, first time dance class, is bar gonna be involved in that automatically?

Teresa: Yes, yeah.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: So, the bar is a series of exercises done at a bar, right? Which is like a horizontal railing that can either—

Travis: Almost like you would see, like, a clothes rack. Except it's, like, three feet high.

Teresa: It's, like, waist height.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: That can either be freestanding, where they have it on kind of, like, a contraption that will let it stand in the middle, like a clothes rack type deal, or it will be attached to the wall. And you'll do the bar exercises after you've done a kind of warm up. You'll do the bar exercises, which are things like pliés. That's bending your knees. Tendu. That's like pointing your foot. And—

Travis: Jeté?

Teresa: That's more of a floor exercise.

Travis: Rond de jambe. Is that something?

Teresa: Rond de jambe. Yeah, you can do that at the bar. That's around the leg.

Travis: I'm trying to remember things our kids have told me.

Teresa: [laughs] Um, and balancing, right? Balancing is typically done at the bar. And you can find this and the five basic positions available on YouTube. All you have to do is search ballet basics and there's lots of tutorials and classes and stuff.

Travis: How much—'cause they always show in, like, TV shows and stuff, the instructor, like, walking around and, like, one, being a little, you know, a little judgmental and, like, adjusting your arm, like, half an inch up, or like, you know, kind of poking with, like, maybe a folding fan or something. Does that really happen?

Teresa: Well, I think that that really depends on the demeanor of the teacher, but yes. Because, like I said, a lot of it is about line, and form, and position, and posture, and things like that. So, a good teacher will walk around to look at the people doing it and kind of do small corrections. One of the things that my teachers used to talk about is, like, the general kind of posture of zipping up your ribcage and elongating the spine, right? And that is a good base for, like, changing the line of all the other things, right?

Because if you're kind of sunken into your spine, you can't lift your leg as high. Or if your ribcage is out, you might not be able to pull your leg to the back as much, or things like that, right? So a good teacher will go around, and hopefully not, like, poke you and humiliate you. But offer constructive criticism to help you engage the muscles you're supposed to be engaging and create the correct posture and alignment.

Travis: Well, hopefully the teacher would stop and say something like, "Everyone look at Travis. He's doing it perfectly."

Teresa: [laughs] Yes.

Travis: "I've never seen this kind of natural ability before. You say this is your first day? You've never had—my god. You're ready for the stage."

Hopefully something like that happens.

Teresa: Something like that. You can also—

Travis: "I'm going to quit now and you teach, because—"

And I would say, "No, no, please. I'm just a student."

Teresa: I would also say that if you intend to sweat a lot, you should bring a towel, because we don't want anybody to, like, slip. Also bring your water bottle. And you can bring a snack, but it is not usually allowed to eat on the actual dance floor. You'll want to go out in the hall or the locker room or something to eat, because dance floor coverings are very expensive, and we don't want crumbs on there.

Travis: Do people wear legwarmers?

Teresa: Occasionally, yeah.

Travis: Nice. That's still cool.

Teresa: It was very fashionable while I was at school for people to wear legwarmers.

Travis: I think legwarmers should always be in fashion.

Teresa: Yeah?

Travis: It's the opposite of shorts. It's like if I took rubber bands and sleeves but had no shirt on. And I was like, "I've rubber-banded the sleeves so they stay up, 'cause I don't want my arms to be cold."

It's like that, 'cause your legwarmers go up and you're like, "But, but, but, ha, ha, ha, no pants." I love that.

Teresa: I've seen people put legwarmers on their arms.

Travis: You could have inverse shorts and t-shirt.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Where you just cover your forearms and, like, your calves.

Teresa: Also, you want to make sure that you are—

Travis: I'm changing up the fashion game here!

Teresa: You surely are.

Travis: A cape on the front! No cape on the back! I'm covering everything but the back. Oh my god.

Teresa: Very interesting.

Travis: A hat that starts at the bottom of your forehead and goes down. The top of your head? Exposed. Inverse.

Teresa: You have some pretty radical ideas, there.

Travis: Inverse!

Teresa: But I was gonna say that you want to get to class early—

Travis: Shoes on your hands!

Teresa: No.

Travis: Sorry.

Teresa: To stretch. And also, there are lots of ballet classes that if you get there after the teacher gets there, you may not be allowed to participate. I'm not saying in, like, these recreational classes that might happen. But in, like, a ballet school, you're expected to be there early, to be ready to dance when class starts. And so some teachers take that very seriously.

If you do come in late, it is good etiquette to wait until you're between pieces of music or between exercises. So you wouldn't want to run in while people were, like, kicking and doing things, right? You would want to wait until that exercise, that piece of music was over, and then join in the next one.

