



1770

British explorer Captain James Cook first sights Australia

1775

American Revolution begins in Lexington, Massachusetts. The "Shot Heard Round the World" took place in Concord later that day

1909

Joan of Arc receives beatification by the Roman Catholic Church

2011

Fidel Castro resigns from the Communist Party of Cuba's central committee after 45 years of holding the title

Arab News | Jeddah

Ballet, one of the world's most demanding art forms, is enjoying soaring popularity in Saudi Arabia as a new generation discovers its physical, mental and social benefits, and a Jeddah-based studio is at the forefront of the dance's development in the Kingdom.

Sera McKnass, founder of iBallerina, said that the studio is shaping future ballerinas to be effective members of society.

"The goal is not only to pass on the art of ballet but also to raise up participants into healthy, classy and confident, caring individuals," the 30-year-old Turkish-Lebanese master teacher said.

Ballet's popularity is growing among different age groups.

"Mothers sign up their daughters to be trained as ballerinas, but now young adults have dreams of learning how to pirouette, chasse and jete," McKnass told Arab News. "They come to iBallerina to start the journey and transform their souls and bodies, becoming stronger and more graceful women."

Widad Al-Kibsi, a Saudi ballet instructor at the studio, said that people in Jeddah were now familiar with ballet. "It's now in most of the main gyms, and private or international schools in the city."

The 20-year-old advises aspiring ballerinas to start at a young age. "It's important to start early because improved strength and flexibility are easily acquired at a younger age."



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SERA MCKNASS



A kid practices ballet in a studio in Jeddah

With the rising popularity of Ballet in Saudi Arabia, the art is now attracting more than young girls. Even though ballerinas have to start at a young age in order to improve their flexibility and strength. Young adults still aspire to twirl as well, seeing that they were denied the opportunity as kids



Farahnaz Forotan, 26, an Afghan journalist poses for a picture in Kabul

Ballet offers myriad physical benefits, she said. "It improves muscle tone and definition, elongates arms, and aligns the posture properly."

Al-Kibsi said that while many Saudis saw ballet as an activity for children, "not a lot of them are aware that adults can also perform. They assume that you should be thin or flexible from the get-go. They don't understand that

with dedication and discipline, ballet strengthens and increases flexibility."

Dana Garii, a 23-year-old Saudi writer, has been practicing ballet at the studio since February.

"I've been wanting to do it since I was young, but I couldn't find the opportunity. When I found they have classes here, I just went for it. People asked me, 'aren't you too old?' But that's a myth.

People think you can't do ballet after a certain age, but you can start any time," she told Arab News.

"Ballet is important to me. It's more than just the physical aspects — it has taught me how to be modest, and that nothing hard ever comes easy.

"It has also taught me patience and how to take on difficult situations because it's not only difficult physically

but also psychologically. It has taught me how to overcome my fears," Garii said.

A 13-year-old student at the studio, Oroub Al-Shareef, said that she began ballet when she was 4 years old.

"There was a TV show for kids about the mouse that did ballet ('Angelina Ballerina') and it inspired me. I've always wanted to be a ballerina," she said.

"Ballet is very important to me. Dance is one of the ways I express myself and I feel at one with myself when I'm practicing.

"It's a very hard thing to do, but it brings me so much joy."

Saudi graphic designer Sara Al-Sabaan, 22, has also been practicing ballet since she was a young child.

"I started dancing in a ballet school in Guadalajara, in Mexico. Then I continued at the Kinetic dance school in Riyadh," she said.

Al-Sabaan's mother inspired her to take up the art form. "I'm following in her footsteps. She was a ballet dancer herself."

The young dancer has watched ballet's growth in popularity. "Dance classes were available when I was a child, but they have been most popular in the past decade."

Practicing ballet is a form of self-expression, she said.

"I have danced modern, contemporary and classical ballet, and it affects me immensely. Not only is it a great physical activity, it's also an outlet for self-expression through movement."



Kids take part in a ballet practice session

SPORT

Hunting birds in warring Afghanistan

ter my death." The war has left much of the environment near Kabul devastated with uncleared mines, pollution, uncontrolled building and general neglect. Only in the last few years has there been an effort to restore areas like the former royal hunting grounds at Kol-e-Hashmat Khan in the city's southwest. Spring is the season of cranes, which the hunters try to catch alive in snares, using a specially trained tethered bird whose cries attract passing flocks. "I like this crane because it won't be silent when the other groups of cranes come, and it always forces them to come down. I like it because he is really a hunter-bird." With environmental controls virtually non-existent, there is little check on how many birds are caught or shot and Jan Agha, who started hunting when he was

around 12 or 13, reckons he has taken more than 1,000 cranes and an uncountable number of quails, ducks, hawks and sparrows.

The birds are usually taken to shops near the town of Bagram or to Kabul itself, where there is a popular bird market in the centre of the old city.

For Jan Agha, hunting is a relief, taking him out of the daily round and into the harshly beautiful countryside, where groups of hunters set out in the night, picnicking at night in the desert before testing their skills at dawn.

"The pleasure of hunting is to be in open space. I like the mountain, desert, shotgun and being awake during the night to hunt," he said. "The pleasure of hunting is to be a success in it. A hunter's hope is hunting. Being a success in every job in the world has a special pleasure."



Jan Agha, 49, an Afghan hunter, inspects a crane in a field in Bagram, Parwan province, Afghanistan

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