



Heading up

Will an Australian teenager become the world's first professional ballerina to wear a hijab? **Jane Albert** meets a young woman breaking cultural barriers.

Anyone who has taken a ballet class knows what an unrelentingly tough art form it is; and it only gets more challenging if your dream is to become a professional dancer. Long hours, an acceptance that pain is typically your constant companion, strict attention to diet and a curtailed social life make it a profession precious few achieve. As if things aren't challenging enough, one Australian teenager is raising the bar even higher. Stephanie Kurlow is determined to become the world's first professional hijabi ballerina. And she just got one step closer to achieving her dream.

In early 2016 Kurlow's story went viral after a Sydney newspaper stumbled upon the young Sydneysider's crowd funding campaign to raise enough money for her to study ballet full-time and attend competitions in her quest to dance professionally. Kurlow wears the hijab, or headscarf, in ballet class; her ultimate goal was to increase awareness and support for not only Muslim dancers but anyone from a diverse background whose dream of a ballet career was hampered for reasons of religion or race. One day, she promised herself, she would own her own school that did just that.

Kurlow had learnt ballet since she was two but gave it up when her family converted to Islam and she was unable to find a school that accepted a student in her position. 'We couldn't find any studios that would cater towards me or let me wear the hijab,' explains Kurlow today. 'It wasn't because I was Muslim that I couldn't dance. It was because other people wouldn't let me dance.'

Her story was picked up by media outlets from New York to London, praising the determined and inspiring young woman. Not only did she crowd fund upwards of AUD7,000 (around £4,300) but the Bjorn Borg Foundation



in Sweden was so taken with the young ballerina they decided to award her the inaugural AUD8,000 Game Changer scholarship. Two representatives of the organisation named after the former tennis champion flew to Sydney to hand Kurlow a cheque that would contribute to her training. That was in February last year and Kurlow put the money towards pointe shoes, eisteddfod entries and tuition at the Sydney school where she now studies full-time and is completing her RAD Advanced 1.

But it hasn't all been positive. Kurlow declines to name the school she attends: she has unfortunately found that alongside the supportive, congratulatory comments on her Facebook and other accounts there were also hateful Islamophobic remarks.

The ultimate dream...
Photo: Kateryna Tytarenko

‘When it went viral there was a lot of negativity and Islamophobic comments. It’s just every now and then but it happens, so you have to find a way to ignore it, basically. My mum and dad are very supportive, in whatever I’ve had interest in,’ Kurlow says. ‘I know lots of Muslim girls dancing for fun or doing classes, but if anyone knows of any professional hijabi dancers that would be amazing – because I’m yet to find one.’

The Australian Muslim population is small, albeit growing, and there is a lack of general understanding of Islam in the broader community, of what is and isn’t *haram* or forbidden by Islamic law. Does Islam forbid dancing, for instance?

‘No, absolutely not,’ says academic and University of Sydney historian Lucia Sorbera, who specialises in women and gender history in art and Islam. ‘There is nothing in the Koran, and very limited evidence in the hadith [the collection of sayings of the prophet Muhammad] referring to dancing or negative judgement that involves dancing. Actually, all the historians agree in early Islam there is no animosity towards singing and music and dancing. However not everything that happens in majority Muslim countries is coherent with what is written in the Koran – the way dancing is considered, even judged, in Muslim majority societies depends on the context.’

Context is everything, as Sorbera explains: ‘I understand Stephanie feels comfortable in expressing herself through dancing, and she was supported by her family, which is also important for a young woman.’

Heba Mostafa is a former professional ballerina in Cairo, now a dance teacher and choreographer at Aspire Ballet, a school she co-founded in Dubai. She is also a practicing Muslim. ‘Ballet is a beautiful art which shouldn’t affect anyone’s faith,’ she says. ‘Most of the children love

dancing and music, and ballet provides both in one. I never had an issue with it.’

Nevertheless she comes across diverse responses in her capacity as teacher. She recalls one student, an Emirate 13-year-old desperate to learn ballet who approached her saying she was in love with ballet but her family saw it as *haram*. The child attended classes for two terms, removing her hijab during class as it was a girls-only class. ‘After a while the girl came to me and she was crying and told me her family wanted her to stop dancing. She tried several times to explain to them she wasn’t looking to be a ballerina, she just wanted to enjoy ballet.’ But it was no use.

