

# plus ARTS

STEP BY STEP

## So, you think you know dance?

TODAY shows you the right moves to get you groovin'



**MAYO MARTIN**  
mayo@mediapartners.com.sg

IT CAN be beautiful or ugly. It can be someone twirling 20 times or standing still for 20 minutes. You know it's great, but the world of dance can be confusing at times.

We're here to set the record straight with a crash course on two main Western dance forms: Classical ballet and contemporary dance.

As for salsa and tango, we'll leave them to that "dance instructor" your husband's paying for.

**FROM CLASSICAL BALLET ...** Admit it, you're thinking of pink tutus and leotards, right?

But the origins of ballet — which comes from the Latin word for "to dance" — isn't as cutesy as you think.

In fact, it's quite, er, cutting edge. During the Renaissance period in Italy, ballet was said to have been created as a "dance" version of fencing.

Gaining popularity, it was exported to France (hence, all your *pas de deux*, *jetés*, *plis* and *piouettes*). It eventually made its way to Russia, which was home to some uber-dancers like Mikhail Baryshnikov.

You know, that Russian dude who was in the last season of *Sex and the City*. From swanplay to Carrie Bradshaw's ex-beau, we wondered just how baller and its practitioners have survived through the ages.

We asked the experts from local ballet company Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT).

After all, they have a massive repertoire of over 100 works, both classical and contemporary, and they're celebrating their 20th anniversary with a lineup of productions including *The Motorcade* and a "best of" edition of *Ballet Under the Stars* (see Plus Picks).

From what we gathered, ballet works as some kind of

theatrical time machine.

Classical ballet can "transport audiences into a totally different era when pomp and pageantry were the key visual elements," said SDT co-founder Goh Soo Khim, who'll be stepping down as artistic director after a successful two decades by the end of the year.

"They are perennial favourites because they bring magic and splendour onto the stage, and the use of highly familiar classical music by composers like Tchaikovsky and Prokofiev make it extra enjoyable."

The "classic" part is echoed by the company's ballet master Paul DeMasson who composes classical ballet pieces to works by masters from other fields like Mozart or Da Vinci.

On a more technical note, Janek Schergen, the group's assistant artistic director, described classical ballet as being "a specific symmetry of lines and patterns".

Like you, we didn't get that last bit either. But Goh offered another basic tip that we'll all understand: Just follow the story.

"They usually have a storyline and plot progression, with many of the famous ones like  *Giselle* and *Cinderella* originating in the 18th century."

And no, don't discount the fluffy tutus and tight leotards just yet, because classical works do tend to have "more traditional and fanciful costumes," said Goh, 64.

She was also kind enough to point out that just like any other artistic language, you've got to know certain rules.

For example, when a danseur (the guy) points to a ballerina's (the babe) ring finger, it's to indicate marriage.

And one final thing. Despite its "uppity" image, you've got to acknowledge that classical ballet is where it all began.

Eventually morphing into other forms like contemporary ballet and finally, modern and contemporary dance.

**...TO CONTEMPORARY DANCE** Modern? Contemporary? Just don't call it "popular".

"The layman often thinks of popular dance forms like

### THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW BEFORE YOU DON THE LEOTARD

CLASSICAL BALLET	CONTEMPORARY DANCE
Classy and timeless	Edgy and timely
Dazzling sequined costumes	Blinding lighting effects
Uplifting classical music soundtrack	Jarring techno music soundtrack
Fancy set designs	What set design?
Beautiful bodies	Occasional nude body
"Once upon a time ..."	"I've been thinking about ..."
Heavy make-up	"Just got up" look
Expectant pre-show chatter	Intense post-show debates
Inspires little girls to take up summer classes	Inspires students to write doctorate theses
Often easy on the eye	Often hard on the noggin'



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jazz or hip-hop or ballroom dancing, but it's a very complicated subject," said Dr Caren Carino, head of the dance department at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts.

Which is to say, even if you're an expert moonwalker or the honorary president of the firing back the Macarena movement, your bid for contemporary dance stardom is still doomed.

