We know the dancer from the dance

Adrineh Gregorian.

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Among the *L.A. Times'* "Faces to watch in 2008," Arsen Serobian defies gravity and all limitations

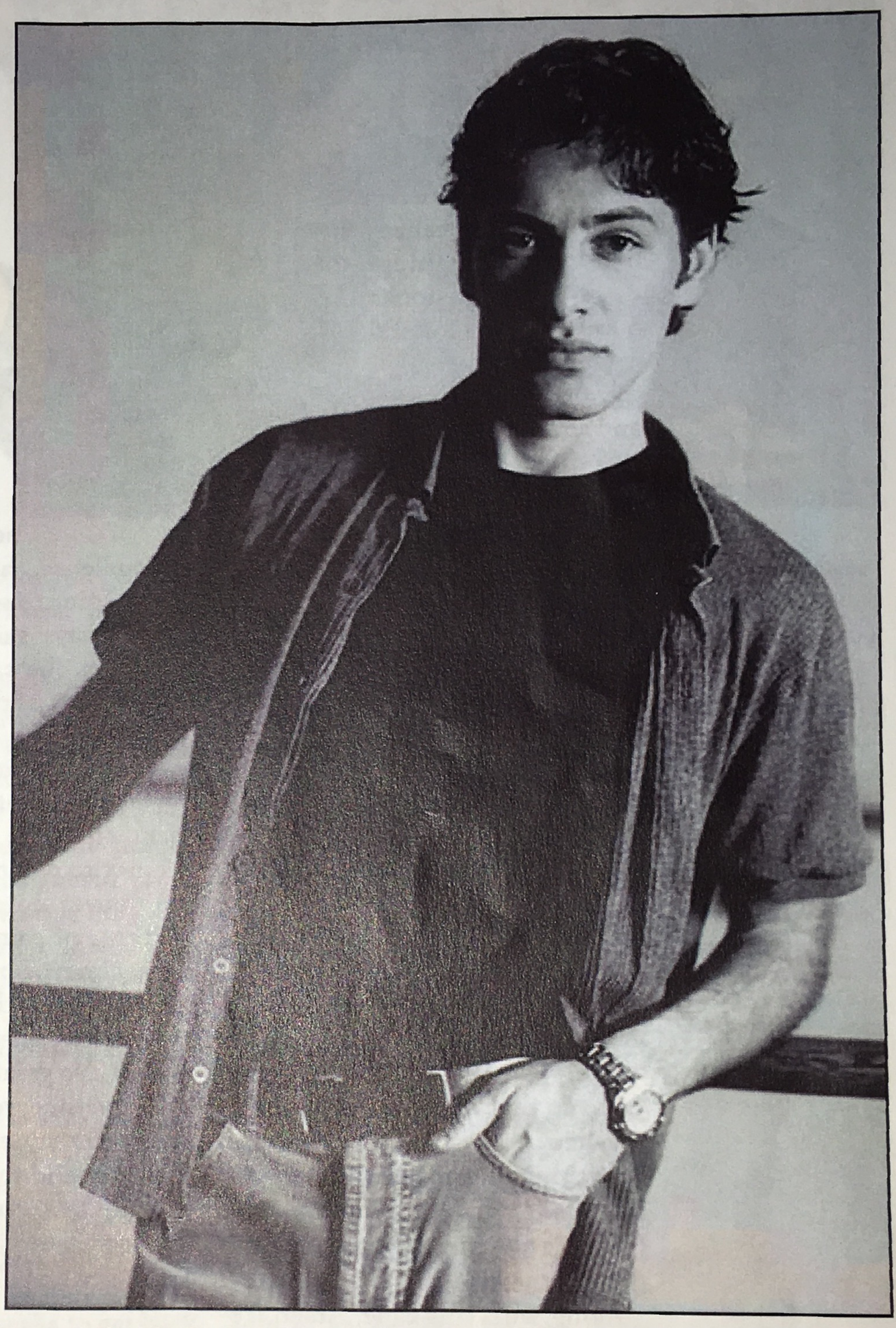
by Adrineh Gregorian

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

— William Butler Yeats

Dance is traditionally an art form that embodies emotions and tells a story through movements of a body through space and time. Behind these aesthetically pleasing visuals to the audience lies a strict regimented sport.

