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Dennis Nahat won a dance scholarship to Julliard when he was a high school senior performing with the Detroit City Ballet Company.



The role of the Swan Queen is considered Cynthia Gregory's signature role. She is shown here in the Cleveland Ballet's production of that famous ballet.

Where ballet thrives

Detroit-born dancer builds major company

By Corinne Abatt
staff writer

EVERYTHING DENNIS NAHAT did as a youngster growing up in Detroit helped prepare him for his greatest achievement — founder and artistic director of the Cleveland Ballet Company.

Since he and Ian Horvath started it in 1976, the company has grown to be the fourth largest in the country.

The performances of the complete "Swan Lake" ballet, March 8-11 at Masonic Temple as part of the Michigan Opera Theatre season, mark the first time the Cleveland Ballet has performed here since its inaugural year performance at the Grosse Pointe War Memorial.

Nahat's memories of that remain forever vivid because he boldly borrowed the black velvet stage curtains from his alma mater, Grosse Pointe High School, to cover the yellow ones at the War Memorial.

HE IS a handsome, intense man, who still has the dancer's body tone. He punctuates his animated speech with facial expressions and body gestures.

He jumps from his chair to illustrate what he means as he speaks of the long fluid line of a dancer's body in "Swan Lake," or how to move on stage in full Elizabethan costume.

In his office at One Playhouse Square in downtown Cleveland, he was talking and eating a tuna sandwich (almost simultaneously). As he mentioned high school, he reached to the shelf behind for his high school and junior high albums.

"I never throw anything away," he said with an engaging smile of satisfaction as he produced a yellowed newspaper clipping from a 1963 Grosse Pointe newspaper.

It described how he, a high school senior, had been invited to audition for the Julliard School in New York City.

MARTHA HILL from Julliard saw him with the Detroit City Ballet Company in the Northwestern Regional Ballet Festival. He received a full scholarship in dance after at first intending to major in music and minor in dance. The fact that he did his own choreography for the audition, the drummer boy solo from "Graduation Ball," didn't hurt either.

"I was in everything," he said as he reminisced.

He wasn't exaggerating — first viola at Barbour Junior High and Eastern High schools of Detroit, drum major of the Grosse Pointe High band (he completed his last two years there), only boy in the

Future Business Leaders Club picture in the high school album, only boy in the typing class, piano accompanist for the Madrigal Singers, tenor in the chorus, accompanist of the Men's Glee Club of Detroit.

ON TOP of all that was dance. "I took the bus downtown everyday to the Ricardeau Dance Studios at Woodward and Warren. I started dancing at 9, in the Maccafee Building. I was teaching ballet at 11. I was doing it all.

"I used to clean the studios cause I couldn't afford to pay for the classes," he said, settling in his desk chair.

"So, every Saturday morning at 8 a.m. as a young teenager, I'd mop the floors, clean the mirrors and if I finished work, I'd start dancing in front of the mirrors and make up my own steps. I actually got better because I made up my own steps.

"Being in a studio alone is a discovery time. I could ask myself why I can't balance while doing this, why this won't work. I accompanied myself. I'd play a combination at the piano and get up and do the steps."

He took a breath. "Cleaning was a pleasure," he said quietly. "I brought all that here."

He remembered when a young student at the Cleveland Ballet School saw him cleaning the mirrors. She thought he was the janitor, until he showed up later as the artistic director.

HE GREW UP in the embrace of family strongly rooted in Middle Eastern culture, and background. His mother was born in Syria, his father in the United States. His parents had a grocery at Fort by the bridge and later at Jefferson and Conner.

"I learned a lot about business from them, how to meet people, how to sell. . . They were very understanding, free family."

He remembered seeing the local dance team of George Coury and his sister, Emella.

Theaters restored

Detroit is just moving into the stage of theater restoration which Cleveland completed several years ago.

Playhouse Square Center in downtown Cleveland is home to three restored theaters, the Ohio (1,035 seats), the State (3,098) and Palace (2,714) as well as the Cleveland Ballet Company and five other resident companies. The restoration of all three, built in the 1920s as vaudeville houses, plus a new stagehouse, took 6½ years and cost \$37.7 million. This is the larg-

"I thought they were the most beautiful people I had ever seen — they were image makers.

"I had two uncles who made violins, one gave me one. We always had a piano in the house, one (relative) played the oud (similar to a lute). At dinners and parties, there was always music and dancing."

As a student in New York, Nahat said he had the best of all teachers — Martha Graham, Jose Limon, Martha Hill, Anthony Tudor, Anna Sokolow . . . Later he became

principal dancer for the Joffrey Ballet and the American Ballet Theatre.

He has choreographed more than 60 ballets for major companies. On Broadway, he choreographed the Tony award-winning musical version of "Two Gentlemen of Verona," Tom Stoppard's "Jumpers" and "Good Time Charlie" with Joel Grey.

He choreographed sequences for the movie, "The Turning Point," and played himself in a cameo role.

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