

## Lifestyle | Features



In these photos, Ballet Philippines dancers perform during a dress rehearsal at the Cultural Center in Manila. — AFP photos

## Ballet Philippines battles Disney, typhoons and poverty to endure

From fierce typhoons and tight budgets to losing its dancers to cruise ships and theme parks, Ballet Philippines has weathered almost every type of storm, but as it celebrates its 50th anniversary the renowned arts organization is determined the show will go on. Funding is difficult to secure and there is little money for necessities such as dancer's salaries or even shoes—but more than 30,000 people watched the troupe's productions last year, no mean feat in a nation where millions live on less than \$2 a day.

One of the biggest challenges is keeping the dancers it has trained—some go on to join world-class organizations such as Stella Abrera who is now a principal dancer at American Ballet Theatre and West Australian Ballet soloist Candice Adea. But many leave after being poached to perform on cruise ships or as characters at Disneyland, who can offer 50-100 times what they make at Ballet Philippines.

"The only thing I'm not happy about is when Disney gets them as Mickey Mouse.... That's happened a lot and it's still happening," Ballet Philippines President Kathleen Liechtenstein tells AFP. Principal dancer Denise Parungao, who started out as an \$40-a-month-apprentice at the troupe, says she relied on family to help pay her rent and

understands why others left. "It's really hard because the salary before was really low and most of the dancers are not well off," the 25-year-old explains.

### 'Filipinas have more heart'

Part of the success of Ballet Philippines has been the determination of its performers. In 2014, a fierce typhoon knocked out power and floods left the orchestra stranded miles from the venue, but with two hours before the show started—the organization decided to carry on so as not to disappoint audiences who had travelled for the show.

"The lights came back on as the people started to fill the Cultural Center of the Philippines lobby. It was a harrowing experience," recalls Liechtenstein, who says they had to use recorded music in place of live musicians. "The dancing was exquisitely unforgettable," she says, adding that the audience agreed—giving a roading standing ovation. The same grit is evident down even when it comes to the use of dancing shoes.

In big name companies a performer might go through four pairs of ballet slippers in the course of a single performance. "In Ballet Philippines, a dancer wears (a pair) for a whole month. They put glue, they varnish, do everything just to make them last," Parungao says. She buys an extra

five pairs a year out of her own pocket to make sure her footwear does not disintegrate during a live performance.

"Filipinas really have more heart in doing this... we give our whole selves to it," Parungao adds. Unlike in Russia and the West, there is no national programme for spotting dancing talent in the Philippines and few get an early start—those that succeed must battle to make their mark.

### Love to entertain

Carlo Pacis, a former senior soloist at the Hong Kong Ballet who briefly returned to Manila to choreograph "A Midsummer Night's Dream" for Ballet Philippines, believes its dancers' strengths are not just physical. "We do not only dance: we embody the roles that we are tasked to portray. We love to act, we love to entertain," he says. Ballet Philippines declined to give its annual funding, but sources in the arts world said its four to six productions per year cost at least \$100,000 each.

Though it has always had free use of the national cultural centre's facilities, the company only gets about \$40,000 a year in government backing. For the rest it must rely on seat sales and sponsorship, as well as donations: The board of directors, a who's who of the country's wealthiest families, collectively put up 30 percent of the

company's annual budget.

Founded in 1969 by pioneering Filipina contemporary dancer and choreographer Alice Reyes with help from Imelda Marcos—whose husband Ferdinand ruled the country as a dictator until his ouster in 1986—the company was one of Asia's first. With Reyes still with the company as artistic director, it remains on a short list of developing nations that have their own ballet troupes including Vietnam, China, Cuba and Brazil.

To open its 50th season in August, principal dancer Evgeny Ivanchenko and first soloist Elena Evseeva of Russia's famed Mariinsky Ballet, previously the Kirov Ballet, starred alongside local dancers in the Filipino troupe's "Swan Lake" gala night. The production evoked the glitter of Ballet Philippines' first decade, even the likes of legends Margot Fonteyn, Rudolf Nureyev, Natalia Makarova and Patrick Bissell danced for the company in Manila. The troupe's reputation continues to pack a punch. Chris Millado, Cultural Center of the Philippine's artistic director, says: "It is one of the best in Asia."—AFP



Items owned by late US-British actress Elizabeth Taylor are displayed during a Julien's Auctions press preview aboard the Cunard ocean liner 'Queen Mary 2' in Brooklyn, New York. — AFP photos

## Elizabeth Taylor's personal treasures set for auction block

Internationally known for her lavish lifestyle and glam taste, silver screen siren Elizabeth Taylor also boasted a playful side, and now some of her personal effects that bared it are hitting the auction block. Items including a gold vermeil link belt, a sumptuous silk caftan and a studded black leather Versace biker jacket belonging to the late Hollywood legend will travel across the Atlantic on the famed Queen Mary 2 ocean liner, giving guests a first glimpse at Taylor's treasures.

Following the actress' death in 2011 at age 79, a week-long Christie's auction in New York of her vast collection of luxury dresses, jewels and fine art saw total sales topping \$156 million. But this time the items anticipated to go for a wide range of price points show the side of a larger-than-life woman—known for starring roles in classics like "Cleopatra" and "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof"—her closest friends and family knew.