Twenty-nine-year-old Arsen Serobian's life story has taken turns no different than the epic tales depicted on the stages of La Scala and the Bolshoi Theater. His story is of a journey that began with years of practice to become an international prima danseur and which is now following a path to media entrepreneurship.



Arsen applies the Stanislavski technique he learned at the Bolshoi to acting parts.

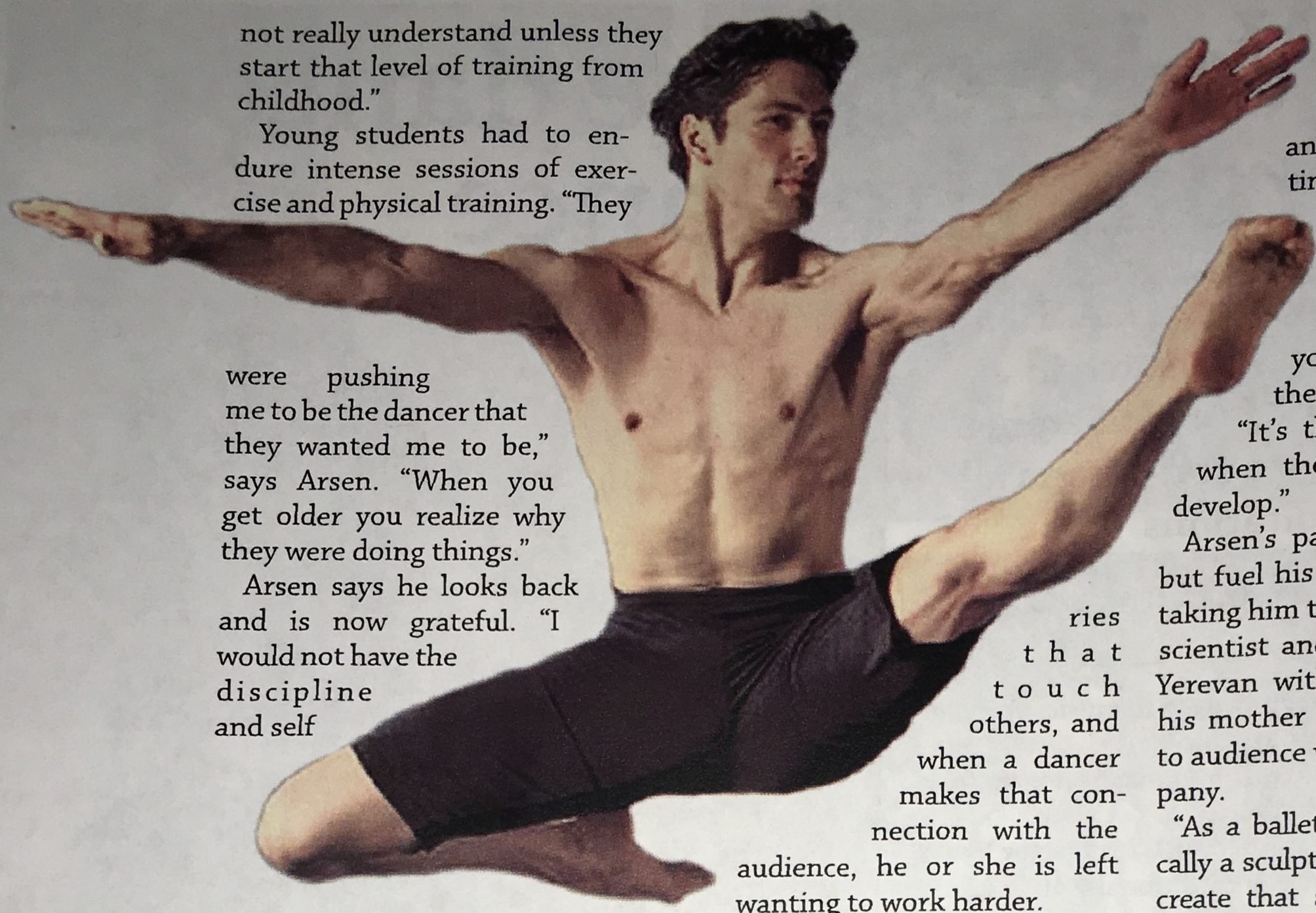
Origins

Born in Armenia's second largest city in 1978, Arsen was not unlike other children in the homeland at the time. The arts were a highly valued part of his upbringing in Gyumri. He began playing the violin from the age of seven and during music class breaks, he followed his innate urge to dance while his teachers played music.

