

Companhia Nacional de Bailado Programme of Extended Leave

Ballet company increases European mobility
and experience of its dancers without them risking their jobs

Background

The National Ballet Company, Companhia Nacional de Bailado (CNB), is the only classical ballet repertoire company in Portugal (although it also presents contemporary dance). It was established in 1977. It is directly subsidised by the Portuguese Government through the Ministry of Culture.

By 2001, CNB was a company growing old: most of the dancers were in the late years of their careers, and there were government restrictions to contracting new dancers. Since CNB is a company which organically belongs to the Ministry of Culture, CNB dancers have the same employment regime as civil servants in any government department, which means that unless there is a vacant place – often due to retirement – vacancies occur rarely. So, young blood was needed.

In 2001, the former Director of CNB created an internal strategy aiming to foster dancers' mobility. This was achieved through providing incentives for the CNB's dancers to go abroad and by receiving international (including European) dancers and occasionally young Portuguese dancers to replace them while they were away.

How it works

The incentive was created by facilitating special extended leave, so that two or three CNB dancers can go abroad each year without losing their employment contract with the company. This is particularly relevant in Portugal since CNB is the only classical ballet company. Without this special "leave" opportunity, dancers would not risk leaving their employment to go abroad for a short period. The model for this arrangement was the opportunity available elsewhere in the public sector, where civil servants were entitled to special leave. A key aim of this initiative is to give the Portuguese dancers experience and training abroad and also allow them to return bringing their experience and new ideas to the company.

Special "Leave" is agreed for a period of one year, and it can be renewed once for a further year. After two years, dancers either return to CNB or decide to keep working abroad thus ending their contract with the Company (two Portuguese dancers so far have decided to stay in their receiving company pursuing an international career, one in Switzerland and the other in Germany).

For the Portuguese dancers of CNB, the only criterion was their own wish to have experience abroad and their initiative to find a host dance company. After having found a receiving company, the Portuguese dancer requests special "leave" for one year to CNB. As only two or three dancers can go abroad each year, this has to be negotiated with the artistic director and the executive director. Foreign or other young Portuguese dancers would audition for CNB when a vacancy occurred as a result of special leave being granted.

Results

This initiative allows young dancers, often coming directly from the dance school, and therefore without any experience or training outside the country, to have experience abroad. The contact with other cultures and working environments is very enriching, not only for the dancer as an artist, but also to grow personally and professionally. It is particularly relevant in the Portuguese dance context where CNB is the only dance company offering full-time contracts for dancers (other dance companies

generally work on a project basis). Since the scheme started in 2001, dance companies from six European countries have hosted CNB dancers: Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK.

Furthermore, the Portuguese dancers returning from other European countries and the foreign dancers coming to CNB have brought a network of contacts with them, along with the freshness of new ideas and also the opportunity to link CNB's work there.

The introduction of the scheme has enabled CNB to introduce new, often young dancers into the Company. At the same time, the Director of CNB who established this programme believed this incentive was needed to allow young dancers to widen their horizons personally, professionally and artistically through international experience.

CNB dancers who have participated in the special leave arrangements have become more aware of contemporary European creations and emerging trends, which has been important in refreshing CNB's programme and presenting more contemporary work to widen both the performer's and audience experience (complementing other CNB initiatives, such as international galas and invitations to European choreographers).

This modest initiative is helping the CNB overcome limitations imposed by the contractual conditions of its dancers. Moreover, it does not bring additional costs to CNB. The Portuguese dancers leaving the company do not lose their contract, but their salary is paid by the receiving company. On the other hand, dancers replacing the departing CNB performers receive the salary previously paid to the professionals on special leave.

Sources

Telephone interview with Ana Pereira Caldas, CNB Director 2000-2007 by Catarina Toscano

The National Ballet Company, Companhia Nacional de Bailado: <http://www.cnb.pt/>

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