

Interview with Anna Avramenko @People of Faro

1. For those who don't know you, how would you define yourself? Who is Anna?

Ana is a person of the world. I was born in Ukraine, and then I came to Portugal when I was 16. It was me and my parents, but now I have my husband and my daughter. I travel quite a lot, for my work and not only, because I like to travel, to meet new cultures, new people. All of my projects are about people. I enjoy socializing. I am a dancer, I like to dance, to give classes, and I also enjoy volunteering, and that's why I dedicate a lot of time to supporting people who come from Ukraine, both because it's my country and because I feel that it's my duty to help people find themselves.

2. Firstly, I think we're curious to know how you got to live here, in Portugal.

My father came to Portugal because he had been unemployed for some time in Ukraine, so he went searching for a better life, for a country where he could find work. Back then, we didn't know very much about Portugal, but we did know that the weather was good, that the people were nice and we thought it could be a good opportunity, and I agree now, we couldn't have been better. It's like I say, we can travel, and we do it a lot, and being in Europe, in the European Union, makes it easier too because in Ukraine it has always been a bit complicated to go out of the country. I couldn't be happier here.

3. How was the transition?

It was perfect. When I got here, I was like "Hello, everyone! I'm here, I'm Ana!". It was great.

4. Then, why dance and how did it all start?

To begin with, my parents have always been professional dancers, both of them, and all my family is made of dancers. The city where I'm from - Kropyvnytskyi - is the capital of dance in Ukraine. It's a city with a lot of dance schools, and with a very well-known dance college, where I studied. I've been dancing since I was 5 years old, and I did the course there, so when I came here, I already had the right training to teach, even though I was only 16. That's how I started.

5. What would you say it's your favorite dance style?

Contemporary dance is the style that I like the most. I have a degree in dance and I graduated in Lisbon (Instituto Politécnico de Lisboa, Escola Superior de Dança), in contemporary dance, focusing on choreography creation. I like very much to create choreographies, to organize events, festivals, and competitions. My mother teaches technical classes, classical dance, and classical ballet, while I am more into creative styles.

6. What other dance styles do you know?

Classical ballet, urban dance, hip hop, and contemporary dance, of course. We also do traditional dances, and we participated in a competition in Porto recently, where we won with a Ukrainian dance, so we try to keep our origins here.

7. What dancer do you admire?

There are many dancers, but internationally speaking, Pina Bausch. Nationally speaking, there's Rita Spider. Also, I have a friend of mine, who has this spectacular energy on stage. He is Filipe Rico, and is a choreographer for many Portuguese singers; he also has a school, and he is one of the people I like the most to watch dancing. Filipe is more into hip hop and urban dance and has recently joined our judging team.

8. You're the founder of a dance school - Splash Companhia de Dança. How did you choose the name?

I was searching for an easy name, preferably in English, one that could be easy to pronounce all over the world, because I've always had big plans about traveling around with the dancers. The farthest place we've been so far is Ukraine, but we're trying to go to at least 2-3 countries to travel or participate in events. So I went through the dictionary looking up words, then I got to the *splash* part and I thought it was something "boom" and that's what I wanted, that's how it was.

9. How is it to have a dance academy?

It's nice. It's very difficult because every person has their own personality, but we have to make it together. I tell some of them "You're fine, you're doing great", and the person gets motivated, and if I do the same with others, they stop working, so we have to find our own way of dealing with them, and they're many. Right now, we have around 80 dancers, and when there are competitions, the parents accompany them, and you have to deal with

different people, but it's fun. It's like a family, I think any family people has its ups and downs, and you have to be flexible and find the right balance.

10. How were the beginnings of the academy? How did it all start?

It started on the street. There were three of us, me and two other friends, and then we started being accompanied by a car, we turned on the car lights and the radio, and we danced, and little by little we started dancing in the clubs, gathering money from the performances, renting spaces. We were growing and at the moment we have around 80 people, all of them working in good conditions, of course.

11. There's the general opinion that artists find it difficult to make a living out of their art. What do you think about this? How is it for you?

I've always lived out of what I'm doing, but I think that you can't get very rich being an artist in Portugal, unfortunately, but it's possible to make a living out of it. I believe the opportunities are increasing, that the dancers are getting more and more rights. I'm talking about dancers because only now have they gained professional status, only now, after so many years, we can really have any kind of support. Also, I think that when you're a professional in any area, you can manage to make a living out of it, and my students say that they would like to dance but are afraid to be left without a job. When I was studying, there were a lot of students in the same year, and none of them is unemployed at this moment or was forced to change their profession. Therefore, I believe that yes, there's a future to this. When we were at this competition I was telling you about, I noticed that the dance has gained more visibility, a lot of people want to dance, to participate in competitions, and I'm very positive in this respect. Precisely for this, I'm opening another dance school and I hope that one year from now, I will be able to say that it went well.

12. Was there any moment when you felt like giving up?

No, never. I could vary, like, I wanted to be a dancer first, then I wanted to teach more, now I'm into doing choreography and organizing the school itself, organizing events, keeping up with the contests, that is, I'm varying, but always within my area.

