

# SURVIVORS

Despite the conflict in Syria, dance teachers and students cross its ravaged capital every day. **Mona Mahmood** hears their stories.

For Diana Dirweesh, only one thing can make her grab her three-month-old baby girl from her home in Damascus' residential Mezza district every morning and run across the streets of Syria's war-torn capital. She is going towards the ballet school in the Dummer Cultural Complex in the suburbs of Damascus to meet with her devoted ballet students, demonstrating her longstanding love for ballet and her wilful defiance of the continuing conflict in Syria.

'It takes me and my baby more than an hour to get to the ballet school,' says Dirweesh, who along with the headmistress, Nagham Mua'alla, is its only teacher. 'It is really too far from where I live – however, all my weariness fades away when I see my students learning agilely, moving exquisitely and dancing with joy.'

For over a decade, the school was part of the Academy for Theatre Arts in al-Amaween Square, in the heart of Damascus. Three years ago, it was moved out to the Dummer Cultural Complex in a bid to give it a distinctive identity as a separate school with over 177 ballet students.

'We did our best this year to accept as many students as we could, considering the gruesome situation of the Syrian people and the limited size of the new place. The aim was to give a space of hope to children to breathe amid the war,' says Mua'alla who was appointed to lead the school in 2015 after the previous head left for Germany. The new school offers two rehearsal studios, a third for music education and another for management, but even so, many students walked away as a single trip to the school might take two hours.

'The ballet school in Damascus was first founded 16 years ago to allow kids aged 7–12 to pursue excellence in dance, music, choreography and rhythm, as well as to study world arts,' says Mohammed Zagloul, head of the Higher Academy of Music and supervisor of the ballet school. He attributes the modest number of male students to the Arabic culture which regards ballet as a feminine art. 'The oriental perspective implies that dance is girly – that is why we have 166 girls this year but only 11 boys.'

Zein Suleitain, 15, was inspired by renowned Russian ballet shows run on local tv stations and by the desire to keep fit, and first came to the school five years ago with his younger sister. 'At first, my mates had great disdain for me. They told me that ballet was something disgraceful to make me hate it. Now, people



Class in the ballet school at the Dummer Cultural Complex  
Photo: Mona Mahmood

begin to view ballet as a global art that could help to build children's self-esteem. I encouraged two kids in my neighbourhood to join this year.'

It seems almost absurd that there is still a thriving ballet school in Damascus, given the growing intensity of the war in Syria. Mua'alla believes that the outside world is barely aware that such a school exists. 'The reason for the school surviving in Damascus is the Syrian people's fondness for this art, which prompts them to come to school regardless of security and transport troubles. I always tell my students: if you did not love ballet, you would not be here.'

Lana Alridha, 13, comes to rehearsal twice a week, dreaming of becoming a ballerina. 'I finish my lessons at 2 pm, go home for lunch, then head to ballet school for three hours. I go twice a week – it should be three days, but there is a studio that needs to be renovated. I'm in the adult group with another eight girls but not a single boy – most of the boys pulled out. It takes my father around an hour to bring me here, but I feel it is worth it. Ballet is an essential part of my life, it grants me comfort and happiness.'

As the security situation worsened in Syria, many foreign experts and Syrian professionals fled the country in fear. 'There used to be three Russian trainers and six



An energy of the heart... students at the school with (right) Diana Dirweesh's baby daughter  
Photos: Mona Mahmood



# 'OUR LOVE OF BALLET HELPS US ENDURE ANYTHING AND SURVIVE'

– Nagham Mua'alla

Syrian teachers running the ballet school before 2011,' says Zagloul. 'They all departed after war broke out in Syria.' Nonetheless, Zagloul plans to open new branches of the school in other Syrian provinces. 'Our plan is to rely on new graduates to keep the school going.'

