



Of Cavaliers and Ballerinas

This month, the ballet profession is all abuzz with the Genée International Ballet Competition being held in Singapore for the first time. The annual meet is a high profile platform that has helped launch the professional careers of many young dancers in the international arena.

By JACINTA FREEMAN

"Ballet in Singapore has come a long way," says Goh Soo Khim, Co-founder of Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT) and an instrumental figure in the development of ballet in the country. "In the past 20 years, the cultural scene in Singapore has greatly developed with established companies where aspiring young dancers can realise their dreams of adopting dance as a career," explains the one-time principle dancer of the Singapore Ballet Academy (SBA).

On the milestones that the industry has achieved, Goh remembers the staging of SDT's first full-length production of *The Nutcracker* by Anthony Then, the late co-founder of SDT, in 1992; the commissioning of *Cinderella* in 1996 by UK-born choreographer Graham Lustig and the achievement of the Grand Prix Prize at the 7th Asia Pacific Ballet Competition in 1999 by SDT dancer Xia Haiying.

Just last year, SDT and SBA both celebrated their 20th and 50th anniversaries respectively. This September, the profile of dance in Singapore will move up yet another notch with the staging of the Genée International Ballet Competition. Presented by the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) from the UK and the National Arts Council (NAC), the competition will gather an international faculty of artistic directors,

choreographers, teachers and top dance talents from all over the world.

The Genée competition, with its 78-year history, is the flagship annual competition of the RAD, the largest dance education and training organisation in the world. As such, the prestige of the competition alone will help encourage dancers to further enhance their knowledge and technique.

"Any competition of international scale always manages to draw media attention and this helps to reinforce the visibility of the art form," shares Goh. "Having the event here in Singapore will serve to inspire greater spurts of growth and interest, and will definitely bode well for the development of ballet in our local scene," Goh adds.

"The Genée is indeed a valuable platform for young dancers to hone their skills and to benchmark themselves against international standards," concurs Elaine Ng, director of the Performing Arts Development Division of the NAC. "The competition will not only provide recognition, but much needed exposure to young talents hoping to succeed as professional dancers. International competitions such as the Genée offer opportunities for young dancers to be talent-spotted by dance schools and companies, which may then propel them to the next stage of their career," says Ng.

And NAC is definitely keen to increase young dancers' chances at such opportunities through various financial assistance schemes such as bursaries, grants and scholarships towards the pursuit of long-term training, as well as initiatives that offer them the prospect of gaining more local and international performance ex-

perience. For example, the NAC recently partnered with SDT to start a group called the Youth Dancers. Here, young dancers are given the opportunity to train with the artistic personnel of SDT and gain professional guidance from them.

BUSINESS OF BALLET

According to Ng, Singapore has seen a growth in festivals and platforms that feature dance in their programmes such as the Esplanade Dances Festival and the Singapore Arts Festival in recent years. Audienceship for dance has also grown by about 30 per cent between 2003 and 2007; and participation in dance in schools and at the community level has also increased. "These are all good signs that the profile of dance in Singapore is growing and that the receptivity to and appreciation of dance has increased," she adds.

Luke Rittner, chief executive of RAD, concurs. "The Academy has an extremely active, enthusiastic and loyal member base in Singapore, so we know that there is a keen interest in the teaching and learning of ballet." Rittner says it is this strong interest that has led RAD to decide holding the Genée competition in the island-state. "As a rule of thumb, we choose countries in which we have a strong membership base; in which there is a dynamic dance community and vibrant cultural offering." In his books, Singapore more than meets these criteria.

GENÉE IN A BOTTLE

Since the beginning of this century, the Genée International Ballet Competition has been staged outside the UK. The

first venue chosen was the Sydney Opera House in 2002, then it travelled to Athens (2004), Hong Kong (2006), Canada (2008) and now Singapore.

A rigorous five-day routine of classes and coaching sessions await participants. RAD's artistic director Lynn Wallis and internationally acclaimed choreographer Christopher Hampson will be on hand to 'grill' these contest hopefuls. Renowned New Zealand choreographer Adrian Burnett has also been commissioned to create two exclusive variations for the candidates to work on during the competition.

Short-listed finalists will perform one of the commissioned variations, as well as 19th-century and 20th-century classical repertoire variations. They will be judged on technique, musicality and performance. An additional Audience Award will also allow the audience to vote for their preferred performer. 🗳️

The semi-finals on September 9-10 and the finals on September 12 will be held at the University Cultural Centre. Tickets are available at [SISTIC, www.sistic.com.sg](http://SISTIC.com.sg).

Ambassador For Arts

The license for performing one of the three dances of Singapore Dance Theatre's (SDT) triple bill in this upcoming Season of Brilliance was acquired by a new group of people who are equally passionate about the arts as the performers themselves.

The SDT Ambassador's Circle is made up of like-minded people who want to enhance their theatre-going experience by becoming personally involved in production, such as the acquisition of new works like *Concerto Barocco*, a classic by legendary contemporary choreographer George Balanchine, for the Season of Brilliance.

Contributions made by members of the Ambassador's Circle (minimum of S\$500) will go into the cost of staging a new ballet. The costs, which include royalties and costume creation, can range from S\$50,000 to S\$100,000. All cash donations to SDT will be matched through a special scheme administered by the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts. This will go a long way to help showcase the talents of SDT and increase their touring opportunities.

Initiated by SDT's artistic director Janek Schergen, the Ambassador's Circle currently

counts Lee Kwok Cheong, CEO of Singapore Institute of Management; Tan Bee Kim, director of Wheelock Properties Singapore Ltd; and Miranda Bien-Lim Walsh, director of CDM Operations for Biospher Capital Pte Ltd as its founding members. However, anyone with a passion for the arts is strongly encouraged to join.

Besides the chance to help acquire new works, members of the Ambassador's Circle will also get an in-studio experience by viewing the new work up-close prior to the opening night performance.

