

United by dance in Singapore

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What does a Frenchman, a Thai-Italian, a Japanese and a Singaporean have in common? Sounds like the start of a riddle! Actually, this situation is quite common in this wonderful melting pot called Singapore where we are blessed with friends from all backgrounds, nationalities and cultures.

The answer to this riddle is that they are all successful professional male ballet dancers with Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT) :

This month we had the privilege to interview 4 male dancers. Each interview was so inspiring that it is a pity that I had to cut them down to a few lines. However, as fellow expats in Singapore, I am sure you will enjoy the stories behind how these talented dreamers came to be united in Singapore through their passion for dance.

Etienne Ferrère (France)

Etienne started ballet at the tender age of 5. His father is a medical doctor but immediately understood Etienne's passion for dance and supported him from the beginning. He took the entrance exam of the renowned Ballet School of the Opera National de Paris at the age of 10. Paris Opera is the world's oldest national ballet company and competition is intense to enter the school and be groomed for a career with Paris Opera. It is said 90% of applicants will be unsuccessful and 20% of students may have to leave each year. Etienne loved the school and successfully graduated after 6 years. His life was 100% centred around ballet, an ideal life for anyone who loves ballet and a complete life between the school and dormitory where he shared his passion for ballet with friends. However, as all dancers know, no matter how talented you are, finding a permanent position after graduation involves a large dose of luck and good timing. After waiting for his chance at Paris Opera, Etienne traveled to Singapore for a charity event held by the French Embassy. He auditioned with SDT and was offered a position. The road was so smooth compared to his challenging days in France – he jumped at the chance. Etienne describes his first impression when he landed in Singapore "Totally liberating. It was like a turning a new page of my life". Singapore is now part of his life "I love Singapore and the new challenges I have here. If someone tells me I could change my life, I don't think I would change anything!"

Shan Del Vacchio (Thailand/Italy)

Unlike Etienne who grew up in France where ballet has deep roots in culture, Shan trained to be a dancer in Thailand where there is no professional ballet company. His father is Italian and his mother is Thai. He started at the age of 8 as his father encouraged him saying that ballet is the foundation of all dance. Shan was the only boy in his ballet school in Chang Mai but he still enjoyed dancing very much. When I asked him what was his biggest challenge, after a little pause Shan answered "money". Shan had to pay for lessons and without a professional company in Thailand, career opportunities are limited. At the age of 19, he came to Singapore looking to make a career in dance in a teaching position and ended up taking an audition at SDT. He has been with SDT for the last 7 years and enjoys his life as a dancer in Singapore. He has no firm plans but one day he may go back to Thailand to bring professional ballet to Thailand.



As an amateur dancer aged 16



As a professional dancer



Relaxed with friends



At age 5 in a costume handmade by his mum



Relaxed with his dogs



Romeo (Romeo & Juliet, 2020 SDT)

Timothy Ng (Singapore)

Timothy started ballet at the age of 7 in Singapore. He and his brother were encouraged by his father who was a dance teacher, which was very unusual in those days in Singapore. As we all know, the Singapore education system is very competitive. Timothy told us his biggest challenge was committing to ballet despite competing demands on his time from education and national service. As a result, Timothy started his professional career in ballet relatively late. After NS, he became a scholar at SDT at the age of 21 and was accepted by a university in Singapore at the same time. He took his father's advice to obtain a degree first and studied engineering, eventually graduated with First Class Honours. By graduation, his mind was firmly set on a career in ballet and was fortunate to be offered a position at SDT when he was 25. He has walked a very different path from Etienne and Shan because of Singapore's education system. His long term dream is to contribute to the development of the Singapore art scene but for now he is focusing on his career as a dancer.



During ballet lesson age 9



◀ Flower arrangement is one of his hobbies



Professional photo shoot

Satoru Agetsuma (Japan)

Satoru first wanted to become an actor when he saw the Lion King at the age of 3. His mother, who was a teacher at secondary school, secretly started looking for a ballet school suitable for him and waited for him to say "I want to learn ballet". When he was 9, he told his mother of his wish to learn ballet and quickly started learning as she had prepared well in advance. Apparently his mother wanted him to make the decision on his own and used every opportunity to teach him valuable lessons. For example, whenever he was unsure of his commitment to ballet, a typical teenager's doubt, she reminded him of the early days when he decided on his own that he wanted study ballet with no one pushing him to do so. During school days, he experienced some conflict with classmates who prioritized study and himself whose passion was ballet. This made it even clearer what was really important in his life and the answer was ballet. He also learnt that if you do what you like, people will like you the way you are. He furthered his training in Australia and joined SDT in 2017. Satoru wants to explore many things in the future including other types of dance and choreography.

I learnt a lot from these interviews. These 4 dancers came from very diverse backgrounds but they share many things in common. Firstly they had supportive parents. Even though they were very young, their parents listened to their dreams and supported them. They were also blessed with teachers at early days who saw their talent and guided them to the next level. When asked whether they were teased about ballet, they said yes but they did not care about it very much. It is probably because they were following their passion and their parents set an ideal learning environment for them.

Secondly, when I asked them what they would be doing in 10 years time, none of them had a clear answer, which I found rather interesting as we all know that a dancer's career is not very long. Many of us set our goals in advance but these dancers are already doing what they love, and so are not focusing on long term plans. They do not see it as a journey. They are already there. In these days of pandemic, we tend to worry about the future but their interviews reminded me of the importance of living in the present.

There is no question that Singapore's diversity brought these individuals together. Singapore and ballet have the ability to pull people together. Different nationalities and different upbringings. From France where Etienne studied intensively from the age of 10, to Thailand where Shan found little infrastructure to support ballet, to Singapore where Timothy was encouraged to build a safety net first, to Japan where Satoru just followed his passion. They are now all here together at this point of time, each on their own wonderful journey.

Photos: Singapore Dance Theatre, Etienne Ferrere, Shan Del Vacchio, Timothy Ng, Satoru Agetsuma, Jason Carter



All male dancers of SDT. From SDT's Instagram #boys dance too (2019)



Don Quixote at age 11



Favourite coffee time



Prince Siegfried (Swan Lake 2019 SDT)



Peter & Blue School Holiday. A perfect ballet for the young audience.



JCC's Kizuna interview with Chihiro

Yasuko Yeung
Ambassadors Council of Singapore Dance Theatre
I have seen their dance so many times yet it was the first time that we sat down and talked. Each interview was inspiring and reminded me of the importance of meeting people and sharing their passions.