

Dance master finds new home for his art

By Lisa Blmon
staff writer

When Jacob Lascu emigrated to Detroit 13 years ago, he thought he had left his well-seasoned career behind in Bucharest, the capitol of Romania.

A renowned master, choreographer and artistic director of classical ballet, Lascu never dreamed he might also make a name for himself in the West.

Lascu's brother-in-law, a State of Michigan social worker, tried for three years to bring his sister, a classical ballerina, and her husband, Lascu, to his home city.

When he finally succeeded through the efforts of former U.S. Sen. Robert Griffin, Lascu expected to spend his time in Detroit working as a tailor. His father had been a tailor in Transylvania where Lascu was born and Lascu was familiar enough with the trade to be able to find work.

"I came to give my son the opportunity of growing up here," Lascu said. His intention was not to further his career in ballet.

"Everyone was very happy. All three members of the family were bringing home a little bit of money."

While the small family was establishing itself in Detroit, Lascu's brother-in-law wrote a resume for Lascu, outlining his impressive career in Romania.

From the age of 15, Lascu studied classical ballet and character and folklore dance with such Romanian masters as Dumitrescu, Romanofski, and Danofski of the Romanian Opera in Bu-

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— Jacob Lascu
dance master

charest, and Vasile and Pavelci of the Romanian Theatre for Opera and Ballet of Timisoara, Romania.

Lascu noted that Westerners are more familiar with Russian classical arts and artists than other East European talent.

Lascu's brother-in-law mailed his resume to some 50 dance companies and schools within the metro-Detroit area. Of the three responses he received, Lascu decided to join the Harbinger Dance Company of Oakland Community College.

Lascu said he was free to leave work and pursue interviews at his leisure because the tailor he was working for was very nice to him. His brother-in-law would attend interviews with him and act as a translator. Lascu's English is still shaky.

Lascu eventually left his job with the tailor and began teaching classical ballet methods for the Harbinger Company.

At the first performance under his direction, recruiters from the then combined, University of Detroit-Mar-

grove College were astounded. They wanted to know more about the ballet master who had instigated such a significant change in the company in only one year.

After this recognition, Lascu was hired part time by the University of Detroit/Marygrove. The following year he was hired full time and presently, he is a tenured professor of dance.

He also teaches at his own school of ballet in Birmingham. (It was previously located in Southfield.)

THE IDEA for running his own ballet school stemmed from Lascu's highly acclaimed direction of the "Nutcracker Suite," a 10-year Christmas time tradition for the City of Detroit and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra.

Lascu explained that in order to produce classical performances like the "Nutcracker Suite" or "Swan Lake," well-trained children dancers are a necessity.

Before the Lascu School of Ballet opened, children from different schools throughout the city were recruited for large productions.

"It was very difficult to have a consistent style," Lascu said.

After last year's record 17 performances of the "Nutcracker Suite," Lascu acknowledged that it is the parents who make the greatest sacrifices, not the children. The parents are the ones that have to car pool and organize their children for so many days in a row.

"To be a good dancer, it takes eight years of study and that means every day," Lascu stressed.

Last year, 16 of Lascu's 100 students were accepted to exclusive summer ballet programs including American Ballet Theatre, the New York City Ballet and the San Francisco Ballet. This year, three of those 16 students were accepted for a second time.

At the Birmingham location, there is one large studio and one smaller one. Lascu has divided his students into six different class levels.

"It is ideal like it was in Romania to divide it into eight, but that was an impossibility here," he said.

There are less than 20 people per class as a rule. Isabelle Vilenky, a recent immigrant from Russia, plays piano for all class levels.

LASCU'S teaching philosophy is that

"both technique and feeling go together." These two traits are parallel and necessary in classical ballet. In the United States, there is a tendency to perfect technique and do something marvelous exclusively for applause, he said.

An affinity with music and movement is something Lascu has nurtured from a young age. He was the only member of his family involved in the arts. But, he knows he inherited a musical gift from his father. He remembers watching his father dance and sway to music at weddings.

Lascu was also trained as a classical musician. He knows how to work with conductors and how to read and arrange musical scores, both essential skills for a choreographer and director.

In just a few short and "happy" years, Lascu has changed the face of classical ballet in Detroit. Once an unknown Romanian defector, Lascu is now a well-known instructor. His school draws students from all over the country and the world. Many arrange to take classes with him when they are in town.

JUDITH Molina, ballet mistress of Detroit City Dance Company, and coordinator of Marygrove's Summer Arts Program, said "He's bringing culture to the city."

Because of Lascu's strong reputation for classical ballet and well-trained dancers, Detroit is now a city that big name dancers will visit to teach workshops and to appear with local companies or in solo presentations.

"Normally, people of this caliber are not available to small Midwestern colleges," she added. "If Michigan had a good classical ballet company, the talented people wouldn't run away from Detroit like they usually do."

In any case, the most respected and prestigious companies are offering both contracts and scholarships to Lascu's students.

"I don't have any big plans," Lascu said when asked about his future. As ballet master and resident choreographer for Dance Detroit, Flint Ballet Theatre and Marygrove College, Lascu has enough jobs to keep him busy.

"My dream is that Michigan one day might have a good professional classical ballet company."



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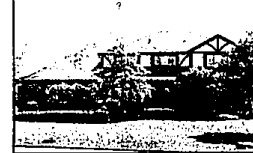
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