13. What do you think it's the one thing that can make a difference in a dance?

Even in a contest or a show, what differentiates one school from another, or even one dancer from another, is dancing with your soul, having fun when you are performing. Of

course, the technique is important, but the soul is much more than that, and when I'm jury in a contest, I always advise people not to be like machines. It's important to have fun, to live the moment, this is what will make a difference.

14. You also organized an event - Arte sem Fronteiras. How was it?

It was good, we had an edition in Lisbon, in November, and another one in March, in the same place. But you know what happened? The number of dancers has tripled - in November we had 150 dancers, and in March, around 400 dancers. In what concerns the public, in November the venue was almost full, and in March, it was sold out, we had people in the street waiting because there were no more tickets. It was such an incredible growth. The next time it will be in Faro, and I hope it will be sold out as well.

15. Are you also part of the jury in this kind of event?

No, I always invite professional jury members for each area, and in the latest edition, like in every other one, we try to find extraordinary dancers. When Rita Spider, a very well-known dancer who has traveled all over the world, accepted to be part of the jury, I was very surprised.

16. Did you participate in any competitions as a dancer?

Yes, in several. When I was at university, I was able to pay for my studies by dancing, just with the work I did around. I did a lot of work on television, and as I was paid well, I was able to pay for my studies.

17. How was Got Talent?

It was a unique experience. We had the live gala and the day after, the pandemic started, and everything closed. And now we received the invitation from America's Got Talent to participate in the auditions, we were all happy until we pre-registered to do the first casting, it was online. We had a problem because ten days before the war had started in Ukraine, I was with my family there, so I was completely off and I couldn't even prepare anyone, and I apologized to my students, but I wasn't in the state to take them to these auditions. Now, for the next auditions, I'll have to correct this mistake of mine, and prepare them to participate because America's Got Talent would be a unique experience. They understood me, they gave me a lot of support and they walked with me in the demonstrations that took place, they are completely my family.

18. You have a little girl. Is she already learning how to dance?

Yes, she loves it. When she was 3 weeks old, I returned to work. After 3 weeks, I was already at a festival, and I myself went on stage to dance, and she was in the car seat watching, and since then she has been watching all the rehearsals, all the classes, she is always present with me, and even goes around giving ideas to the dancers. She happened to participate in an event, and was going to have a show but got sick. We went together to Got Talent Portugal in 2019 when she was only 11 months old, and we took her to the studio to see everything. So, she's been with us everywhere since she was 3 weeks old.

19. I also saw that she has a YouTube channel - Hey Nicky. I believe it's become common for parents to create social media accounts for their children. What was your motivation behind it?

My daughter has always been an artist. For example, she goes to the doctor's and says "Hello, doctor, subscribe to my channel, leave a like and see you in the next video." She lives it all, she loves being filmed, taking pictures, and being the center of attention. She creates stories and tells us how to record them, it's all a movie. If this already comes from her and she likes it, "Why not?" I thought. She has a lot of fun. Then I have my niece, who likes to edit, and whenever she comes to Portugal, I think it's nice to occupy her time like that. The two prepare the video, think about what it will be, I help to record it, then one edits it, another one adds voices over it, and they finally share it. They even made a TikTok for our dog, Cookie, we've only had the dog for two weeks, but it already has TikTok.

20. Would you say that dance is a popular art in Portugal?

At this point, I think yes. When I arrived here, it wasn't, that's why I felt the need to create my own group, I was thinking that there wasn't much on offer, nothing that I wanted to be part of. Then, little by little, I started to do what I like and something that I would like for my children. When I started, there were other people starting as well. Then there was "Achas Que Sabes Dançar?", a program that brought much fame to dance. The university also has a lot of students, it's a course that has a lot of demand, and people continue to have post-course work, they spread the word, and there's more demand. And Got Talent Portugal is also something that gives a lot of visibility. Therefore, I think that dance is growing more and more in Portugal.

21. How would you define the Portuguese dance scene?

The quality increased a lot during the pandemic, which is funny, because the pandemic closed down and stopped everything, but comparing what was before the pandemic to what I see now, the events we're seeing now, their quality is spectacular; there are many good, big, impressive schools. I returned from the last event full of hope, there was an event with 2 thousand dancers and 85 schools from all over the country. It's a lot of people.

22. What would you say are the most popular dance styles?

Contemporary dance, classical ballet, and also hip hop.

23. Is Faro an important name for the Portuguese dance scene?

I think Faro it's important, yes. It's the center of Algarve, a big city, with a lot of people, a big theatre - Teatro das Figuras - and being here is very important. Faro is nice, I have been thinking about opening a dance school here for some time now while keeping the one in Vila Real de Santo António, because besides being my first school, I still have my students there and I won't abandon them, of course not, but my life took a big turn. I met a guy from Faro, I moved here, and since I spend a lot of time here, why shouldn't I carry out the project I had on my mind, why not open a school here? Although there are many good schools here, there is a lot of competition as well, and I think we can always make a difference.

24. What do you like most about Faro?

I like the people here, and the city itself. I find it a welcoming city, and I feel comfortable and good here. I've always felt at home in Faro, and it's one of the main reasons that make me live here.

25. What is the first thing on your mind when you think about it?

The dock. It's beautiful.

26. What would be the soundtrack of your life story?

Right now? Ukraine's national anthem.