Both his parents and his teachers caught on to his inherent talent, so Arsen was enrolled in dance school. Soon after, his parents were advised that Arsen should pursue more serious studies at the state dance conservatory in Yerevan.

At the age of ten, Arsen moved into dormitories in Yerevan and lived with other talented youngsters. In the dorms, musicians, artists, and dancers occupied the hallways and entertained each other with their respective talents. "It was a lot of fun," Arsen says.

He was a kid on his own for the first time, away from parents and his sister. "It was like an army," recalls Arsen. "It creates a discipline. It creates a character. It creates something that people will



not really understand unless they start that level of training from childhood."

Young students had to endure intense sessions of exercise and physical training. "They were pushing me to be the dancer that they wanted me to be," says Arsen. "When you get older you realize why they were doing things."

Arsen says he looks back and is now grateful. "I would not have the discipline and self motivation I have today," he says. He was able to apply all the discipline and work ethic he was taught to all his life's ventures.

Your body is an instrument

A videotape of Mikhail Baryshnikov's performance in Don Quixote inspired Arsen to become a ballet dancer. "When I was younger I always wanted to fly," he says. "When I saw [Baryshnikov], I wanted to do that with ballet."

When Arsen first saw the rare Baryshnikov tape, he asked himself, "Is it possible to do that - to fly up in the air, to have this freedom in the air?"

Along with this tape, Arsen frequented local ballet productions in Yerevan, including Spartacus and Gayane.

"I think it's very important for people internally to go and see those things," he says, "because you get so much inspiration to follow the stories, to see the bodies move."

Arsen says dancers create stories that touch others, and when a dancer makes that connection with the audience, he or she is left wanting to work harder.

"I always said, we only have one body," he says. "It's like one instrument, and in your life you only have one chance to create what you want it to be."

Though sometimes dance may seem effortless and easy, Arsen is quick to point out that some of the moves involve unbelievable amounts of pain. He says when a dancer moves his or her body in ways a dancer thought would not be possible, there is always great joy but also great physical pain.

"Every time you see [a dancer] onstage, they are going through that pain and they make it look so simple," adds Arsen. "That's why I say that dance is harder than any sport I've done."

Bolshoi and the boy

From 1993 to 1994, during the dark, cold years of the newly independent Republic of Armenia, the economic crisis, blockade and virtual shutdown of the nation's utilities, dance classes were few and far between. It was during these formative years of the Republic that were also the critically formative years in this young dancer's life. His teachers and parents realized timing was everything and Arsen needed to continue learning his craft and shaping his body.

"As a child if you miss certain amount of time as a dancer, you cannot improve for the future," says Arsen. "It's the most crucial time when the muscles and bones develop."

Arsen's parents had no choice but fuel his passion for dance by taking him to Russia. His father, a scientist and professor stayed in Yerevan with Arsen's sister, and his mother took him to Moscow to audience with a folk dance company.

"As a ballet dancer, you are basically a sculpture," adds Arsen. "You create that sculpture; and if that certain age passes, you cannot be as flexible as you want to be. You can't be as strong as you want to be."

