



Cristina Pora, a Mississauga resident who has just opened up a classical ballet school in the Clarkson area, helps student Fran McNie with her barre exercises. Staff photo by Michael Stuparyk

## Bringing her Russian training *Real County Big. Bk.* to 'prima donna' hopefuls

by TINA IVANY

When she was but eight years of age, Cristina Pora first slipped her tiny feet into a pair of ballet slippers. Nervous but excited, she took the hand of Gabriela Ionita, a former dancer with the Kiro Ballet in Leningrad, and entered through the doors of the Bucharest School of Dance in Romania.

She had opened the doors to a world she grew to love, a world which demands concentration, sacrifice, an immeasurable amount of hard work and a stern sense of self-discipline.

Her world is the world of ballet.

But it was a world that took a long time to develop. Under the tutelage of Gabriela Ionita and then Sergiu Stefanski, presently a prime soloist with the National Ballet of Canada, Cristina continued her studies for 10 years in Bucharest.

She was then awarded a scholarship with the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. Coached by Marina Semionova and Raisa Struchkova, she finally debuted as a soloist in "Giselle", "Don Quixote," "Les Sylphides" and "Swan Lake" at the Opera House in Romania.

Then three years ago, after performing as a prime soloist in "Coppelia" and in contemporary ballet with the Compagnia Italiana Balletto, Cristina came to Canada with her uncle.

She has never left.

### NO REGRETS

It is a decision she has not regretted. There are times when she longs for the "old world"; it's difficult to live in Canada, she says, if you're a romantic. And Cristina is a self-confessed romantic.

Her Mississauga home would betray that fact if she didn't so freely admit it. There are all sorts of Romanian, Ukrainian and European artifacts lining shelves and dotting the walls of her living room. Just a little bit of the old world in the middle of the new.

CONF

But she hasn't much time to dwell on the past. The present is offering a large, new challenge to the 26-year-old ballerina.

That challenge takes the shape of a new classical ballet school which Cristina opened recently in Mississauga. She's now offering her world of strenuous training, Russian classical style, to 110 ballet enthusiasts from the age of four to 40 in her Clarkson-area studio.

For the youngest from ages four to six, pre-ballet classes are offered.

"Such classes," says Cristina, "teach the student co-ordination. The little ones learn to stop and start, to change direction, to go backwards and forwards, to alter speed or rhythm, to skip, jump, hop or run, to restrict effort to one part of the body without convulsing the rest and to relax while moving.

"This type of training prepares the student for ballet classes. Before the age of seven, I don't believe in beginning ballet training itself."

#### LEVELS

At seven, a youngster begins serious training in posture, development of foot and leg, elevation and balance through barre exercise and centre work.

From this point on, depending on how serious about ballet the student is, she can progress through four preliminary levels (each level of approximately a year's duration if classes are taken once a week), followed by five levels (if classes are taken twice a week, Level 1 alone could take two years), then followed by two years in "elementary", one year in intermediate and then the last class in advanced.

The time period seems a long one, but as Cristina points out, at some point the student decides on ballet as a career and at that point classes would be taken almost every day so the time period in terms of years

would be shortened considerably.

Can we all be ballerinas? Perhaps not, but Cristina does not discourage unlikely candidates.

"Ballet," she says, "is 99 per cent work. As a result, it's not my belief to discourage anyone. With a lot of hard work, one can produce good results."

She's not too willing to discuss the differences between Russian and Western ballet training. Both, she says, have their strong points. Political diplomacy prevents her from opening up on the point.

Diplomacy and the fact that both her parents and her sister are still in Romania. Although she does not believe their positions could be harmed by what she says, she's not about to ask for trouble.

Particularly now, as her mother is expected to visit in January. It's an event she's been waiting for now for three years, the length of time during which she has not seen her parents.

#### CREDITS MOTHER

It is to her mother, she says, that credit is due for her success as a ballerina.

"She was the only one who encouraged me during the difficult times," she says. "I'm anxious that she see the results of her encouragement."

Rather than test her students with exams after each level, Cristina puts on recitals during which time the students get the chance to show what they've learned to parents and friends.

"I don't believe in exams," she says, "they are such artificial situations. Students tense up so much they cannot perform."

Students are not the only ones who tense up during a performance, however. Cristina says, before any recital, she is white.

"It's me dancing up on the stage when one of my students is performing," she says. "You get so involved, you hope so much for them. It is a matter of pride."

It's also with a degree of pride that she talks about her meeting with Mikhail Barishnykov, the Soviet dancer who last year defected to Canada following a performance at the O'Keefe Centre in Toronto.

"During my last year of school in Bucharest when I was 17," she says, "we had a competition, an International Concourse."

"Barishnykov was a good friend of my partner and we met then. He also walked off with the gold prize."

Cristina considers him second only to Rudolf Nureyev.

"He's still young, too," she says, "but when he dances, it's like fire in the room."

#### NUMBER ONE

And who would Cristina rank as the number one ballerina in the world?

"Well," she begins, "I'll tell you something. Karen Kain is one of the most talented ballerinas in the world. I've seen a lot of dancers, but I was so impressed with Karen when I saw her last year in *The Sleeping Beauty*. She was marvellous."

Although she's not promising anything, Cristina is very excited about some of her own students right now. Fifteen-year-old Laura McMillan, a Mississauga resident, is one of her most promising dancers, one about whom Cristina believes there may be a future in ballet.

Cristina doesn't perform any more. But her ballet slippers still see a lot of use. Classes begin every week weekday at 4:30 p.m. Lesson plans for those classes begin a lot earlier!

More information about Cristina's school of ballet and about the methods she uses to teach her students may be obtained by calling 823-5150.