

PublicationDate: 21-08-2001
PAGE: 01
Pipithsuksunt,
ballet

PUBLICATION: BANGKOK POST
KEYWORD: Nutnaree

HEADLINE: A chance to dance

SUBHEADLINE: Nutnaree Pipithsuksunt walked away with a gold medal in a ballet competition recently, setting several records in the process

BYLINE: Story by

BYLINE: WANPHEN SRESHTHAPUTRA

BYLINE: Picture by

BYLINE: SOMKID CHAIJITVANIT

When a doctor offers advice, one feels compelled to abide by it, even though the outcome may not be what was expected. And what Chadatip Pipithsuksunt didn't expect when she took her daughter Nutnaree to the doctor some nine years ago to inquire as to which sort of exercise would be good for stimulating the girl's growth, was that her daughter would eventually turn into a fervent Western classical ballet addict, sparing no effort, practising every single day except Sunday _ sometimes to the displeasure of her mum, who wouldn't have minded an extra hour of sleep at the crack of dawn on rainy Saturday mornings.

No doubt ballet was the right prescription for Nutnaree. After some nine years of high doses of jet, {AAC} grand jet, {AAC} fouett, {AAC} c{AAC}happ, {AAC} arabesque, entrechat and so on, the ``smaller than usual'' girl has turned into an attractive, rangy specimen of 167cm in height.

Now 15, Nutnaree, or Ommi, is the pride of an entire nation: She's the first Thai student to have earned a three-year scholarship to the prestigious London Royal Ballet School. In addition, she is the youngest dancer ever to have won a gold medal at the tough Royal Academy of Dance's (RAD) Adeline Genee Awards 2001, held this past April.

``I was hoping that I would have the chance to win a medal, bronze or silver,'' said Ommi, who is in Bangkok for her summer holidays. ``But I didn't even dream about a gold medal ... After they announced my number as

the gold medal winner, I was really shocked, just as my mum was. It was the greatest event of my whole life.'

The memories of that day _ the culmination of a whole week's worth of competition among 31 candidates, shortlisted to nine finalists, at the Royal Academy of Dance in London _ remain vivid in the mind of Ommi's mother as well.

``The night prior to the finals, just before falling asleep, Ommi asked me if I thought there would be a gold medallist this year _ there were none the previous year. `There will surely be one,' I told her. `Do you think all the finalists have an equal chance to win it?' she asked. I said I thought so. Actually I was afraid she would be considered too young to receive first prize,' Chadatip said.

``When Ommi went to register for the competition, we realised that most of the other students had already won prestigious titles such as the Prix de Lausanne, the Young British of the Year award, and so on _ I told myself we were not really in the running.

``Although Ommi had never won any medal before, she had performed a lot. She had no fear of the stage, that's for sure. Being very young, she was very natural, sincere and without pretension. Her style was very pure, while more experienced dancers tend to put on a show, perhaps adding too much drama to their performance,' Chadatip said.

``I could see she was enjoying her performance and somehow dancing for herself. At the end of her recital, she was hailed with so much applause _ I had never heard that. During the intermission, I could hear Ommi's number on many people's lips.'

Indeed ``No. 5'' would ultimately win the gold medal, concluding ``a vintage year with exceptional candidates'', as the judges put it.

RAD's ballet principal Mary Goodhew, writing to Ommi's instructors in Bangkok at the Varaporn Kanchana Ballet School, said: ``To win the gold medal at the RAD's Adeline Genée competition at her young age is fantastic. You must be extremely pleased. We certainly are bursting with pride at her achievements and credit you with your training.'

Ommi's father, who works in the automotive industry, said: ``This great event did not just happen in England _ somehow it's as if it happened in Thailand too.''

There has certainly been much enthusiasm here, particularly among Thanpuying Varaporn Pramoj, the head mistress at Ommi's former ballet school and herself a Royal Ballet School graduate_ and Ommi's two ballet teachers, Kanchana Jalavicharana and William Morgan.

Ommi readily credits her former dance school for her impeccable training from the ages of six to 15, whereas her instructors struggle for superlatives when speaking about the young ballerina.

``It showed right from the beginning that she would be a very talented dancer. Ommi always graduated with honours _not less_ at every level of her ballet training,' ' Thanpuying Varaporn said.

``She is very intelligent, dedicated and hard-working. She is also quite mature for her age. Ommi created a surprise when she grabbed the gold medal, usually won by contestants aged between 16 and 17. Her mother deserves the gold medal as well; she has always been supporting her. This can make a big difference _ many students have talent but do not always benefit from their parents' support and availability.''

Ommi methodically divided her time between Bangkok's traffic jams _ considering the family lived in the Phutthamonthon area, there was a lot of traffic to contend with _ and Mater Dei, where she went to school, as well as the ballet class she attended in the evening.

``Ommi would always come home at about 9:15pm. After school, she would go to her ballet class until about 8pm, and then eat her dinner in the car. In the morning, she would wake at 5:15am to leave the house at 6:15am to be in time for school,' ' her mother explained, noting that a driver would take over from her for the early morning ride.

``She maintained this from Prathom 5 to Mathayom 3. I never forced her _ she herself asked for it.''

