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Countdown to Tirgan Festival: Who Knew We Had a National Ballet?

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Sima Sahar Zerehi – The ballet world has a reputation for being exclusive, impenetrable, rigid and unchanging. In the aftermath of Hollywood films like Black Swan, it’s hard not to think about how truly gruelling this world of delicate tutus and ethereal dancers really is.

“It was very hard and I did it with a lot of injuries,” explains Nima Kiann the Founder and Artistic Director of Les Ballets Persans, about his foray into the ballet world as an adult.



Kiann started his career in ballet at the age of twenty after leaving Iran for Sweden, an astounding fact considering that most male dancers begin their training before reaching their teens.

Speaking about his late start, Kiann offers, “usually twenty is very late, but there are some exceptions, some people make it and I’m glad to be one of them.”

For Kiann leaving Iran meant finally having an opportunity to pursue a career in dance, “My first contact with any ballet education was when I arrived in Sweden. I started to investigate the possibility of dancing and I looked into schools and at first I was not accepted at the dance school, I could not be accepted because I had no background in ballet.”

His lack of experience or advanced age didn’t dissuade Kiann from pursuing his dream, “I didn’t have any training, so after a while I started a preparatory period of intensive training and after a year I started my formal education,” recounts Kiann.

Kiann explains that breaking into the ballet world as an adult required single-minded determination and hard work. “Ballet means eight hours of training a day six days a week, you really push yourself to the limits, it’s a very tough world and very hard training, you need a lot of passion and a lot of work and push to make it through.”

While Kiann had to work hard to gain the technical skills of a professional ballet dancer, the passion for dance was something that had been ignited in him as a young boy. He states, “The passion for dance has been there since quite a long time ago, long before I started to dance. Since I was in Iran I had this passion but unfortunately I didn’t have the opportunity to get into it.”

For Kiann ballet was a life-long aspiration, “I just dreamed always about ballet until I got the opportunity in Sweden – I was watching dance on TV, I went to theatres to watch ballet, I was reading about dance, I was living ballet before I had a chance to get involved in it.”

After years of hard work Kiann secured his first job as a ballet dancer when he was twenty-four.

Now in his early 40s Kiann is the Artistic Director and choreographer for Les Ballets Persans. The company, which was established in 2001 and had its world premiere in 2002, is an international touring ballet company dedicated to presenting dance productions inspired by eastern cultures.

The project took almost four years to be realized, “It was a project I started in 1998, it was the recreation of the former Iranian National Ballet which had dissolved in 1979 after the revolution,” recounts Kiann.

When asked why he felt it was important to re-establish the Iranian National Ballet Kiann begins to speak more quickly, revealing his dedication to the cause.

He blurts out, “Because this is our national heritage,” and adds, “it has become completely unknown to people – many people don’t know that Iran had a national dance company that represented the country internationally.”

For Kiann dance is an ideal medium for transmitting culture, “without any language this art form can

communicate; you ask why ballet, because ballet is a novel art, its respected in all culture. All eastern and western modernized countries have a ballet company; Egypt has one, Turkey has one, and in Germany each city has its own ballet company.”

For Kiann re-establishing the Iranian National Ballet was the culmination of his efforts to establish himself in the ballet world.

“I had this passion for dance, I got to get my education, when I was finished I felt that I had to do something with it to create a repertoire inspired by Iranian art and history,” adds Kiann.

Since its inception Les Ballets Persans has mounted numerous productions showcasing the company’s diverse repertoire, which ranges from classical ballets such as *Scheherazade and Seven Beauties* to neoclassical works like Babek and contemporary productions such as Femme.

While many ballet companies struggle to attract new audiences, Les Ballets Persan seems to have no difficulty selling tickets.

Kiann tries to share the secret to the company’s success, “we created a repertoire that has been quite unique. Many dancers turn to the company and apply months before we even announce a production.”

He adds, “Le Ballet Persans is a classical ballet company, however, we do not have any work from the typical international ballet repertoire like Swan Lake – the kind of repertoire I created is based on classical training but has strong Persian roots. The music is Persian but the dance is a mixture of classical ballet and Persian traditional dances.”

According to Kiann the attempt to showcase a wide range of ballet techniques is what makes a company a national ballet.

In addition to being a dance production company, Les Ballets Persans also houses an educational and research department. The company has employed the talents of hundreds of artists from across the world to realize its singular vision of an Iranian influenced ballet.

“In the past nine years there has been more than 200 people involved from twenty-eight different countries, members of our company speak more than eighteen languages,” notes Kiann.

Unfortunately the company does not yet include any Iranian dancers.

Kiann explains the reasons why, “Les Ballets Persans is a professional dance company, and we work with dancers who have studied ballet at a professional level. Although there’s been many fellow Iranians wanting to get involved, their training is not suitable for a professional company.”

Despite their lack of professional training these aspiring Iranian ballet dancers continue to contact Kiann hoping for a chance to realize their dream. “On a regular basis, at least three to four times per month I get contacted by young Iranians from all over the world, some in Iran and others who have just arrive in places like Sweden, Poland, or Bulgaria. Unfortunately, we do not have any means or possibility to help these people.”

While the company can’t cater to those without professional training, Les Ballets Persans does have a youth program titled the European Youth Dance Project (EYDP), which was introduced in the fall of 2007, this program strives to bring young dancers from various countries and cultures together.

Les Ballet Persans is one of the headlining performances at this year’s Tirgan Festival hosted at Toronto’s Harbourfront. The company will be performing three pieces from their repertoire including Turquoise Land, Femme, Simay Jan as well as showcasing a world premiere for their new ballet Iraaneh Khanum. The four pieces are sure to acquaint audiences with the company’s singular approach to ballet.

These performances are among some of the most sought after tickets for the festival so all those wishing to see Les Ballet Persans are encouraged to purchase their tickets soon.

2012 will mark Les Ballet Persans tenth year anniversary, Kiann notes that many plans are on the way to commemorate this landmark but refuses to give any further clues as to what will come next for the company.

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