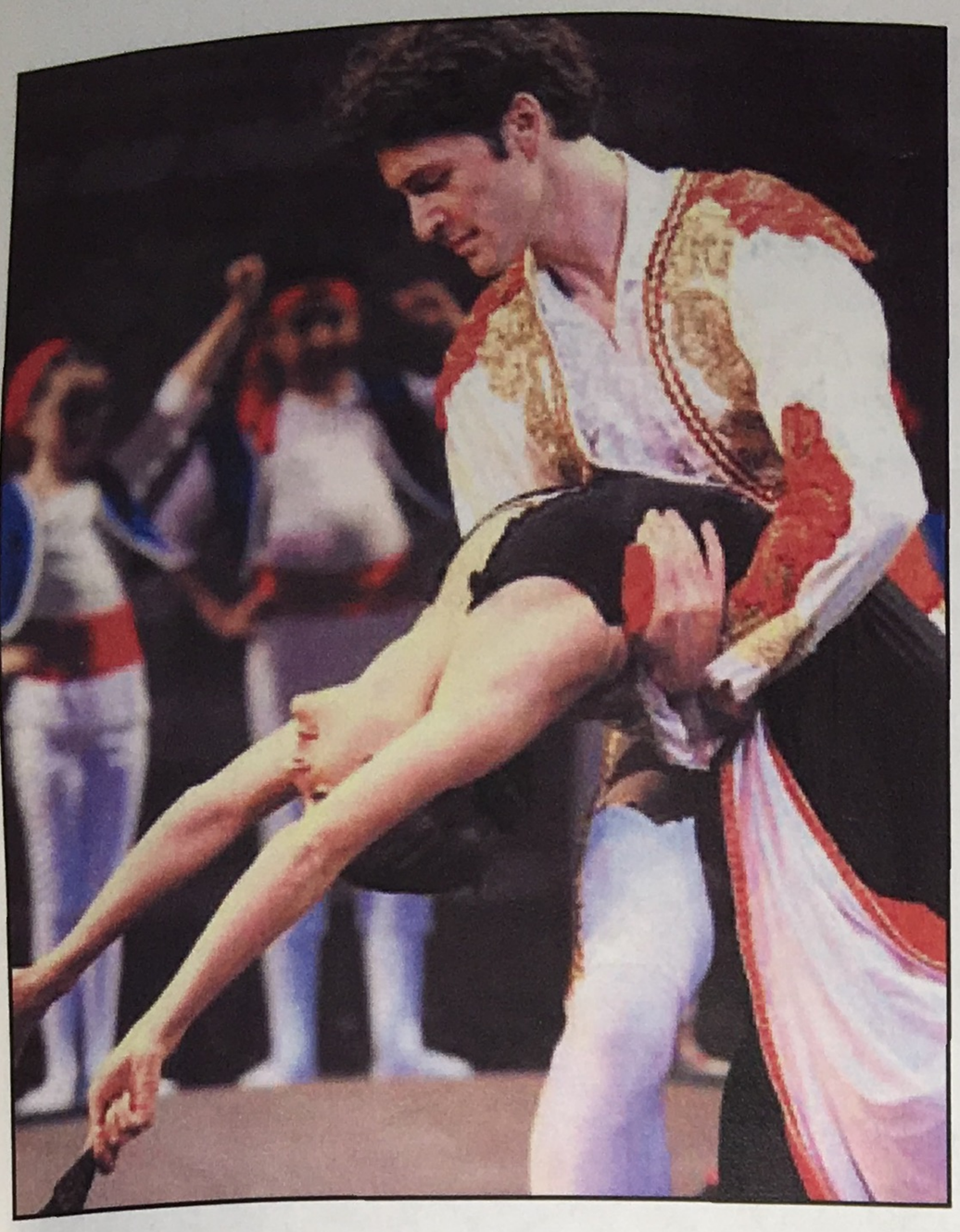
Arsen was quickly accepted to the folk dance school and lived with the company. His mother worked two jobs in Moscow to make ends meet. Arsen attributes his early success to his mother, who got him through it by working cafeteria jobs, serving and cooking Italian food at a Moscow factory.

Moscow to Ohio

Eventually, Arsen got used to the madness of Moscow and enjoyed the connections he made with all the different people he was exposed to.

Though he got into the field by first focusing on folk dance, Arsen eventually shifted his studies to ballet. Because of his age, he was first intimidated to approach the prestigious Bolshoi Company. Usually ballet dancers start at a very early age; but at 15, Arsen auditioned and was accepted into the Bolshoi Ballet Academy and trained there until he graduated at 18.

