

- **Brazilian ballet dancer from 'Only When I Dance' earns a soloist spot in Boston**
- **Meet Irlan Silva, 25, who once danced in his socks because he couldn't afford shoes, and the people who helped him leave the violent slum where he grew up and become a ballet dancer.**

By Rosiane Barcelos de Oliveira
Contributing writer

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In Irlan Silva's future there could most certainly have been drug trafficking. Gangs. Violence. But there weren't. He had a dream.

Silva's dream of becoming a successful ballet dancer eventually led him from his home in a large favela (slum) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to a stage in Boston where he is now a soloist with the Boston Ballet.

The journey required Silva to overcome a seemingly insurmountable barrier: The social abyss that separates the rich from the poor in his native country.

"He came from a favela of Rio, faced prejudice; he's a life example. We know our country, the difficulties, and he overcame all to get here," says Vera de Lima of Centerville.

Originally from Espírito Santo, a state north of Rio de Janeiro, de Lima attended a Boston Ballet performance of "Onegin" in which Silva was dancing. It was the first time de Lima, 59, attended a professional ballet. She was enchanted. "I liked it a lot. It was beautiful. I became even happier to know that there was a Brazilian dancing."

In 2011, Silva joined the Boston Ballet and in 2015 and was promoted to soloist. But his trajectory was steep.

He was born in Complexo do Alemão, in the Northern zone of Rio de Janeiro, a poverty stricken

neighborhood, and one of the most violent favelas in Rio de Janeiro. A place plagued by drug trafficking, violence and nearly daily drug-related deaths of young people. The Brazilian Army invaded Complexo do Alemão last year in trying to help pacify the place.

"I always wanted to leave there (for) a calmer place and take my parents with me," says Silva, in a telephone interview from a Boston train on his way home to Wellesley after a performance of "Swan Lake."

Love at first sight

At a cousin's invitation in Brazil, Silva attended a Fine Arts class at Núcleo de Arte, some two long bus rides from his school in Rio de Janeiro; a project sponsored by the government to offer art classes to disadvantaged children. He was pursuing drawing. But it was the noise of

the tap dance shoes in the classroom next door that caught Silva's attention. He was 10 years old.

"I stopped by the door, the teacher asked me if I wanted to try tap dancing, 'why not?', I asked."

Somehow, he felt he too could dance.

"He was quiet and focused," says his former dance teacher, Denise de Sá, from Projeto de Extensão Núcleo de Arte, in a phone interview. It was de Sá who went to Escola Dança Rio, a renowned ballet school in Rio de Janeiro, and asked for a scholarship for Silva, after he had been in Projeto for one year.

"He was very talented," de Sá says, "he wouldn't be able to better his techniques (in the Projeto)."

"Classical ballet?" Silva asked when Dança Rio school director, former classical ballerina, Marisa Estrella, invited him to study the dance under a scholarship. He did not know ballet. In 2001, Estrella took Silva to the most famous theater in Brazil, Teatro Municipal do Rio. It was his first time. Later, he held his first job there as a professional ballet dancer.

When he saw male dancers jumping and the girls dancing on the tip of their toes, and the dancers carrying them from one side to the other, he thought it was fantastic.

"I tell everyone, it was love at first sight." He decided to try it. "I thought it was challenging, kind of impossible, but inside my head I imagined myself doing that."

So he did.

Honors and awards

In 2008, Silva won as best contemporary dancer at the Youth America Grand Prix in New York – the same year he was a top finalist in the competition's senior division. In 2007 he won first place in the senior division of Youth America Grand Prix Brazil and also de Prix de Lausanne, in Switzerland .

He joined American Ballet Theatre, in New York, after winning first place in a competition with kids from all over the world. He was 14 years old. When his name was called, Silva did not understand one thing of what they were saying. "I did not speak any English at all." It was his fellow competitors who pushed him back into the stage.

"I think I am really good at what I do," he thought to himself as he saw hundreds of people applauding. "I was very moved."

In the beginning, when he started dancing in Brazil, Silva felt horrible. He was the only boy among girls. He says that the girls were beautiful, with beautiful physiques and beautiful clothes. He did not even have appropriate shoes. "It was Mariza who found people to help me with clothes and ballet shoes donations."

Finding a way

Estrella became his tutor. His first trip to New York City was sponsored in part by the Brazilian Ministry of Culture, through Estrella's advocacy.

"There was a time where he danced wearing only socks, we did not have the money to buy dance shoes," says his mother, Maria da Penha da Silva, who still lives in the same house in Complexo do Alemão.

In 2009, Silva became well-known through the critically acclaimed documentary, "Only When I Dance.". The movie told his story and also that of Isabela Coracy – a poor girl, also from the

slums of Rio de Janeiro, and their struggles to become professional ballet dancers. The producers learned about Silva's story through Brazilian media. He had become a sensation in Brazil after winning dance competitions in Lausanne, Switzerland, and in New York City. Silva's mother also recalls the days when she and his father, Irenildo Santos Silva, did not have the money for bus tickets to go see their son perform. "We would wait for him to get home and tell us how things went."

But Maria da Penha was far from being a mere spectator though. She raised money through raffles and bingo, and even opened a modest café out of their home to help with Silva's dance expenses.

"His mother participated in everything. She would take him from school to the project. She is an exceptional woman," de Sá says..

Silva's parents visited Boston two years ago. And loved it, except for the cold.

"Everything was very enchanting: How polite people are, the culture. Everything is so organized. A world very different from ours," she says.

Moving on, staying in touch

Silva and his parents talk on the phone every day. Maria da Penha feels very blessed that her son left home on a time so technologically advanced. When they telephone each other, she insists on Face Time.

"Irlan, I need to see your face," she demands.

"Mom, I am an adult."

"Still."

Silva has not forgotten his roots. His place. Every time he travels to Brazil, he goes back to his first school, Projeto Núcleo de Arte – now located within Complexo do Alemão, and visits Denise de Sá, who has not seen him perform abroad. He dances for the students there and even opened for a performance the dancers had.

"The kids go crazy wanting to see him and to take pictures with him. He is a very grateful person. A boy of gold." de Sá says.

At 25, Silva's goal is to become a principal dancer with the Boston Ballet. The hardest thing for him, Silva says, is to live away from his parents. He dreams of bringing them to live in the United States.

He plans to visit them this month, but will fit in a trip to the Cape before then because he has not yet visited the area, with its large Brazilian population.

Then it's back to Brazil. Silva's boyhood home remains the same. The only change to the house is that now the living room's main wall showcases two four-foot banners with the picture of Silva performing: one from the movie, "Only When I Dance," and the other one from the Gran Prix de Laussane, in Switzerland.

"My son had a dream and fought for it. I admire him very much," Silva's mother says.