

Singapore Dance Theatre dancers Etienne Ferrere and Chihiro Uchida during a performance of Rubies by George Balanchine at Ballet Under the Stars in 2015. PHOTO: SINGAPORE DANCE THEATRE



POISED FOR GROWTH



Benson Ang

Ballet classes have traditionally been a popular activity for girls from better-off families here, as parents hope that these will cultivate poise and grace in their daughters. But these days, more people, including boys, are taking up ballet, which is being offered at more private dance schools as well as primary and secondary schools. Ms Melissa Quek, head of Lasalle College of the Arts' school of dance and theatre, notes that she is seeing ballet offered in more primary and secondary schools. Sengkang Green Primary School offers ballet as an enrichment programme, structured on the international syllabus from the Royal Academy of Dance, it says on its website. At Princess Elizabeth Primary

School, ballet has been offered as a co-curricular activity since 2002, according to its website. A quick Internet search found at least 25 ballet schools here. "I think people nowadays are more exposed to ballet and dance through screen media, Internet and travel," says Dr Caren Carino, vice-dean of the dance programme at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts. "With greater exposure, interest naturally grows," she adds. Experts say the plethora of ballet schools in recent years has led to more competition, with schools differentiating themselves in various ways. For example, Dr Carino notes that the Little Dance Academy, founded in 2012, is billed as the first school here teaching the Russian Vaganova method, a rigorous programme designed to enhance strength and body expression. She also observes that some schools cater to particular demographics. L'Academie De Danse in Claymore Hill is touted as the only French ballet school in Singapore,

while Studio Arts Passe in Robertson Walk caters to the Japanese community here. She says: "Ballet schools or studios often feature more than one unique selling point. Sometimes they promote a particular dance style. Other times, they endorse a particular dance method or syllabus. Some also promote the professional reputation of its principal, director or faculty." Dance schools interviewed say while there are still much fewer males doing ballet in Singapore, their numbers have grown. Jitterbugs Singapore, for example, has 13 male ballet students, aged six to 17. Its artistic director Tiffany Wrightson says there were no boys studying ballet when she started teaching at Jitterbugs in 2009. She adds: "Initially, most of our boys joined the studio to learn jazz or tap (dance). However, they have realised that classical ballet is fundamental to their training and will make their other genres stronger. "Along the way, they have grown to love ballet." Over at Jeffrey Dance Academy, there is a junior boys ballet programme designed for boys aged nine to 16. The Singapore Ballet Academy also has 12 boys taking ballet classes. With a wider base of learners, there are more Singaporeans taking up ballet professionally too. Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT), the first professional dance company here, has 10 Singaporean dancers, the biggest contingent it has ever had. With the Singapore Ballet Academy and the SDT, two of the Republic's ballet pioneers, celebrating their 60th and 30th anniversaries respectively this year, they



can look back on the long way the ballet scene here has come. For one thing, Singaporeans are breaking new ground and getting accepted into prestigious dance schools overseas. For instance, former Singapore Ballet Academy student Michelle Lim reportedly became the first Singapore dance student to be admitted to the renowned Juilliard School in New York in 2013. The alumni of the academy, Singapore's oldest ballet school, have gone on to prestigious dance schools overseas, such as the Australian Ballet School, Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance in London, New Zealand School of Dance and the Hong Kong

Academy for Performing Arts. The academy, which is in Waterloo Street and has been helmed since 2016 by principal Han Kee Juan, currently has more than 500 students. One of them is Clarice Glass, eight, who attends classes at the academy three a week and names SDT dancer Chihiro Uchida as her idol. "She moves like a princess and makes dancing look so easy," says the Primary 2 pupil. Her mother, part-time counsellor Cecilia Yee, 47, says: "I think ballet has taught Clarice poise, good posture and confidence. She has always been very interested in music and dance, so ballet is a good way to channel this interest." While the ballet education scene

Students during a lesson at the Singapore Ballet Academy, the country's oldest ballet school. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

Picking up ballet as a toddler

Chihiro Uchida, 32, principal artist at Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT)

One of the most graceful and expressive dancers in Singapore, the Japanese national picked up ballet when she was 2½-years old.

As a toddler, she liked dancing in front of the television to any music that was playing. Her mother put her in a ballet class and Uchida has been dancing ever since.

In 2001, she won the Idemitsu Kousan Scholarship at the Asian Pacific International Ballet Competition in Tokyo and was later accepted into The Australian Ballet School.

She joined SDT in 2005 and has taken on principal roles in productions such as Jeffrey Tan's The Nutcracker and Kuik Swee Boon's Pellucid.

She has played the title characters in Paquita, Giselle, as well as Odette and Odile in Swan Lake, Princess Aurora in Sleeping Beauty, Juliet in Romeo & Juliet, and more.

She says: "One of my pre-performance rituals is to bring six to seven pairs of pointe shoes with me. Before the performance, when the stage is empty and ready for dancers to go onstage, I try on all the pointe shoes and choose what I want to wear for that performance.

"Even though I feel comfortable with a particular pair of shoes the day before, the next day, it can feel different.

"I also always have Pocari Sweat or an isotonic drink with me. I make sure I hydrate and have enough fluids in my body, it helps to prevent my muscles from cramping."

