

Children of the Craft



By Kristal Spence
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This year, Mystic Ballet celebrates its 10th anniversary of establishment within the Dance Palace, along with its finished renovations and additions to its staff.

"I designed the whole building for specifically this," Goran Subotic said as he walked through the three different rooms inside the palace where ballet practices take place. Subotic is the founder and managing director of the Dance Palace in Mystic, and explained that the Dance Palace opened in 1992 for anyone to join. The Mystic Ballet, begun in 1997, is a company within the building that students must audition for to receive a scholarship to continue their efforts in dancing.

The lighting in the room bounced off the mirrored walls as Subotic looked around with a sense of accomplishment. He hopped on the floors, which he said are specially designed with springs to absorb landings and jumps.

Among the children's program, apprentices, trainees, and pre-professional program, the palace is filled with approximately 300 to 350 students throughout the week.

"I was spoiled," Subotic reminisced, thinking back to when the palace opened. "I was very spoiled in the way of having a very good friend of mine, Alla Osipenko...one of the best dancers in the world...she's unbelievable. She was here and she helped me in the beginning."

He said Osipenko was at the school for almost two years training the staff on how to build the establishment and begin the school. Subotic had many goals when first starting the program and, during the first five years, one of his accomplishments has been to instill a sense of pride within young students.

"When I first came here, I talked to young children here that were in ballet," Subotic said. "I would ask them, 'Do you dance?' and they would say yes and put their head down. I was shocked because this is a privilege. This is a part of a culture...Classical music and classical dancing has been preserved for hundreds and hundreds of years and the kids weren't proud of it."

Due to their sold-out performances, Subotic said participants in the ballet school have now gained exposure and self-esteem, from being asked for autographs or given free drinks at restaurants.

"Do you know how much pride that gives them?" he asked. "Now if you ask them who they are, they say, 'I am a dancer. I am happy to be a classically trained ballet dancer.'"

For the last five years, Subotic has focused on educating the children on the craft, art, and history of ballet. To help the process, he would suggest his students attend different ballet performances.

"It's very hard to teach children," he said. "The children are there for an hour and a half and watch a performance without speech. It only has body expressions, emotions, and things like that...so for a 5-year-old child, to sit down in a theater for an hour and a half, to watch a show and then clap, not because someone else told her to clap but because she's excited by the performance, this is an enormous achievement...and this is why we're teaching."

Johnna Taylor of Mystic said her 17-

year-old daughter Brianne started dancing when she was 3 years old and became a part of the ballet palace a couple years after it had opened.

"At some point, the kids that stick with it develop a passion for it and I think that my daughter developed a real passion for dancing," Taylor said. "She's the one that is completely and absolutely dedicated."

Taylor believes that her daughter, now a senior and finishing her last year with the ballet school, will bring to college her experiences and honed skills of dancing.

"I think it makes them very dedicated individuals," Taylor added, referring to the ballet lessons. "Just like any athlete, you can't be really good unless you're really dedicated."

Though she could never imagine dancing in front of large groups like her daughter does, Taylor believes the experience is positive and gives many students inner confidence.

Karen Cavaliere of Stonington said her 14-year-old daughter Catey started dancing when she was around 6 and signed up for ballet lessons at the palace. She said the ballet program has come a long way in the last 10 years and the experience has affected her daughter.

"I think it's great for her self-esteem," she said. "It's very positive. It's challenging but it's never too harsh. It's just a nice balance and she forgoes other activities to go to ballet class. She has classes really just about every day and that's her sport. She's happy, so we're happy...All the teachers that they've had, you can just tell that they love ballet. They are patient, they're kind."

Subotic admitted that his selection for instructors is a very picky process and his new additions to the palace had taken him a couple years to find. He said his constant search was for people who possessed an incredible amount of skill who would be willing and able to share that skill with others.

"In two years, I went through probably 50 people that I auditioned," he said. "I would ask a lot of questions...Do they have an education? Would they like to stay in this type of environment? Many people gravitate toward big cities."

After much consideration and searching, Subotic found choreographer and assistant artistic director Sergei Vanaev of Germany, guest master teacher Alexander Brady of New York, and ballet mistress Vanessa Duarte da Silva of Brazil.

"I've been here since the beginning of September," Duarte da Silva said, "so I'm still getting settled some and getting used to everything. This is my first time in America at all so everything's new and exciting and I really like everything around here." She has been a professional dancer for eight years, a choreographer in Germany for seven years, and said working with children has been very rewarding.

"I've worked many places teaching and choreographing and all, and it's so good when you find a place where everyone takes it so seriously," she explained. "All the kids, they're so concentrated and I think it's the discipline that [Subotic] has been teaching for the last 10 years. They are all very strong kids and very curious...they learn very fast and I'm really enjoying it."

Finally establishing new staff, Subotic said, will help the palace transition toward its next step, a part of his long-term planning.

"Now we are working on classical performances for adults to show a different aspect of ballet but also to be prepared for international and national touring," he said. "My next goal is to create very reputable, professional performing in states and outside the states...It has been 10 years of very hard work, just to achieve where we are at this point."

For more information about the Mystic Ballet, call 860-536-3671.



Photos submitted

Dancing at Dance Palace enhances self-esteem, garners praise



After 10 years, the Mystic Ballet's staff instructs approximately 300 students a week at the Dance Palace.