

Lia Cirio's Quest To Modernize the Ballet World

By Carly Lanning
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Lia Cirio performing in the Boston Ballet's production of "Swan Lake" Photo by Rosalie O'Connor

Each week, Lia Cirio can go through over 30 pairs of pointe shoes. She has a full schedule: 9:45 a.m. workouts with the Boston Ballet company, followed by six-hour rehearsals, cross training, performances, and, once she gets home, coursework for her undergraduate degree at Northeastern University.

But this year, the 30-year-old principal dancer of the Boston Ballet, who joined the company when she was just 16, is embarking on her greatest challenge yet: Running her own dance collective away from the politics of the traditional ballet world and helping to modernize the artform.

"We founded [this group] to provide a place where all types of artists could feel safe to create and collaborate without boundaries of a feeling of self-consciousness," Cirio told NBC News. "We do not want to be bound by the politics that come that often come about in the ballet world, but instead make space for creation."

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Cirio fell in love with ballet when she was just three years old. Her parents had taken her to see "The Nutcracker" outside of Philadelphia and, in what she calls "a cliché ballet moment," Cirio instantly fell in love with the character of Clara. She immediately started taking tap, jazz, and ballet before shifting her focus solely to ballet. "Growing up I was super shy," Cirio said. "[Ballet] was the way that I could express myself without words, and I think that's what's so beautiful about ballet and dance, you can express a whole story without even speaking one word."

When she was 14, a group of professional dancers sat in on one of her classes and told her teacher that she had what it takes to make it professionally. At the time, Cirio didn't know being

a professional dancer was even a job, but with the vote of confidence and support of her family, she auditioned and was accepted into the Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet to study dance full-time.



https://youtu.be/kw9lSeR_FFc

It was a difficult transition. Her family moved to Carleigh, Pennsylvania, to be closer to Cirio's new school, and every weekend, her dad would commute two hours to see them before returning to spend the week working outside of Philadelphia. Cirio had to deal with misconceptions that she was frail and unready, using other's doubts to fuel her work ethic.

"Every teacher I ever had said I looked super weak," Cirio said. "I had this disability, I had hyper extended legs and crooked feet, and I was thin. I made it a point to change people's minds. I wanted to be the strongest dancer. I would take five classes a day and work extra hours at the beginning of the day. That was the thing that pushed me the most, I wanted to prove everybody wrong."

At 16, Cirio was hired by the Boston Ballet and quickly rose in the ranks from corps de ballet to principal dancer in just seven years, performing over 100 lead roles. She served as an inspiration for her younger brother Jeffrey, who also became a dancer. The two performed together for six years at the Boston Ballet before he left the company to become a soloist at the American Ballet Theatre in 2015

"Lia was a huge inspiration for me as a dancer," Jeffrey Cirio told NBC News. "When she was about 13, she decided she wanted to do this as a career. It was a little late to 'get serious,' but what I saw in her was a determination and focus. When my parents moved so that she could study ballet at Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet, she attended classes as if she was possessed. I followed her into the ballet world and she remained an inspiration for me."

While Lia Cirio sees the Boston Ballet as her home, she took a momentary hiatus in 2009 after her then-boyfriend was non-fatally shot outside of her apartment. "In 2008, I had gone through a really big personal trauma so after that all settled down I kind of lost my love of ballet," she said.

She spent a year performing contemporary dance roles internationally before returning to Boston. Though what happened was difficult, Cirio credits that time with helping her grow as an artist. "I feel like if I hadn't gone through such a trauma my artistry wouldn't be as deep as it is," she said. "In some ways, I'm grateful for something like that to happen even though it was something so terrible."

Since then, Cirio has taken on leading roles in the Boston Ballet's "Sleeping Beauty," "The Nutcracker," "Giselle," and most recently "Mirrors."

With the 2015 - 2016 season finished, Cirio is redirecting her attention to a project she started last year with her brother: The Cirio Collective, a group of dancers working together to push choreography outside of institutional influence.

"Our vision really when we created the Cirio Collective was to focus on collaboration with other artists and dancers away from the pressure of politics or a ballet board," Cirio said.

This year, collective will take up residency in Martha's Vineyard and already have a music video in the works as one of their many summer projects. Cirio's craving for diversity is echoed by other ballerinas such as Misty Copeland and Stella Abrera, both whom have let their skill and discipline expand society's definition of what a ballerina can look like.

It wasn't until later in her ballet career that Lia Cirio began to suspect that people had their doubts that a half-Filipino ballerina could be a Clara or Sleeping Beauty. While the Boston Ballet employs 69 dancers of 20 different nationalities, she still sees the need to prove herself on stage with each performance.

"Older ballet people tend to have an image they believe should be upheld in a classical way," Cirio said. "Discrimination still happens in the ballet and it needs to not. Audiences now, they are not coming to see a pure white ballerina, they can imagine an Asian person being a swan or a black person being a Giselle. We should give the audience more credit and change the stigma."

While Cirio's muscle memory allows her to balance the routines of Cirio Collective along with her multiple leading roles at Boston Ballet, her years of ballet are slowly starting to catch up with her. Along with continuous back and hip pain, Cirio suffered a back spasm during her "Swan Lake" rehearsals in May, though she pushed forward to not only star in "Swan Lake," but Boston Ballet's contemporary show "Mirrors."

"A lot of times I feel like most ballet people come to Boston Ballet and see me and have preconceived notions about me. They assume I can't be classical or I'm not athletic. Almost all the time I prove them wrong," Cirio said.

"When you watch Lia dance, it is honest. She is not trying to be someone else or emulate someone else," Jeffrey Cirio said. "Even when she is dancing a character — she may not act and dance that character like everyone else. She thinks about the roles, she thinks about what and who that person would actually be, and she makes them more human, more relatable. It is not 'put on.' It's real. ... One thing I have learned is that there will always be dancers who can turn more, or jump higher, but what's important is, 'did I make someone feel something?' That might sound cliché, but that's who Lia is when she dances. She makes people feel something."