After graduating Arsen danced



with Bolshoi. Soon, he began to receive offers from the Moscow and Kirov ballets. He was asked to perform solo roles, traveled throughout Europe and then came to the United States on tour.

In 1997, when touring with a production of Swan Lake, Arsen visited his sister, who was studying in Ohio. He decided to stay.

Though Arsen did not speak English at the time, he began auditioning with different dance groups and started performing as a guest artist at the University of Akron. This led to offers from the Ohio Ballet and a chance to dance in Cleveland.

Culture clash

In the United States, Arsen traveled from company to company from Chicago, Minneapolis, New York, Ohio, and Indianapolis to name a few, while learning the English language and familiarizing himself with the American approach to dance and work ethic.

Arsen says he was disappointed with the ballet companies in the States. At the Bolshoi and in Yerevan, the discipline was different, he says. "You had to be very responsible. In Russia, you go for it and rehearse 24-7 and you do it your best."

He was used to the Agrippina Vaganova technique and found it troublesome to shift to George Balanchine technique used predominately in the United States.

"With the Vaganova technique, moves are deconstructed to a science and carried out until perfection," he explains. In the U.S., with red tape such as union rules, training was not as good, and Arsen began suffering more injuries than usual.

"It depends on you," he says, "you can bring the performance to the top or you can make it simple and not very interesting in terms of technique. As a dancer it takes one day to get out of shape, and it takes one to two weeks to get back into shape."

When you are preparing choreography Arsen says, "it takes months and months of preparations to get on stage and be able to not think about the choreography. Everything in your body is built in and you give it your best."

In Russia and Armenia, it's about "practice, practice, practice," says Arsen. "They would not let us put our legs on stage until you're positive and you're sure about what you're doing on stage. The execution of a movement is going to be flawless with no mistakes."

Arsen notes that people in America don't have the time or they don't put the time in training. "Dance becomes a hobby and not a profession," he says.

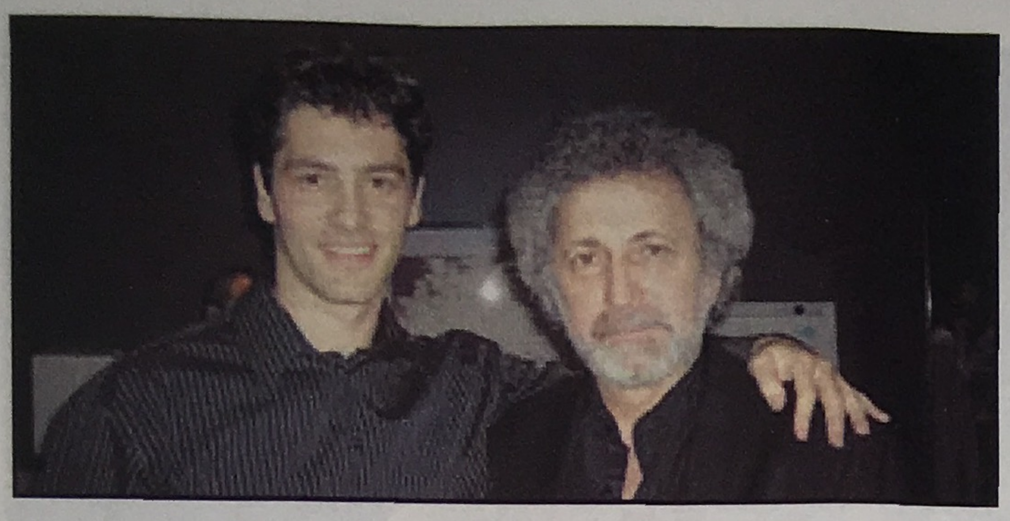
What stands out most to Arsen from the years he danced with companies in the United States was that he was not as inspired as he was in Armenia and Moscow.

"I was a dancer from Russia," he says. "It was a big thing for them to have a dancer from Russia. I could get into companies with ease, without even auditioning."

In Russia, a company would have him in an audition for five hours before making a decision. In the U.S., says Arsen, dance companies did not have the time and dedication to prepare like companies in Russia.

