

Education



Taking the beauty of ballet to schools **31**

CYPRUS MAIL

Τετάρτη, 22 Απρίλιος 2009, π. 1





Teaching kids the beauty of ballet

Dancecyprus has taken ballet into schools as part of its campaign to promote the need for a permanent professional ballet company

By Saskia Constantinou

What is Ballet? This was the question posed to over one thousand primary school children this last month by Cyprus' professional ballet company, Dancecyprus in their newly launched educational programme.

The question was the title of the company's programme, which introduced ballet music and dancers in a straightforward, educational but highly entertaining way. Designed by Catherine Dawson, founder and director of Dancecyprus the presentation provided an insight into all aspects of ballet.

"I passionately believe that children in Cyprus should be afforded the same opportunities as their European counterparts," said Catherine.

"Unfortunately, at the moment, they are on the losing end simply because there is no national ballet company. That is why I have made it my mission in life, together with the other directors of Dancecyprus, to ensure that children here, who want to become professional ballet

dancers, can do so in their own country."

Catherine may be petite in stature, but in her enthusiasm and drive she's a dynamo. "In Cyprus there are more ballet students per capita than any other country. These are statistics from the Royal Academy of Dance - and there is nowhere for them to dance. Cypriot dancers have positions in top companies all over the world instead of here, where most of them would want to be," she said.

Funding, of course, is a major issue. Catherine explained that forward planning is imperative.

"We are fortunate and grateful for the financial support we do receive of course, but we could be far more effective knowing that we have backing over the next three to five years for example. One of the major tragedies is that the Cypriot dancers employed abroad want to come back, but dare not without the security of a job," she said.

Secured subsidies would allow the company to employ these dancers on a full-time basis and create many new jobs for stage hands, set designers and costume makers - all qualified people who are available in Cyprus.

"Audience and educational outreach programmes are also very important. We are more aware than ever now that the children are our future audiences. So, we were thrilled with the reaction to our new education programme."

The presentations were given in both English and Greek all around the island, and began by explaining the 500-year-old origins of the art form and the reasons for the French terminology. Two dance students of Clare Andreou, 15-year-old Emily Loumba, a junior associate of Dancecyprus, and 13-year-old Nicole Livera gave the Nicosia presentations. Emily has been training for eleven years and Nicole for nine.

Frosso Hadjigeorgiou trained and prepared the Limassol and Paphos teams comprising dancers Rachel Peters, Erica Vassiliou, Philippa Vush and Christina Souvji. Lambros Lambrou was the teacher of Jasmine Knowles who danced in Limassol.

Chloe Menicou-Stavrou, herself a professional dancer and teacher, did the Greek presentation at the Ayios Chrysostomos Ioannou Primary School in Lakatamia and at Trimiklini District

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Primary School, achieving an immediate rapport with the four groups of children. She had all the children on their feet, trying the steps themselves and feeling the tension of their own muscles stretching. They were totally engrossed much to the delight of headmistress Maria Kasinidou, who emphasised the importance of children being exposed to the arts from an early age.

"We are immensely grateful to Dancecyprus for this introduction, and hope that they will return soon. It's not always easy to take children to performances, so having Dancecyprus come to us was a huge bonus," she said.

The children were particularly enthralled when 11-year-old Dominic Coombes took to the stage. A pupil of Nadia Nicolaides' Dance Company, Dominic has only been training for eighteen months but his short lyrical sequence and modern jazz solo was charismatic.

Ballet training is hard work and has been compared to Olympic sports training. It also requires an incredible amount of discipline but builds strength, agility, stam-

ina and, of course over time, skill. So, it is the best training for other dance styles.

The children also had the opportunity to see and feel "pointe shoes" and a "tutu" with the presentation concluding with a question and answer session.

Catherine attributed an important part of the success of this initial education programme to the preparation of the students prior to the company's arrival. "We had a pack for each teacher outlining our presentation, CDs with the music, quizzes and questionnaires," said Catherine.

"This, we feel, made a positive contribution. Some of the preparatory work done by the schools was phenomenal."

The question now is how Dancecyprus can continue to maintain this initial spark of interest and excitement.

"We have got this far with a lot of perseverance and hard work in Dancecyprus - the schools have opened their doors willingly and enthusiastically with invitations to return soon with other presentations. This we will follow

up."

What is Ballet? will be presented in other schools too. The second Dancecyprus Educational Programme is planned for November and, funding permitting, will involve professional Dancecyprus dancers rather than students.

"Ideally, we should be returning to each school every few months," said Catherine. "But it does come back to the question of finances and manpower. In order to be hugely successful and build a solid foundation, we undoubtedly need government support."

Is the government responding? "Yes, although we would like everything to move a little faster. At a recent meeting with the Minister of Education and Culture, it was understood that Cyprus is the only European country without a permanent professional ballet company and that steps must be taken."

■ *Individuals can help by logging onto the Dancecyprus website and become a Friend of Dancecyprus - www.dancecyprus.org*



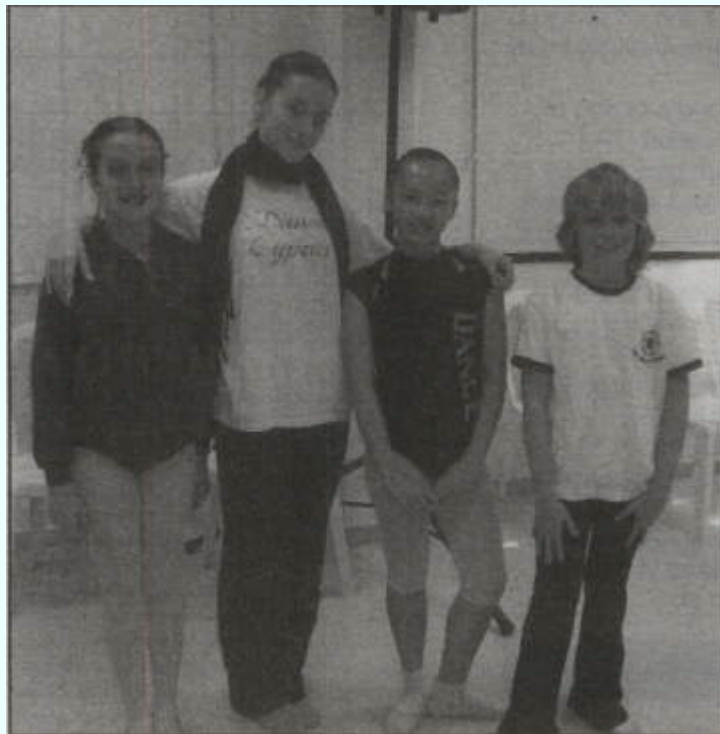
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Dancecyprus programme dancers at Heritage Private School, *above*, and Lakatameia primary school, *below*

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White Magic, performed by Dancecyprus (Peter Figetakis)

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