

A Ballet Dancer's Career

Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT) had to close its studios from April to July forcing our dancers to train at home. Although it could be the biggest challenge they have had to face, they remained positive and wasted no time at home, keeping in shape and in touch with the ballet community. Through Instagram I saw many of the dancers practice in their limited space at home, and even giving lessons. Others connected with fellow dancers world wide through SNS and collaborated with them. Such a positive attitude was inspiring and refreshing in the midst of such uncertainty. These are the passionate individuals who made their dreams come true and love what they do as professionals. Would you like to know what a dancer's career is really like? This month's column is based upon a talk given by our Artistic Director, Janek, during the monthly One @the Ballet at SDT (The Arc of a Dancer's Career).



Behind the curtain ~ Kana Minegishi as Odette
(Swan Lake SDT 2019)

Professional dancers can come from various paths and backgrounds and eventually meet at a junction called an audition. Many of them start from once-a-week lessons as a child, moving onto intermediate, advanced and with luck, all the way to professional level. Interestingly enough, most successful dancers have gone through a point in their career when they were told they would not make it to become a professional dancer. Janek explains that while this could be discouraging it usually separates the candidates who "want to be a dancer" from the ones who "have to become a dancer". George Balanchine, the most celebrated choreographer of the last century and



Behind the scenes during Masterpiece in Motion
(FIVE by Choo San Goh 2019)

Yasuko Yeung

the co-founder of the New York City Ballet said "I don't want dancers who want to dance. I want dancers who have to dance". And quite rightly and often, dancers who attain full professional status are the ones who had the determination to maintain the rigorous training while finding beauty in the details and the act of sustained study towards the end goal.

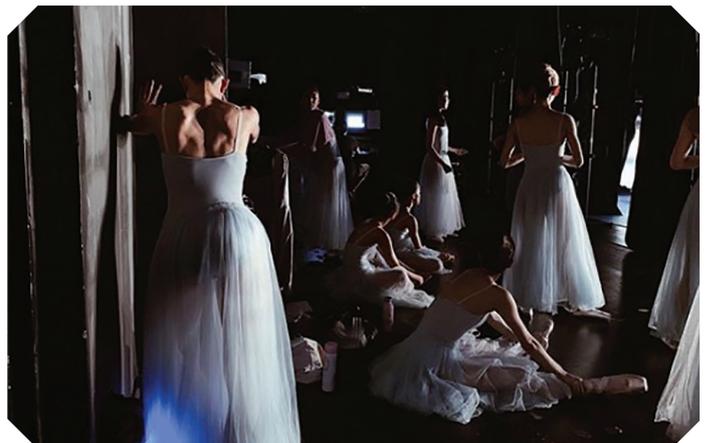
Our Artistic Director receives mails requesting auditions every day; that is how severe the competition is. At SDT, there are 39 full time dancers including 13 Japanese dancers. But what are their lives like?

These dancers at SDT are employed 52 weeks a year and receive all the usual benefits like other professionals in different industries (full salary, medical benefits, insurance, annual leave etc). The only difference in benefits may be the free supply of pointe shoes!



The show is complete! After "Sleeping Beauty" (2018)

Each day company class begins in the morning (for 1 ½ hours) followed by rehearsals that last till 17.30 from Monday to Friday, sometimes Saturday. A dancer often learns and rehearses multiple ballets at the same time, sometimes an intense rehearsal of a single ballet or sometimes rehearsals of 4 to 6 different ballets in the course of one day. One hour one can be dancing on pointe in a classical ballet and the next hour rolling on the floor in soft shoes in a contemporary dance work. SDT usually stages 6 seasons plus tours overseas each year. There are about 45 main stage performances each year as well as educational outreach performances, open rehearsals and showings. Rehearsals and performances are all encompassing but as Janek confirms, the rewards in artistic terms are extraordinary.



Behind the scenes during SDT Malaysia Tour
(Serenade, SDT 2019)



Fun photo shooting at Changi Beach
(Kana Minegishi, Sayaka Yamauchi, Reo Mizuno)

For a dancer, the ritual of taking class, rehearsing together intensely focusing on the unity of performance is an experience that cannot be replicated. There is a certain magic in getting ready for a performance, wearing a beautiful costume, hearing the music, dancing on stage what you have worked so hard to perfect in the studio. It is a very personal experience and is different for every individual dancer. Dancers are intelligent and sophisticated as a breed, as they are trained to be aristocrats in their professional lives. They develop a professional response towards each other and a sense of trust and respect in dealing with teachers, choreographers as well as with each other.

During the Singapore Circuit Breaker period, SDT took the initiative to hold an Instagram live interview every Monday. It was a wonderful way for SDT's supporters or even occasional theatregoers to get to know individual dancers who talked about everything from his/her

favourite cafes to his/her worst mishap on stage. It was revealed that a common misunderstanding about a dancer was that "Dancers don't eat very much". Also that "Dancers are not friendly". They dance so gracefully with such presence on stage they can be difficult to approach. But I dare say that this is not true. When you meet them in person, you will be very pleasantly surprised how really "nice" and down to earth they are. They are well balanced physically (of course) and emotionally. I was once told that when a dancing pair does a "lift", a male dancer has to have 100% responsibility for his partner and a female dancer has to give her partner 100% trust. One of the reasons for such friendliness and humility I often see in the SDT dancers may come from the trust they have with each other.

The length of a dancer's career depends on each individual. Their second careers can be diverse from a professional photographer, teacher, writer, actor, designer to a lawyer. And most of them are usually very successful in their second career thanks to their strong self-discipline, goal oriented determination, and ability to cooperate. Dancer bonds are strong and friendship often grows after they retire. Our ballet teacher, Ms. Megumi Sugita is one of them. Perhaps you can ask her about her happy days at SDT when you see her teaching at the Japanese Association ;-)

Yasuko Yeung
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Member of Japanese Association

Photos & Information: Singapore Dance Theatre (One @ the Ballet),
Nanase Tanaka (photos), Takeaki Miura (photos)

Our Instagram interview "Meet Me On Monday" has come back. Satoru gave his interview on 28th and we are also planning more interviews of Japanese dancers. Please check our Instagram page for the latest line-up.

<https://www.instagram.com/singaporedancetheatre/channel/>



Nanase signing brochures for the young dancers
(Romeo and Juliet, SDT 2020)



Listening carefully to SDT Artistic Director's final comments
(Romeo and Juliet, SDT 2020)



A beautiful lift (Bitter Sweet, SDT 2019)