

WW | high life

# art to hearts

Music moves, but only dance can light a fire in you, say these women. They share how Singapore's growing passion for dance is changing lives *by Teo Kuan Yee and Tan Lili*

**D**ance wasn't popular five years ago. But now you can say Singapore is having a dance, dance, revolution. You can visit the Esplanade Dance Festival for contemporary and classical dance; watch internationally famous choreographers like Bill Calhoun, who have set up base in Singapore; keep fit with funk and pole dance classes; or take your toddler to ballet classes. Communications Manager Celine Quek, 32, has a four-year-old daughter who has just started ballet. "She loved it so much after one lesson, we signed her up for more."

But perhaps what's most significant is this: In 2008, the Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT) is set to celebrate its 20th anniversary. To mark this milestone, these dancing divas share how they are taking their passion for dance into the future.



*Xia Hai Ying*  
Company Dancer,  
Singapore Dance Theatre

Some people cry to sentimental tunes. Others are touched by a photograph. Hai Ying, 31, has seen ballet touch lives in the same way. She recalls, "Once, Singapore's late President Ong Teng Cheong came to watch *Ballet Under The Stars*. It started to rain, but he didn't leave. He had so much respect for the art, he stayed till the very end."

Dance has given Hai Ying the opportunity to thrill audiences worldwide with her dancing. "After our 2002 performance in Mexico, some members of the audience waited backstage for 45 minutes just to shake my hand. In London, a six-year-old waited for hours to get an autograph."

She says, "I love dance because I can move people through my hard work. It's extraordinary how a shared passion draws people together and creates friendships – from professional dancers to choreographers to ordinary people the world over."

She's stayed in historic places on some dance tours. One trip Hai Ying remembers fondly is to Biarritz in France. "The view was especially lovely, as the Theatre du Casino Municipal de Biarritz is right next to the sea."

Ironically, Hai Ying started her life of dance due to illness. "When I was young, I was a weak child. Mum made me study dance so I could exercise. At 10, I was dancing at the Beijing Dance Institute of China (China's crème de la crème dance school)."

In 1993, Hai Ying became the first dancer to be offered a contract with SDT. Since then, she's grown in her role and now dances the lead roles in major ballet productions such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Giselle* and *Sleeping Beauty*. In Shanghai last year, Hai Ying represented SDT in its first performance at the prestigious Shanghai Grand Theatre.

## Mrs Laura Hwang

Managing Director,  
Memories of the East

She manages her own successful arts events company and holds directorial positions in the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts, and the International Women's Forum. And believe it or not, Laura Hwang credits dance for it all. "Dance has made me a better person and taught me to look beyond one discipline when forming opinions," she says.

Laura fell in love with ballet when she was in primary school, although she later gave up the discipline. "But my love for dance remained!" So when the Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT) started in 1988, she volunteered to help, going on to join the Board in 2001.

Laura's clearly determined to show that ballet is not just about obscure shows for the elite – it can be enjoyed by everyone. So recently, SDT joined with Esplanade to organise a dance appreciation series, the Arts Education Programme. This reaches out to schools with behind-the-scenes tours of ballet productions and the Esplanade itself.

"The programmes are enjoying great attendance. Working with dance groups in community clubs has also created a new vibrancy for dance in Singapore," says Laura happily.

Her personal brainchild, the annual *Ballet Under The Stars*, proves ballet can be family-friendly: Mums, dads and kids with picnic mats in tow pile into Centennial Park to watch these performances in a relaxed atmosphere.

To Laura, it's a joy watching children fall in love with ballet. "I love watching kids master ballet moves. It's a reminder that life is beautiful when we take the time to enrich our soul." **W**

### Numbers On The Dance Floor

**3** The types of evening classes SDT offers adults: Jazz ballet, contemporary dance and Pilates.

**7** dancers at the SDT in their first year. Now, there are 22 full-time dancers from eight countries.

**20** years of growing the local ballet scene means SDT has good reason to celebrate all of this year. In June, it will stage a contemporary dance performance by choreographers David Dawson, Jorma Elo and Graham Lustig. *Ballet Under The Stars* takes place in July, and in October SDT partners with Esplanade for the Esplanade Dances Festival, where local choreographers Jeffrey Tan and Kuek Swee Boon put together a new show. *The Nutcracker* will be re-staged in December 2008.

Photography by Andy Wong / Fern Wong photo courtesy of Silk Road Pictures / Styling by Pam Yeo / Make-up by Lorry Yeo using Glomawaks / Hair by Alycia Tan using Sebastian Professional / Sulfurica dress: Hai King's own / Mrs Hwang's outfit from The Link / Special thanks to the Esplanade



## 10 MINUTES WITH...

Jeffrey Tan, 41, choreographer,  
Singapore Dance Theatre

### **I knew dancing was going to be the career for me when...**

...my artistic director and mentor passed away in 1995. He really pushed me to be better each time. Moreover, the Singapore Dance Theatre is a Singaporean company. I feel I should take the opportunity and keep it going.

### **The idea that male dancing is effeminate...**

...should be disregarded. I think people hold on to this stereotype because the media often portrays male dancers as flamboyant. But without male dancers, how can female dancers be lifted up? All ballet pieces have storylines that involve a romantic link between two leads, so why are they deemed effeminate?

### **One important piece of advice for parents who enrol their kids in dance classes...**

...is to have an open mind. It's great that they are exposing their children to such platforms. They can find out what hidden talents their kids may have.

### **What parents should watch out in their children before enrolling them in a dance class are...**

...discipline, physique and commitment. If their kids are musically inclined, the better!

### **You'll be surprised, but...**

...there are quite a number of adults and parents learning ballet in our school! Perhaps dancing has always been their dream but they haven't had the opportunity to pursue it until now. It's definitely harder for adults to learn because as people age, their bodies become stiffer. But never say never — one cannot be too old to learn anything!

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