This reality led Arsen to change paths and enroll in business classes. His interest in technology prompted him to start a web developing business.

Left: Don Quixote is considered one of the more festive of the classical ballets, filled with spectacular virtuoso dancing. Right: Arsen performs a pas de deux, a duet in which ballet steps are performed together.



Arsen and Boris Eifman, visionary Russian choreographer.

Welcome to corporate America

The business environment brought out the discipline that had been ingrained in Arsen's head back in Armenia and at the Bolshoi. With his newly formed business, he had the discipline he craved in an environment where he thrived.

Arsen says he learned a lot by having his own company. He put dance on the backburner but looked back with fondness.

"Every time I would see a performance I would get sad," says Asren. "Especially when a company from Russia would come and perform." He still attended ballet classes once a week and tried to stay in shape.

By this time his parents had moved to San Francisco and he joined them in 1999. This way, he was close to his parents and Silicon Valley. While managing Russian software developers for a high tech company, Arsen began to recall his past.

"I'm doing something in my life that I'm not really happy with," says Arsen. "I got into this corporate world; a world that is sad. It's all about 'how can I get my next bonus, how can I get more money.' For me, coming from an artistic background from Bolshoi, our goals were 'how can I get onstage at the Bolshoi and get the principal role, and get in front of four thousand people, get them to clap and inspire them,' just the way Baryshnikov did for me."

At 24, Arsen decided to move to Los Angeles and give show business another try.

"I went the same way I would do with anything," says Arsen. He says he gave acting his all and enrolled at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. There he trained in acting for two years and signed with an agent after graduation.

To make ends meet, Arsen continued to develop websites while auditioning for all types of roles. He appeared in a handful of national commercials and danced in major motion pictures like I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry with Adam Sandler.

Dancing on my mind

If the stage was not enough, then neither was Silicon Valley nor Hollywood. Arsen is not just your average artist. He is also an innovative thinker.

Years ago, Arsen had come up with the concept of creating a media portal dedicated to dance. In 2007, he turned his dream into reality when he launched Dance Channel Television.

Arsen wanted to create an outlet where dancing could be showcased to a wide audience.

Dance Channel TV is the first worldwide online dance network for high quality programming. It introduces an appreciation of all forms of dance and is a place where dancers can build a foundation of support.

"I see that in the future the Internet is becoming the new TV," says Aresn. "We try to showcase people who are starting out or dancers who are trying to become something. There is so much talent."

Arsen says he is committed to educating people about dance, about where dances come from, "why they have this body, why they should dance. Because in your heart, you have rhythm, and when you have rhythm, you have to move."

Dance Channel TV's mission, says Arsen, is not to be the richest TV station in the world, but to educate people about dance. Arsen also wants to provide financial support to dance companies and strengthen their potential and visibility.

Arsen says Dance Channel TV will eventually be streaming live. Arsen plans to pair up with local non-profit channels to show programming and direct viewers to Dance Channel TV programming that's already on-line.

Presently, Arsen's web television site serves as a community for dancers and enthusiasts alike. Dance Channel TV also broadcast a weekly dance newscast and a monthly world dance news cast.

Arsen's channel also features an artist of the month, faces to watch, blogs, photo galleries, dance videos, and original programming.

Though his operation is based in Los Angeles, Arsen is able to reach out to the world through the Internet. Not only does Dance Channel Television bring stories to the United States from around the world, it consistently has an international following.

Dancer from the dance

"It's unbelievable," says Arsen, "when I take ballet class, I forget everything that's going on around me. The worries and stress disappear."

Arsen says he uses dance to connect with himself and encourages people to use dance to find their way back to physical, emotional and mental health.

"In the future, people are going to be so connected to technology that they are going to be sitting all the time, their health is going to get worse," says Arsen, who often takes breaks from work to dance .

Even though Arsen has his hands full with his new media venture, this dancer is never too far away from the dance. Arsen continues to perform with dance companies in Southern California, including the Media City Ballet in Burbank, the Palos Verdes Ballet, West Side Ballet in Santa Monica, and the Djanbazian Dance Company.

connect:
dancechannelTV.com