

Appreciation

Lilian Attard

On July 20, I received the sad news that Lilian Attard had passed on to a better life. For over 38 years, she had instilled in countless students, local and foreign, the joy and discipline of dance. She is one of the pioneers that brought classical dance to Malta in 1937.

In honour of her memory, I would like to share a short extract from my thesis, *The Development of Classical Ballet in Malta 1930-2000*, offering an insight to her distinguished career as a teacher, mentor and friend. Her generosity, kindness and hard work have truly paid off.

Many untold memories have been forged and Lilian will live on, embedded in the hearts of many students. Condolences are extended to her sons, Andrew, Phillip and her grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

In 1957, when Malta finally started to emerge from the devastation wreaked by World War II, Lilian opened a ballet school out of her mother's apartment in St Julian's. This all began from a newspaper advert.

The British Forces were stationed on the island with their families in various parts of the island and sought to organise social and theatrical events. Activities for British children were also

provided, and these ranged from a ballet club, which was set up in 1950/51 under the direction of Ms Rowe, to drama, athletics, swimming and music.

These clubs were held at the Verdala or Tal-Handaq barracks on a twice weekly basis. As Ms Rowe, the person responsible for teaching the Royal Academy of Dancing syllabus to the young students, stated in her article in the *Tal-Handaq School Magazine*: "Classes appear to grow larger and larger as time goes on!"

In 1957, Peggy Whitley was on the island conducting a series of Ballet in Education examinations. Realising that there was a significant demand for dancing classes, she placed an advert in the newspaper asking for "any teacher interested in learning the grades examinations of the RAD to contact Miss Peggy Whitley".

Spurred on by curiosity and her enormous love for the theatre, Lilian applied. This was to be the start of her long and distinguished association with the RAD.

In those early days, Lilian was wholly dependent upon and supported by the RAD in London. Each year, specific teachers, such as Whitley, were sent over to Malta to help and guide her, teaching her one grade at a time.

She was taught not only the syllabus but also the technique. Ms Gordon, the director of the academy, visited Malta to



Lilian Attard. PHOTO: PATRICIA ANASTASI

specifically "sit in and watch the examinations in progress" to ensure that a good standard was being achieved.

On July 14, 1958, Lilian became the first Maltese teacher to present eight Maltese candidates for their Ballet in Education examinations which were conducted by Kathleen Oliver.

With Malta being a British colony, Lilian's students were mostly children of military personnel or colonial officials stationed in Malta. This proved to be somewhat frustrating in that she was unable to see her students through to the higher grades and complete their training under her tuition, as the girls generally left the island when their fathers received new postings.

However, this association with the British forces did have its ben-

efits. Lilian was assisted by those army wives who were trained teachers. She also appointed a full-time foreign professional ballet teacher, Jennifer Lynam from the UK, in 1966.

A milestone in her career was when, in 1965, she was granted permission to use the Manoel Theatre for her ballet show *Sleeping Beauty*. It was the first time that young students studying the RAD system were to perform on a national stage.

Lilian received a lot of assistance from the forces stationed on the island. In 1966, she was putting up *Cinderella* at the Manoel Island Theatre in Gzira and was busy collecting the funds for the costumes when the wife of Rear Admiral Walwyn approached her and offered to help. She managed to get together a group of officers who were able to play musical instruments.

In no time at all, these officers managed to compile a musical script for this production. Instruments, ranging from violas, violins, drums, flute to trombone, were borrowed from the many band clubs situated on the island and an orchestra was born for this production.

Parents helped with the actual design and production of the scenery. Mothers took charge of the students backstage, ensuring that they were entertained and ready to appear on stage.

This production was a great success and went on showing for a whole week as many parents were thrilled to watch their children dance on stage.

In 1966, Lilian was invited by the academy to the RAD headquarters in London to watch the college students being trained as teachers. During this trip, she met Margot Fonteyn, Adeline Genee, Madame Karsavina, Ninette de Valois, Ruth French, Arnold Haskell and Noel Coward. It was at this time that she was asked to become the local RAD representative, a post which she held for 29 years, until she retired in 1995.

In 1993, Lilian received the President's Award for her dedicated service to the academy. Throughout the years she had striven to give the art of ballet the status it deserves. In 1998, she was awarded the *Medalja Ġieħ ir-Repubblika* for her dedication towards the development of the art of ballet on the island.

Since the introduction of the RAD in Malta in the 1950s, the RAD has flourished and presently lays claim to 16 ballet schools. In 2019, the remarkable number of 1,006 Maltese students were entered for examinations at graded and vocational graded levels. A rather significant increase from the mere eight presented in 1958!

Ingrid Desira Buttigieg