Not long afterwards she taught two Emirate sisters whose parents had made the decision to go against the wishes of their extended family, and allow their daughters to learn ballet. ‘I spoke with the mum and told her I really liked what she was doing with her girls. She said it wasn’t easy but she and her husband supported each other and wanted to keep doing that until the girls wanted to stop.’ Another school contacted her about teaching their students ballet but stipulated she not use music during class ‘as it was a Muslim school and they followed the rules.’ Mostafa says it was an unusual situation as she was left counting out loud, but she persisted. ‘I just accepted it because the girls loved it and they were really listening to me and following.’

When Kurlow attends class she chooses to wear the hijab, or headscarf; a long sleeved top and a romantic or long tutu. ‘There aren’t specific rules [around dress], it’s a personal choice about what you feel comfortable in. Everyone perceives modesty differently so it’s very individual,’ says Kurlow, adding that her classmates and teachers are all very supportive. Sorbera concurs it is about individual interpretation. ‘When it comes to many expressions of Islamic culture, most of the time it is a matter of interpretation. The religion invites Muslim

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STEPHANIE KURLOW

men and women to be modest; however, there are many interpretations of what that can be. Religion does not inform all areas of Muslims' everyday life. This is also why in the Arab world you have schools of ballet everywhere: the middle classes love ballet for their girls.'

KurLOW hasn't yet reached a point where she is performing narrative, costumed ballets like *Swan Lake*, and it is here that the subject of dress is particularly pertinent. 'Stephanie can progress in her skills but I'm not sure if she can really carry on to perform on the stage with other ballerinas wearing regular tutus, as that would require the director to think about how to suit her without [distracting the audience],' says Mostafa. 'As she cannot dance with a male partner it's quite hard for her to fit in with normal ballet performance.' Again, the question of whether or not a Muslim could dance with a male partner is one of interpretation. 'From the perspective of the religion, anyone could make their own argument pro or against dancers partnering with males,' Sorbera says.

David McAllister, Artistic Director of the Australian Ballet and an RAD Vice-President, has come out strongly in support of KurLOW, saying her situation poses a challenge that deserves to be taken seriously by ballet companies, although he doesn't yet have the solution to the costume conundrum. 'When you have a corps de ballet of 24 swans they sort of have to look the same, costume-wise,' he told the Australian national public television network SBS. 'I guess the one thing that is the great leveller in ballet is talent. If you have the talent and you work hard and achieve what you need to assume those rigorous positions and movements of ballet, then that's the only thing that really separates dancers. She's definitely forging new ground.'

While KurLOW doesn't have any role models of professional ballerinas who choose to veil, she cites Misty Copeland and Li Cunxin as her inspiration to stay focussed. Copeland, the first African-American dancer to be made principal artist in American Ballet Theater's 75-year





history continues to champion diversity in her successful transition from ballet star to international celebrity and brand ambassador; while Chinese-born Australian Cunxin, now Artistic Director of Queensland Ballet, has had a book and feature film (both titled *Mao's Last Dancer*) made about his success as an international dancer despite his impoverished beginnings in rural China. 'Li Cunxin is very, very inspirational to me. He came from a very different background and wasn't the norm in terms of ballet and was this incredible person and had so much passion,' Kurlow says. 'I always look back on the movie whenever I'm feeling down and it hypes me up.'

With professional classical ballet companies finally moving away from their traditionally white company make-up perhaps accepting dancers who express their religion through dress will be the next big shift. For Kurlow, the sky is the limit. 'In the short term I want to go to a pre-professional school overseas; then get into a professional ballet company. Being a principal dancer is

the ultimate dream, obviously,' she states firmly. She sees no reason why this isn't achievable, hijab or otherwise. 'Originally ballet was a very modest, royal dance, they wore the long, romantic style tutus. Obviously [ballet has] changed a lot but the world can't progress if it doesn't include diverse people.'

The ultimate goal, however, is to own her own performing arts school that doesn't discriminate. 'I want there to be a place where Muslim girls who wear the hijab, or Jewish girls or Sikh boys can be comfortable as themselves and still be able to perform and express themselves. That's a major dream for me because there really isn't anything like that now.'