Travis: I'm trying to think of the word I'm thinking about. It's not control, and—it's discipline. Right?

Teresa: Oh, okay. Yeah.

Travis: Of, like, I could see that being—like, ballet is very precise, and a very disciplined art form. So if you can't show up on time, how can you expect to have the discipline, you know, to, like, do these things? And especially, man, when you're throwing people around the stage. You gotta have the discipline to be there to catch 'em! You don't want somebody—you don't want to throw 'em too hard, and now they're in the tuba.

Teresa: Of course not. I know. The tuba? Who's playing a tuba?

Travis: It's in the orchestra!

Teresa: Oh, okay.

Travis: You threw 'em into the orchestra. And then they're stuck in the tuba. The tuba player—

Teresa: We're at a performance?

Travis: Yes, the tuba player goes to play. Oh, but it's clogged up! And then he explodes. And now you got tuba player all over your violin guy! And it's slippery, oh, the bow slips out of his hand. Goes right through the vi—the violin—there's another violin, right through his face.

Teresa: There's usually more than one.

Travis: Yeah. The bigger one? That's louder?

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: And the saxophone player starts to cry, 'cause he had to witness all of it.

Teresa: So, just a few more pointers if you're taking class.

Travis: En pointe-ers.

Teresa: Ah. You're on fire tonight.

Travis: No, I'm just tired. And my back hurts.

Teresa: So, there will be probably people who will have their favorite spots at the bar. Try and, like, suss that out. Go to a new spot. But also, if someone takes your favorite spot, you know, be cool. Also, a lot of classes, especially at the beginner level, have a mix of abilities. It's common to let the most experienced dancers in the first row. Because that way, you get kind of a line of teachers, right? You're able to watch those more experienced dancers, instead of kind of, like, the newbies flailing around in the front row.

If you are waiting in between sections and you're, like, waiting to do a combination, maybe across the floor, it is appropriate—you can kind of do micro-movements, or watch, but talking is discouraged.

Travis: You gotta dance it out.

Teresa: I mean, yeah. They want you to. If you accidentally hit someone, okay?

Travis: Dance off.

Teresa: It happens. But apologize quietly to that person, and make sure that nobody's injured, but then keep going. It's not supposed to, like, stop the dance class, right?

Travis: No. You just have to let them hit you back real quick to balance it out. It's about balance. Precision.

Teresa: I mean, sure.

Travis: Vengeance.

Teresa: Be mindful that if you go to a different teacher, you might get slightly different techniques. Like I said, the moves are practically the same, but every teacher has something to add.

Also, you may find that some of the holdovers from kind of, like, the courtly etiquette, are often observed. Like, at the end of the dance class you will present to the teacher, and you'll do kind of like a bow, sometimes.

Travis: Sure.

Teresa: Some classes you'll clap on the way out. You'll applaud for the teacher, for the other dancers in the class. And, you know, those are normal, so don't worry too much about that.

Travis: And sometimes the teacher will give you stickers and lollipops.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Which is what I've observed from our child's class.

Teresa: That's what our kids get.

Travis: I don't think you should expect that as an adult, but if it happens, pretty cool.

Teresa: And most of all, have fun, right? It's supposed to be really fun. It is hard, but fun.

Travis: Hey, everybody. Thank you so much for joining us. Thank you to our researcher, Alexx, without whom we could not do this show. Thank you to our editors, Rachel and Gino, without whom we could not do this show. And thank you for listening. You are... like the ballerino who throws us into the air and catches us so that we don't go in the tuba.

Teresa: Hooray!

Travis: We really appreciate it. Thank you so much. What else, Teresa?

Teresa: We always thank Brent "brentalfloss" Black for writing our theme music, which is available as a ringtone where those are found. We also thank Bruja Betty Pinup Photography for the cover picture of our fan-run Facebook

group, Shmanners Fanners. If you love to give and get excellent advice from other fans, go ahead and join that group today. And as always, we are taking your topic submissions. I believe that this one was submitted by our office manager, Alice, which is great.

Travis: Correct.

Teresa: But you can submit one, shmannerscast@gmail.com, and say hi to Alexx, because she reads every single email.

Travis: And it's a new month, so make sure you head over to mcelroymerch.com and check out all the cool stuff there, including a Crown Wilson pin, which is a reference—"Woww."

Teresa: "Woww."

Travis: A reference from My Brother, My Brother, and Me. That was one of my best jokes ever.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: And I'm very proud of myself, so make sure you check that out. Mcelroymerch.com. And that's gonna do it for us, so join us again next week.

Teresa: No RSVP required.

Travis: You've been listening to Shmanners...

Teresa: Manners, shmanners. Get it?

[theme music plays]

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