

# Learning to Watch and Watching to Learn

**Gwen Booth** asks how we can encourage students to attend shows by professional dancers.

The excitement of a performance by a really great dancer is (whether we analyse it consciously as we watch or not) in seeing their technique, performance skill, and musical interpretation. A great dancer uses these skills to bring alive the music so that we can almost see it.

Many students can imagine the excitement and satisfaction in performing at a haflah, but the joy and knowledge to be gained from watching someone that they do not know may not be so immediately obvious. It seems we need to work harder to 'sell' the idea of a professional show than we do to encourage students to perform.

How can we encourage students to spend their hard-earned cash on tickets for professional shows?

I believe that if we want our students to benefit from seeing and enjoying professional performances, then we need to show them, through our teaching and in our conversations with them, how much we value the skills of the professional performer. We can all do this in part by working to increase our knowledge and skills and by passing our knowledge on. But if we want our students to really see what makes a professional performance different, we must also give them the tools they need to appreciate the technical skill, performance ability, and musical interpretation that make a good performance. Then maybe our students can imagine what it is they might gain from watching professional performances.

To see what makes a great dancer great, we must do just that- we must see. The ability to 'see the difference' comes more naturally to some than to others. But it is also something that we can learn and something that we can improve with practise and experience.

How do we enable our students to really see?

One key may be to make sure that we always teach with an eye to technique and style, encouraging our students as they become more proficient to think about how they are making a movement, about its size and speed, and about why a movement performed in a certain way expresses a certain mood or style. Another may be to encourage our students to really look closely as we demonstrate movements, and as they practise. We can also encourage them to attend workshops with a wide range of teachers to experience new and different techniques and styles. By watching, trying, and understanding a wide range of ways of doing the movements, we can begin to really see the difference.

Making sure our students have the ability to really see may enable them to share in the great enjoyment many of us gain from watching a professional performance. More fundamentally, being able to see the difference will help them grasp precise technique and better understand different styles of dance. Really seeing will enable them to progress to the best of their ability as dancers.

This article was first published in Mosaic Magazine, Winter 2007.

All Rights Reserved, Copyright Gwen Booth, 2007.