Staying focused, thanks to dance

Etienne Ferrere, 27, principal artist at Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT)

Handsome, athletic and noted for his confident jumps and nifty footwork, this French dancer has seen his star rise to the top of Singapore's ballet scene.

The Paris Opera Ballet School graduate joined the Paris Opera Ballet Company in 2009 and has performed in classical works such as Cinderella and Raymonda.

He joined SDT as an artist in 2010, rising up the ranks to become principal artist in January this year.

His repertoire includes roles in Romeo & Juliet, The Nutcracker and Don Quixote, and he most recently danced the part of Peter in the children's ballet Peter & Blue's Forest Adventure, at the School of the Arts studio theatre from May 31 to June 3.

He says: "Being a teenager was very difficult for me, but I remember that having dance in my life helped me keep my head out of the water.

"I cannot really say that dance has changed my life, because I have never known a life without dance as I started very young. But it has definitely shaped and defined my life very significantly.

"When days in the studio get a bit difficult, I will always remind myself that we do what we do in the studio so that we will be ready for the stage.

"I am not afraid of hard work if I have a goal in front of me."

Interest in ballet is growing here, with more primary and secondary schools as well as private schools offering the art form

here has come a long way, experts feel that there are still challenges in taking the standard of ballet to the next level.

Mr Han, 60, notes that Singaporeans still see ballet as a hobby, second to academics.

Whenever the annual year-end examinations come around, he observes, most students do not show up for ballet class.

"Studies are important," he says. "But if you are serious about ballet, you should come for class."

There should also be more emphasis on performance opportunities to let dancers practise what they learn, he adds.

"As dancers, we have to perform. And there are many qualities – such as discipline, confidence and teamwork – which students learn best when they are preparing for a show." To that end, he decided in 2016 that the academy will put on a school performance once every two years.

For this year's show, happening this month, more than 280 of its students will present In The Classroom, a series of classwork reinterpreted for the stage, and Four Seasons, a festive piece set to the evocative score of Russian composer Alexander Glazunov.

Mr Han says: "Parents, in general, want their children to go for ballet examinations to show the standard they have achieved." "But to me, a dancer must also have the opportunity to perform and the experience of dancing in front of others.

"When you are trying to get a job as a professional ballet dancer, it is about what you can demonstrate during the audition. "A distinction certificate is secondary."

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Singapore's dance pioneers

SINGAPORE BALLET ACADEMY

Singapore's oldest ballet school was established in 1958 from a merger of the Frances School of Dancing and Malaya School of Ballet, two famous ballet schools here back then.

The academy was set up by choreographer Vernon Martinus, his wife Frances Poh and dancer Goh Soo Kee.

It aims to raise awareness of ballet as a beautiful art form, offer training as well as provide a platform for stage performances.

It came under the directorship of local dance doyen Goh Soo Khim in the 1970s.

SINGAPORE DANCE THEATRE

The Singapore Dance Theatre, the country's first professional dance company, was founded in 1988 by dancer Goh Soo Khim and the late choreographer Anthony Then. It began with seven dancers, and now has 40. This includes 10 Singaporean dancers – the most the company has ever had.

Its artistic director Janek Schergen, 67, says: "This shows the maturing of the Singapore ballet scene. It shows the dancers understand ballet as a profession and more deeply as an art form... not just an activity."

Currently, at least three Singapore Ballet Academy alumni – Elaine Heng, Chua Bi Ru and Kwok Min Yi – are dancers with the company.



PHOTO: SINGAPORE BALLET ACADEMY

My favourite part about ballet is that I always get to feel challenged. I love it when I have to learn a difficult step because it makes me want to keep practising until I get it.



PEARL SOH (above), 12, a student at the Singapore Ballet Academy, on what she loves about the dance

Tears at first ballet class

Pearl Soh, 12, student at the Singapore Ballet Academy

When Pearl took her first ballet lesson at the age of four, she burst out in tears.

"I don't remember anything from my first ballet lesson, except that I cried. I was so scared to dance in front of other people. I guess I was too shy," she tells The Sunday Times. She has clearly come far.

Today, she spends an average of 18 hours a week dancing and harbours dreams of becoming a professional ballerina one day.

Last week, she came in second in her category (Junior B, Section 3) at the inaugural Masterpiece International Ballet Competition held at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts. It turns out that ballet, an activity which once made her so nervous, has helped her come out of her shell and feel more confident.

"My favourite part about ballet is that I always get to feel challenged.

"I love it when I have to learn a difficult step because it makes me want to keep practising until I get it. When I finally manage to do it, I feel so happy," says the Singapore Chinese Girls' School Secondary 1 student.

An example of a challenging step for her was the developpe, a move that requires the dancer to lift a leg very high up and hold it. "You need a lot of strength to do this pose. I tried to do it for a very long time – maybe over a year. I'm so glad I can do it now," says Pearl, who started taking lessons with the Singapore Ballet Academy five years ago.

She is the middle of three children. Her mother, 39, is an aesthetic clinic assistant, while her father, 47, is a manager at a hardware solutions company.

Her ballet dance idol is Chihiro Uchida, 32, a principal artist at Singapore Dance Theatre. "Female dancers usually retire at a young age, but she has been dancing for a long time. I danced with her once for a show and she's inspiring. I hope to be like her one day."

Yip Wai Yee

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To win a pair of passes to the floral-jamming sessions, take part in this contest, which closes on July 9.

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