
Latin America's Largest Dance School Is Brainchild of Brazilian Dreamer

Contributed by Cláudia Abreu
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The background noise is the sound of impatient shoes tapping the ground, trying to match the proposed rhythm of a more assertive sound. It is probably the teacher's, who is showing the art of flamenco to a group of interested students. The sound may distract passers-by, but not Gladys Altafani. She is used to the sound of dance.

She likes it so much that she decided to set up a school, but not just one more, the largest in Latin America. Not bad for a businesswoman who started dancing to escape the stress of her business life.

Gladys fell in love and decided to add her executive experience to her desire of spreading dance around Brazil. Pulsarte school, which includes belly dancing in its grid of courses, was born, in São Paulo, southeastern Brazil.

Graduated in Business Administration, Gladys started working in the family business, in the meat packing industry, at a young age. At 15 she already clocked in at the company every day and remained there. She studied, graduated, always considering an executive career, running the business.

Time was short, work filled her whole day. At night, when she went out to dinner, she liked to go to places where she could also dance. She watched people dancing, danced a little. She soon started relaxing, discovering that she had a knack for dance.

One evening, her husband told her, "Why don't you take belly dancing lessons?" He did not have to say it twice. "In the same week I looked for a school. I got there and they asked me whether I wanted to watch a class before enrolling. I said I didn't, that I had gone there to start," she recalls.

Gladys started. And she didn't stop. In the beginning she took two lessons a week, then three, four and finally she was doing it every day, three hours a day. She started with jazz, then took flamenco, belly dancing, classical and tap-dancing. The period between 7 pm and 9 pm was sacred, untouchable. It was for dancing.

"From Monday to Friday, I took lessons, on Saturday I practiced for presentations," explained Gladys.

Her husband, Leonardo, who works in advertising, also decided to learn some steps, and started ballroom dancing. With an attuned couple, the idea of establishing the dance space arose.

"Initially, I was in doubt whether it would be better to open a gym with dance lessons or a dance academy," she revealed.

The decision was made in a conversation with her husband, one evening, on the balcony of their home. "He said: the gym will be nice, but it will be just one more. The dance academy not. It could be unique," explained Gladys.

Once the decision had been taken, the executive, who carefully thinks each step of the business, entered the scene. Gladys sought references in the area. First of all, she sought a consultant specialized in academies to develop the strategic planning, then she found an architect, also specialized in dance academies. She calculated the costs, budgeted and then she started entering the dance world, behind the scenes.

She sought renowned professionals to develop the content, the education part of the business. In her many meetings, she met Inês Bógea, a former ballerina from Corpo (Body) group, who is now a dance critic for newspaper Folha de S. Paulo. The talks became deeper. The project gained shape. "The professionals I sought recommended teachers for the school," explained Gladys.

Each detail was thought out carefully, with passion, but also including a business vision. The references for the tasteful building that the businesswoman erected in São Paulo came from abroad, including Laban and The Place, in London. Houses dedicated to dance.

At Pulsarte, whose name was inspired on the words of eternal ballerina Renee Gumiel - who passed away last year -, there are 1,600 square meters (17,200 square feet) of built area, nine classrooms, all of them with appropriate flooring and acoustics for dance, the concern of all ballerinas.

The artist teachers are around 20. Two kinds of courses are offered: free and training. "Different from the training course, in the free course, for example, constant presence is not required, neither are presentations necessary," explained Gladys. The belly-dancing course is present in both categories.

The belly-dancing teacher was chosen, as is the case with the other teachers, with great care and, of course, due to experience. Semiramis, who was chosen, gave Gladys private lessons for four years.

A teacher, ballerina and choreographer, she studied modern and classic belly dancing. Apart from teaching, Semiramis also prepared the methodology of the Pulsarte course and included in the curriculum several workshops about the matter.

The speakers include Egyptian dancer Shokry Mohammed, belly dancing researcher and writer Lucy Penna and dancer and researcher Fauda Chuffi, as well as Omar Naboulsi, who also works with Arab rhythms.

"The school's intention is to teach dancing, but also technique, we give students the option of understanding the philosophy of belly dancing," finished off Gladys.

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