"The icon on screen isn't the grandmother that I would hang out with around the house," said her grandson Quinn Tivey, a 33-year-old artist who is an ambassador for The Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation. "I don't really know Elizabeth Taylor the celebrity," Tivey told AFP aboard the

enormous ocean liner his grandmother frequented, on which he will make the week-long journey with the preview of her items. "To me she was just grandma."

Martin Nolan—the executive director of Julien's Auctions, which is hosting the sale—says some items like Taylor's scarves or costume jewelry carry pre-sale estimates of \$200 to \$400, meaning not only institutions and members of the upper crust will have a chance at taking something home. "I think people will be surprised that they will be able to actually acquire and afford to have something from the amazing Elizabeth Taylor," he told AFP.

After their voyage across the Atlantic and to the Newbridge Silverware's Museum of Style Icons in Ireland, Taylor's effects will be taken to California, with bidding December 6-8 online and in person at a Beverly Hills exhibition. The gold coin-chain belt from Cartier was a gift Taylor gave to her mother to match one of her own, which she engraved with the message: "To My 'Flippy' Mom All my love Elizabeth."

The house estimates the belt could go for between \$1,000 and \$2,000, while the aforementioned leather jacket—which Taylor wore in 1992 on Johnny Carson's iconic talk show—carries an estimated price tag of \$4,000 to \$6,000. Tivey remembers growing up watching movies with his grandmother, her frequent advice on his love life and even swiping the jacket from Taylor's closet on occasion to give it a try. He hopes that whoever buys it will "actually wear it" and share her style with the public.

Fascination with Taylor's rich legacy persists because "she was true to herself," Tivey said. "She was never one to let fear be the deciding factor," he said. "She always followed her heart." "She always had the courage to do what she thought was right." — AFP



## Uruguay's national ballet stretches to new artistic heights

Pirouettes and arabesques perfectly executed, dozens of dancers in a colorful assemblage of sweat pants and leotards perform an exhaustive routine at rehearsals in downtown Montevideo. Rehearsals at Uruguay's National Ballet Company have taken on a new elan since Argentine artistic director Julio Bocca took over and bravely declared he wanted to make the small company "the best in the world." Popularly known as El Sodre, it celebrated its one millionth spectator in 2018, a crowning glory for the dance troupe that has made a spectacular transformation in a decade to become one of the most prestigious in Latin America.

Bocca, former principal dancer with the American Ballet Theater in New York, was brought in to revive the company in 2010 by Uruguay's then-president Jose "Pepe" Mujica. A decade ago, performances often had fewer audience members than dancers on the stage. Now, thanks to astute artistic choices and better management, it attracts more than 100,000 spectators a year—a small achievement in country of 3.3 million.

### Political will

Igor Yebra, a Spaniard who took over from Bocca two years ago, credits his predecessor for raising standards, and Mujica for "the political will to attract the right person to the job." Bocca, who returns to the Montevideo company next year in a teaching role, said he came in at the right time. "The most important thing is to have the support to be able to change things, that is to say: 'OK I want this company to be the best in the world,'" Bocca told AFP.

"I had seen some shows that were very bad, there were few performances and no one in the audience," the 52-year-old choreographer recalls. He accepted the offer of the leftist president, but with some conditions. First, to lock in an annual budget for productions, which was over-reliant on ticket sales and sponsorship. Then, to slash long-term contracts for dancers to one-year terms, which led to friction and strikes, but Bocca prevailed.

He used the money generated by productions of crowd-pleasing classics like "The Nutcracker" to fund contemporary creations. The company now goes on the road to tour Uruguayan cities and abroad, and international choreographers, teachers and dancers are regularly brought in.

### Returning talents

Other changes wrought by Bocca included eight-hour workdays, a renewed ballet corps, and offering shows on

week-nights, previously unheard of in Uruguay. The company started to adopt a workload and creative rhythm equivalent to that of US or European companies. "There was not this mentality in South America, this way of working," said the choreographer. Prior to Bocca's revolution, the ballet's performances were only publicized at the last minute, sometimes only a day before the show, and the tickets could not be bought in advance.

Bocca changed all that. The face of prima ballerina Maria Noel Riccetto adorned public transport all over the city ahead of her recent performance in El Sodre's production of "Onegin", John Cranko's adaptation of Alexander Pushkin's novel. Performances at the modern theater in downtown Montevideo are a sell-out, with ticket prices an affordable \$25. "It costs more to go and see a film at the cinema or to a football match at the weekend," said Yebra.



However, South American companies like El Sodre can't possibly match the salaries on offer for artists or choreographers in Europe or the United States. "When a dancer starts to reach her best, they come here and take her off," said Yebra. "For us it's complicated because we have to be constantly on the lookout for new young talent." All too conscious of the reality, the Uruguayan ballet authorities don't hold back young dancers who decide to leave. They prefer to focus on those who they can get back, like Riccetto, former soloist at the American Ballet Theater and stand-in for actress Mila Kunis in Darren Aronofsky's movie "Black Swan."

Her compatriot Nadia Mara, soloist at the Atlanta Ballet in the United States, also danced in this month's "Onegin" production, her first time dancing in front of family and friends in the audience since she left for Atlanta as a teenager. Bocca is meanwhile preparing to return to the scene of his triumph. He will take on a teaching role at El Sodre next year, to do what he likes best—to teach, free of the pressures of production budgets and funding and having to fill theaters. — AFP



Dancers of Uruguay's National Ballet company take part in their daily practice in Montevideo. — AFP photos