

Ballet Makes Me A Better Lawyer

By **Sharon Katz-Pearlman** (September 3, 2026)

In this Expert Analysis series, attorneys discuss how their unusual extracurricular activities enhance professional development, providing insights and pointers that translate to the office, courtroom and beyond. If you have a hobby you would like to write about, email expertanalysis@law360.com.

Every spring semester, I teach a graduate course in civil tax controversy and litigation at New York University School of Law.

During the first class, when I introduce myself and give a brief overview of my experience, I always say that I don't really know how my life's path led me to become an adjunct professor of law and a long-time practicing tax controversy attorney.

From a very young age, I was all about ballet; I went through much of my life with my hair in a bun, wearing a black leotard, pink tights and pointe shoes. I took class six days a week, three to four hours a day, and dreamt of joining a ballet company and dancing the classics. But, as we all know, things don't always turn out the way we plan.



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The short version of my story is that I did not join a major ballet company, but danced with a small one in New York City, teaching ballet classes to children and adults for many years. I am now a shareholder at Greenberg Traurig.

Through college and law school, and even once I began practicing law, I continued to take ballet class and perform. And even now, so many years later, I still take class and lose myself in the music and the movement.

Through the years, as I danced less and practiced law more, I was often struck by how my ballet training had given me incredible tools for being an attorney.

Dancers must be singularly focused and incredibly disciplined. "Good enough" is not acceptable in ballet.

Ballet dancers strive for perfection, which may not always be a healthy pursuit, but it is the reality of training. That is why we spend hours watching ourselves in the studio mirror — scanning for errors, weaknesses or a position that is less than 100% perfect.

While attorneys don't practice surrounded by mirrors, in a way, we have and use an internal mirror that helps us know when we are ready with our case and when our argument is ready to be presented. Good enough is also not acceptable in the practice of law — our clients pay for and expect perfection, or as close to perfection as one can get. Just like in ballet, perfection in practicing law requires commitment, endless focus, revision and refinement.

Also fundamental to dance and to the practice of law are self-discipline and the ability to

work on one thing for hours — be it mastering a difficult step, or developing and supporting a challenging argument. The practice of law, like dance, is indeed a craft, and both require a strong, unwavering commitment to getting it right.

Like ballet, practicing law is hard, and to do it well, you must be fully invested and engaged with your clients and cases. Achieving the best possible outcome for clients comes only through hours of thorough preparation, boundless energy and relentless effort — a process eerily similar to what a strong dance performance requires.

As a dancer, you train to perform — you learn the steps to a ballet or your variation, and practice them over and over again to make sure you know them cold. In ballet, this is called developing muscle memory, so that if your brain freezes while you are performing, your body can keep going because you know the steps so well that they flow without thinking.

As a young (and scared) trial attorney, I came to view trial prep as the same kind of rehearsal. I was no longer in a ballet studio with mirrors, but I still had to learn the "steps" of my argument and commit the arguments and the case law to memory. This way, if my brain froze while in court, I would still be able to continue because the muscle memory would carry me through.

I would review my arguments repeatedly and would stop preparing only when I could recite my opening statement perfectly without notes and visualize the flow of the case. Once I had committed things to memory, I would work on the presentation aspect.

Through the years, I found that this same approach applied to a variety of professional scenarios, and to this day, I prepare for meetings, hearings and conference presentations as if I were preparing for a performance: I practice what I am going to say and how I am going to say it until I am almost on autopilot.

And then, once I have mastered the steps of the presentation, I practice how I will present. When will I pause? When will I bring in a certain reference? When will I make a certain comment? And, importantly, how will I connect my points so that I have created a logical, flowing argument with the only possible conclusion being that my position is the correct one?

After so many years practicing law, I still prepare in front of a mirror, just as I did when I danced. I walk through everything out loud so I can hear myself and watch how I look when I present. Do I look comfortable delivering the argument? If not, then I need to rehearse more until I am comfortable.

I have shared my mirror technique with many junior attorneys over the years. Even those who were initially resistant to the idea of speaking out loud while watching themselves in the mirror eventually came to agree that this method works.

At the end of the day, whether dancing or practicing law, it's critical to be self-aware. Do you really hear what you sound like? Are your gestures appropriate and natural? Are you comfortable making your arguments? Body movement is important, and if you look uncomfortable, people will notice.

When I am finally presenting at a meeting or hearing, I go through a preperformance checklist. I developed it based on what my beloved ballet teacher (who trained me from age 8) taught me to focus on before a performance.

I tweaked the elements to apply to a legal presentation, and it covers the following:

- How is my posture?
- Am I relaxed about what I am about to present?
- How will I ensure I maintain contact with my audience?
- Am I executing the arguments clearly and correctly?

My wonderful teacher, who remained a strong presence in my life until she recently passed away, taught me from an early age that when you step out onto the stage, or into a studio to teach, you need to take control of the room: Stake your ground, make your presence felt and don't be shy.

Meekness doesn't work, and presence is everything in dance — just as it is in practicing law. You need to exude confidence and clarity, backed up by all the hours of rehearsal you endured to get it right.

So, next time you prepare for a hearing, a trial or a client meeting — rehearse, anticipate, hum a few bars of the "Nutcracker Suite" and step out onto your stage.

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