Throughout this marathon-style life, the young student managed to maintain

an outstanding academic record, with a GPA average of 3.58 at the Mathayom level. She also pursued music, playing the piano and reaching grade 6.

``At times, when she was still in P2, I would tell her come on, let's go, instead of loafing around at home _ so that she would learn how to be responsible _ but soon it was Ommi who was dragging me,'' Chadatip said.

A solo examination for the Royal Academy of Dance syllabus was organised for the first time ever in Thailand last November _only four Thais have passed this exam abroad _ and Nutnaree was the only one who passed last year.

One of the judges, Deborah Wayne, quickly sensed Ommi's potential. She advised her to apply for a scholarship at the prestigious Royal Ballet School, as well as for the Adeline Genee Award competition.

Although the Thai ballerina had been granted another scholarship to attend an Australian ballet school, she decided to go for the British experience.

It was the right decision. She was admitted without delay and granted a three-year full scholarship, and beginning in September, will study at the professional level.

``Only exceptional foreigners are granted a scholarship to the British school,'' Thanpuying Varaporn said, noting that at present a Japanese ballerina was also enrolled in the upper level.

Ommi's present class counts only 22 students: 10 boys and 12 girls.

``Every day, I wake up at 7am to start school at 8:30am. I have classes (to graduate in O level) then dance at 11am, class again at 2pm and some rehearsals again late in the afternoon.

``I am still not completely settled in, especially because English is not my native language. But in terms of dancing, I feel up to it,'' Ommi said, noting that her uncle runs a Thai restaurant in London.

``It is really a dream come true. Dancing is what I like most _ it is so beautiful. It helps me expand my memory, concentration and coordination skills.''

After she finishes her three years there, Ommi plans to secure herself a

position in a ballet company _ the Royal Ballet, if possible _ as she makes her way up the ladder to coveted posts such as soloist, corps de ballet, principal ...

But in the meantime, one should be able to catch a glimpse of Omni's magical dancing skills when she lights up the stage at Mater Dei's Christmas performance in December in the role of Swan Lake's (Act II) black swan.

DaBallet today

The status of ballet in Thailand has never been better, and yet the economic crisis has taken a toll. Here's what those in the field say:

Thanpuying Varaporn Pramoj, headmistress of Varaporn Kanchana Ballet School, one of Bangkok's oldest ballet schools:

``Ballet schools in Thailand are teaching according to the (British) Royal Academy of Dance syllabus. The standard of teaching in general has greatly improved, but we deplore the lack of backing by the government.

``In 1989, we joined hands to form the Bangkok Ballet Theatre Association, trying to foster the most talented students in town. We held successful co-productions with Le Jeune Ballet de France, for example.

``But in the wake of the Asian financial crisis, we have endured severe financial trouble. Sponsors were getting very hard to find. We had to turn to organising performances at schools such as Mater Dei.

``The 150 or so professional ballet dancers who graduate each year all over the country have a rough time trying to make ends meet. They mostly live on short-term contracts for commercial work.

``It's a shame that ballet is always considered a hobby, a side-line job. There are no jobs on offer, apart from teaching. Compared to a place like Hong Kong, for example, where some 5,000 students a year major in ballet, we are still in the infancy stages.''

Temduen Kesakomol, teacher at the Dramatic Arts College

``Thai people are talented but they rarely have opportunities to perform. We are lacking financial support to come up with quality productions.

``Graduating in this field, students can become teachers. The teaching career seems to be a good compromise as it gives them the opportunity to work as artists as well. Otherwise, there aren't any ballet companies to employ them, although they can get by on freelance work _ our entertainment industry requires dancers anyway.

``Ballet performances are very much appreciated and in demand. Tickets for such shows are always sold out. Thai schools now are really up to the standard.

``But it seems unfair that, as a governmental institution, we have to ask our students to pay for their performance costumes and shoes out of their own pockets _ it's a problem we're trying to sort out. Financial difficulties have become worse since the economic crisis. Many of our projects have had to be frozen.''

Sirithorn Srichalakom (Mum), dance teacher, choreographer, Dance Department of the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University:

``The standard of ballet schools is going up. At present it is even pretty good _ there is nothing to say about it.

``There is a kind of collective emulation between students, who have a chance to compare themselves with others through the different performances held on the Bangkok scene. Yet, something has to be done about this critical step leading to professional careers. Advanced students tend to drop dancing because they feel that there aren't many opportunities to do real ballet in the long-term, or because they have never taken it very seriously, or else they go abroad and God knows when we will see them coming back.

``If only there could be at least one company employing ballet dancers, performing one show a year ...

``Besides, the audience tends to be misinformed about the art form, seeing mostly small kids in pink tutus surrounded by very young teachers. One also tends to confuse ballet with gymnastics.

``Thai people rarely realise that our country has adequate facilities to turn talented ballerinas into real professionals.

``Apart from the problem brought about by the absence of a professional

dance company _ at the most, students can only be part-time ballet dancers _ we lack scholarships and government support. Not to mention the Thai system of schooling, which can prevent students from really pursuing a regular hobby. They rarely have enough time to spend on all the after-school activities as it is.

``It's sad that advanced ballet dancers, including myself, tend to turn toward contemporary dance, which offers more opportunities, while our real skills go to waste.

``Perhaps it is really seen as a Western art form and consequently not well supported here.''