



Matthew Leonardi, 14, is the first American boy to be invited to attend Bolshoi Ballet school in Russia.

Bolshoi Ballet Academy gives young dancer the chance of a lifetime

It's a long way from San Bernardino to Moscow, but Matthew Leonardi, 14, is making the leap.

By David Kelly, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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In his tough San Bernardino neighborhood, Matthew Leonardi doesn't talk much of his graceful pirouettes or evenings spent dancing with girls in pink tutus.

He's not ashamed; he just doesn't need the grief. And the tights are completely off-limits.

"When they first told me I had to wear tights, I said, 'Women wear tights,' " the lanky 14-year-old said. His mother, Valerie, had a ready response: "Superman wears tights."

Matthew is no Superman, but he has accomplished a pretty super feat. He has been asked to attend the Bolshoi Ballet Academy in Moscow, a rare invitation from one of the best dance schools on Earth. According to the Russian

American Foundation, which organizes auditions for the Bolshoi, Matthew Leonardi is the only American male accepted this year.

"I would say it is uncommon globally because they only invite the best dancers," said Rina Kirshner, vice president of the foundation. "The academy needs a combination of physical features, talent and training, and Matthew has all three."

The polite, good-natured boy with the wild head of hair and mouthful of braces has never left the country. He is supposed to arrive in Russia early next month. His mother, a kindergarten teacher and single parent of four, is trying to line up sponsors to help pay the \$18,400 annual tuition. But it's an uphill battle. "I was calling New York looking for donors and when I told this one lady that not many people here had heard of the Bolshoi, she said, 'Naturally, Californians tend not to know very much about the arts,' " Valerie Leonardi said.

San Bernardino is known for many things -- the birthplace of McDonald's, the Hells Angels. Ballet isn't one of them. Still, Cecilia Hering, Matthew's dance teacher, said famed dancer Twyla Tharp once lived and trained in San Bernardino. "When I was dancing, maybe one in a thousand could go to the Bolshoi," she said. "It goes to show that it isn't where you come from."

Even Mayor Patrick Morris, 70, has dancing chops. He and his daughter belonged to a ballet company for years. They danced in "The Nutcracker," an annual performance done with the 80-year-old San Bernardino Symphony.

Finding Matthew Leonardi in his city delights Morris but doesn't surprise him. "From the capital of the Inland

Empire come a lot of great people," he said. "And I don't think we are underrepresented in the world of great talent." The teenager will perform for the City Council on Monday. "I am hoping I can tell his story in a persuasive way so the good citizens of San Bernardino can help make his dream come true," Morris said.

Ruddy-cheeked, with an easy smile, Matthew was noticed in August while participating in the Bolshoi academy's Summer Intensive Program in Connecticut. Several top professors were impressed. "They were looking for those with talent and natural ability," said Kirshner, of the Russian American Foundation. "A handful of people were selected. He was the youngest and the only boy."

The course in Moscow lasts about four years. It includes academics, and when he graduates, Matthew will receive something akin to a bachelor of fine arts degree, his mother said. Matthew seems somewhat overwhelmed by the prospect. Prior to this, he wasn't even certain he wanted to be a professional dancer -- maybe an architect or engineer. That's all changed now. "I never thought it would come to this," he said. "I'd like to be a professional ballet dancer. I want to be the best at what I do."

Matthew began dancing at age 4, when his sister's ballet teacher asked him into the studio so he would stop crying in the hallway. He immediately began imitating the moves. "A teacher took me aside and said, 'He's very good; he could be a dancer,'" his mother said. "He began dancing at the Inland Dance Academy and did 'The Nutcracker.'" A chronic ear infection rendered him partially deaf for years, and he didn't start talking until he was almost 5. He danced before he could speak. Soon he was winning competitions, but he felt isolated. "I was the only boy, and I was around all these girls," he said. "I felt funny doing it, and the girls didn't want to play with Transformers."

In middle school, he played football and basketball and didn't talk much about ballet. Other students teased him when they found out, he said. "I just walked with my head down, I didn't look at the other kids," he said. "Some carried knives." His mother recently transferred him to a Catholic school. One of Matthew's ballet teachers was Spencer Gavin, a member of the State Street Ballet in Santa Barbara. He understood his pupil's plight. When Gavin was in high school in Riverside, he, too, kept his ballet a secret. "I played sports, and the last thing I wanted to tell my friends was that I was wearing tights on the weekend," he said. "Matt is probably the only boy dancer in a 30-mile radius of his home. I worked with him for a year, choreographing contemporary pieces. He's a sponge who really soaks it up."

Matthew comes from an artistic family. His mother ran a puppet theater, his grandfather headed the music department at Northern Arizona University and his grandmother taught music at Phoenix College. The family's San Bernardino home is in a neighborhood that's seen its share of crime. Iron bars cover the windows and gang activity can be found close by. Matthew stood outside recently talking about a break-in and other incidents. "I saw a group of guys on the street once and one of them was holding a weapon," he said, sounding both excited and frightened. His mother frowned.

Despite financial challenges, the Leonardis have excelled in academics and sports. Matthew's older brother attends Johns Hopkins University on a scholarship, and his 17-year-old sister hopes to get a scholarship to Princeton to study medicine. Valerie Leonardi works three jobs. She teaches kindergarten, teaches children too sick to attend class and runs an after-school program. Most evenings, Matthew trains at Hering's School of International Ballet in Redlands, often arriving at 3 p.m. and staying until 8. Once inside, the limber teenager sheds any sense of self-consciousness and dances slowly, deliberately around the room.

"I love to travel across the floor because you can show your emotions without saying anything," he said. "When you jump in the air, you feel this total sense of freedom." On a recent evening, Hering put him through his paces. "One, two, three, pirouette!" she shouted. "Arabesque turn!" He sweated as he kept up with the commands. "Nothing is more refined or defined as a ballet dancer," Hering said approvingly.

"Matthew has a natural ability for artistry. When he sees something he can imitate it," Hering said. After class, she asked if he was ready for the challenge of the Bolshoi. Matthew nodded.

"I heard they go easy on Americans," he said.

david.kelly@latimes.com