

Dreaming of dancing

Cypriot ballerina
Anastasia
Paschali, a
member of the
Royal Danish
Ballet, talks
about her
childhood
passion for
dancing and
the joys and
demands of her

career

By Saskia Constantinou

ONE of the oldest ballet troupes in Europe is the Royal Danish Ballet in Copenhagen which originates from 1748 with the founding of the Royal Danish Theatre. From the outset, the Royal Danish Ballet employed leading dancers and choreographers and within a few years of its founding, the Ballet School was established to give native dancers a home base.

It is an honour for our country that ballerina Anastasia Paschali is a part of the corps de ballet of such a prestigious company.

Anastasia was born in Pennsylvania in 1987 and, from the age of four, began ballet lessons, which very quickly became her passion. As a child, her dream was to become a ballerina, but "as I grew and learnt more about ballet and other styles of dance, I realised that becoming strictly a classical ballerina was rather narrow minded."

Looking back at her childhood, Paschali says that knowing her dreams and goals from an early age, led to her maturing and growing up quickly.

Her first ballet teacher, Avgi Papakyriakou, exerted enormous influence but working with the Dutch choreographer Jiri Kylian changed her as a dancer. "I met him and thought - this is a true artist! He had a sense of energy which permeated throughout the theatre and dancing

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his ballets *Petite mort* and *Bella Figura* was of especial significance to me.”

Countless little girls are taken to ballet by their mothers, but few continue to dance. Paschali is driven as “each waking day, I get to live my dream”.

But it wasn't easy getting there. Cypriot musicians, ballet dancers and artists in general have to face the stark reality that arts generally are not high on the political agenda of the country.

“I remember as a young teenager realising that I would leave the country at 18, never to come back and so I spent as much time as possible with family and friends. The positive aspect was learning to savour and appreciate all those moments,” she says.

Surely you must have wanted to rebel and give up sometimes? “Yes of course – but those feelings came at a time when I had no plans. When I realised that I didn't want to remain in Pennsylvania or New York, having spent a summer there, I wanted to give up but it was rather because I feared failure . . . you need a special temperament to be successful and it is very much a matter of believing in oneself.”

A typical day for Paschali begins with a warm up in the gym at 9.30, before the one and a half hour morning class – “hours which I treasure because that is

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when I really dance. Unless I'm working on a solo, I don't dance so much during the daily rehearsals.” Rehearsals are from 11.30am to 3pm with a short lunch break followed by evening performances. Preparation for the evening begins at 6pm so it is only at about 11pm that the day ends, when the curtain goes down.

Much has been written about the sacrifice and pain of the ballet world and of what it takes to be a ballerina. Paschali describes it as a “demanding but satisfying career”, although in her free time she would rather rest than go to a party.

“I am frequently physically and mentally exhausted, with the repertoire of the moment playing a role. There is sometimes respite, and when we have less demanding roles, I can enjoy life in more ‘normal’ ways. Despite some of its negative aspects, I would never alter my choice of professional of lifestyle.”

The criticism from peers

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and reviewers which all performers must endure is not always easy to deal with. "It's very personal when someone says they don't like your work. But I try to keep all the comments in perspective - after all, they are just opinions. If I am not chosen by a choreographer for one role, something else will come along - it is a matter of balance. Between us though, there is little professional rivalry and more acknowledgements of good performances which is exhilarating."

Of all the ballet roles, *Don Quixote* has particular significance for Paschali as it was her first solo role, dancing Amor. However, her first solo role in *Minus 7* by Ohad Naharin was inspiring as "I have never been good at modern dance, but for the first time with this ballet I found my modern feet and movements".

Is returning to Cyprus a possibility? "Naturally I think of it, but what will I do? There is no work, and



Picture of grace: Cyprus's Anastasia Paschali doing what she loves best on stage with the Royal Danish Ballet

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although Dancecyprus is beginning to make some changes to the artistic side of Cyprus, nothing can correspond with my present work satisfaction. As one never knows what opportunities will arise, I take one day at a time, and enjoy living in the present.”

Dancecyprus will be having a fundraising evening at the residence of Nadia and Geert Declerck where Serbian-Cypriot accordionist Nenad Bogdanovic will play a selection of tangos and gypsy music from Hungary, Romania and Russia while enjoying a buffet dinner.

This will be followed by an auction which will include items such as a pair of autographed pointe shoes, weekend stay in Troodos, watercolour painting, and historic autographed photographs of Margot Fonteyn. Tickets are €40 per person and can be obtained by calling Katerina 99 316608

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