### It can be the fear that you don't understand what it means and you don't want to look stupid.

Dr Caren Carino, head of the dance department at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, on why people might prefer ballet to contemporary dance

The roots of modern dance can be traced back to the early 20th century, to disgruntled ballet dancers who wanted more than just dancing en pointe for the umpteenth time.

The new dance form, spearheaded by icons like Marie Therese Gubins, Isadora Duncan in the United States, eventually found its way to Britain in the '70s where the term "contemporary dance" was formed. Dig deeper and you'll find a history more convoluted than a Justin Timberlake dance routine.

But there's an easier way of spotting what's contemporary: just look for names like Merce Cunningham, Alvin Ailey, William Forsythe. Or newer renegades like Akram Khan, Jerome Bel, Pina Bausch or Wim Vandekeybus.

Locally, watch out for shows by groups like Arts Fusion, Odyssey Dance Theatre, ECNAD, Ah Hock and Peng Yu, among others. However, knowing who to look out for is different from knowing what to look out for.

The joke is that you can spot a contemporary dance show if the dancers are barefoot. In reality, the styles are varied, simply because it mixes everything up.

"Sometimes the moves can be very gymnastic or athletic, or 'sculptural', or pedestrian-like walking and sitting — it can even look like a ballet," said Carino, 51, much to our confusion.

For dancer-choreographer Kuik Swee Boon, contemporary dance is more connected to our modern life than classical ballet. His new piece called *Old Sounds*, which will be staged in September at the National Museum, will be based on his experience of communicating with his parents through dialects.

"Somehow, there's something inside my body that wants to touch on this subject," said Kuik, 35.

We have a vague inkling about what he meant. But we won't be surprised if the man on the street may find that explanation esoteric compared to say, *The Nutcracker's* in-a-nutshell synopsis: A little girl travels to a strange world and encounters fantastical characters.

That's probably the main misconception about contemporary and modern dance. That it's "difficult" and not as "beautiful" as ballet.

It's like art, said Carino. "It can be the fear that you don't understand what it means and you don't want to look stupid."

It's this "Am I right or wrong?" mentality that may turn people away from a dance form that requires more than just admiring perfection, but Carino says the audience is slowly but surely growing.

Kuik thinks it's a matter of getting used to. Like eating durians. "When you're not used to the smell, it'll always be hard the first time."

And after a while, you wonder how you ever lived without it.

## PLUS PICKS STEP UP AND DANCE

### PICNIC: BALLET UNDER THE STARS

Marking Singapore Dance Theatre's 20th anniversary is this "best of" edition of their regular outdoor dance show.

It features 22 pas de deux to highlight some of the pieces in their repertoire, as choreographed by the likes of the late Goh Choo Sui, Jeffrey Tan, Graham Loring, Mohamed Noor Sarman, among others.

July 25 to 27, 7.30pm, at Fort Canning Park. Picnic-time starts at 5pm. Tickets at \$30 from Sistic.

www.singaporeballet.com

### RENT: BILLY ELLIOT

Jaded with ballet or dance in general? It's time to re-visit this heart-warming story about a miner's son who secretly takes up ballet classes — when he should've been at the boxing gym — and eventually bags a lead role in *Sweeney Todd*. You can also catch the original musical version... in Sydney.

www.billyelliott.com

### WATCH: TRUE

A multi-media performance led by Kyoto collective Dumb Type dancer-choreographer Takao Kawaguchi and Tsuyoshi Shirai. It's guaranteed to give you sensory overload with LEDs, oscillators and other sensors, which make the space itself "a flickering and vibrating extension of the performers' bodies".

July 24 to 26, 8.30pm, at Esplanade Theatre Studio. Tickets at \$28 from Sistic.

www.thestudio.com.sg

### SURF: PINA BAUSCH

The German modern dance choreographer mixes the surreal with humour. Check out the many excerpts of her pieces on YouTube.

If you're a fan of Pedro Almodóvar, his movie *Talk To Her* also excerpts two pieces: *Café Müller* and *Maturra Fogo* — and the film's protagonists meet up at a Pina Bausch concert.

www.youtube.com