Amazingly, the school has never stopped because of the security situation but only due to snow and inclement weather in winter. It is open every day from 3 to 6 pm, except on Saturday when it starts at 10am. 'I have six groups with 12 to 20 students in each, despite the security events in Syria,' says Dirweesh, a graduate of the Moscow Institute of Arts who also runs a private ballet class. 'Kids love dancing and like to know more about it. When I show them ballet recordings in class, they keep asking questions.'

Before the war, thousands of kids would apply to the school, and only a few were admitted. Now, a few hundred come to auditions in October and none is refused unless the child has serious problems with their feet. 'We accept kids from age 7 to 10,' Mua'alla explains. 'Sometimes

we make an exception and accept a six year old if their comprehension is good and they are fit. We also give a chance to overweight kids on condition that they get slim by the following year.' Mua'alla still remembers her own audition. 'I was eight year old, obsessed with ballet. I was madly happy to pass the audition, then to graduate from the Academy for Theatre Arts in 2011.'

'We rely entirely on recordings,' says Dirweesh. 'Mua'alla teaches French classical ballet, I teach Russian Classic dance, and there is a solfege (music education) lesson for the first year students – but no musician to accompany rehearsals. It is up to the teacher to decide the type of the lesson in accordance to the students' needs, but we always start with things like *The Nutcracker*. The kids also watch videos of *Cinderella* and *Swan Lake*, and the teachers try to educate them on what they can get out of these productions. Lessons have been reduced to two days a week, which undoubtedly affects the standard, but I ask my students to rehearse at home, to sleep and dream of dance.'



In its third year, the school's new location has proved unsuitable: there are problems with the height of the roof and with the floor. 'We try to boost the physical and technical abilities of the students,' Mua'alla confirms regretfully, 'but they are forbidden to perform high and wide jumps, or to hold a ballerina for fear that the girl's head would hit the ceiling.'

'The school only accepts kids under 18 because of the height problem,' says Suleitain as he describes the weekly pattern. 'I take classes twice a week. First I warm up, then practice at the barre to enhance flexibility and memorise new moves for the annual show. Even though we might hear sounds of explosions, we never stop. Power cuts affect the heat and lighting.' Heating is a fundamental problem for the school, affected by the continuous power cuts in the capital. 'The school needs more care if it is to develop,' says Mua'alla. 'It is like a flower – if you do not water it, eventually it will die. There is a shortage in power, fuel and heating. If we have no fuel in the generator we do not dance. It is difficult to practice in cold weather with a leaking roof and kids wearing light clothes with a bare back. We give this place an energy of our heart.'

The school used to provide students with their ballet wear, but that has become almost impossible with lack of contacts with any foreign companies or delivery by DHL or Fedex. There was previously an open route to Beirut, but the shops that imported ballet wear have now closed as the dollar rate keeps changing. Families have turned to local tailors to design garments for their children. 'I go

so often with my mother to Russia to buy my ballet wear and pointe shoes,' says Alridha, 'though they cost lots of money. I did not forget about my fellow students, and brought them five outfits.' The school managed to buy a large quantity of pointe shoes at a discount this year. 'We get them from Lebanon,' Mua'alla says proudly. 'Each pair usually costs 27,000 Syrian Pound (£46), which is more than my salary. Now, it is 16,000 SP'

When the school was founded it was free to students; two years ago, an annual charge of 3000 SP (£5) was imposed. 'It is like the cost of a pair of trousers in Syria now, it did not affect the number of the students at all,' says Dirweesh. She gets 12,000 SP (£20) a month for teaching in the school, but spends more than half of that amount on transport.

As head, Mua'alla gets 19,000 SP a month for working seven days a week. 'I believe that if any of the staff went, the school would go too – and so would the future of ballet. Our love of ballet helps us endure anything and survive all these events. Dancing ballet is like breathing oxygen, I'm nothing without it.'

Even if there is not any scenery or enough costumes, the school continues to stage an annual show. 'We are training for the annual show and discussing ideas most of the time. The teacher gives us segments of ballets like *The Nutcracker*,' says Alridha. 'If we get better, she promised to teach us a few parts of *Swan Lake* – my favourite.'