

In the Spotlight: Irina Constantine Poulos

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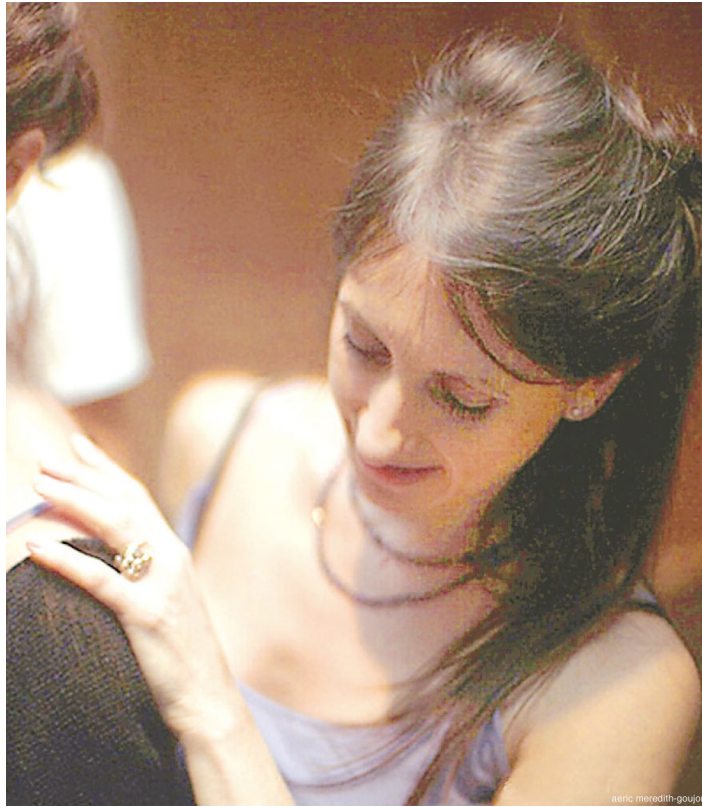
NEW YORK - Growing up in Athens didn't necessarily prepare Irina Constantine Poulos for her experience when she arrived in New York to study Choreography at the Tisch School of the Arts of NYU, but being raised by an exceptionally loving and supportive family, and a having a circle of extraordinary friends provided her with the spiritual armor that is often required to "make it there," in the words of the famous song about the Big Apple. After 17 years of dance training, she moved to New York in 2001 with two 40-year-old suitcases with broken wheels that two of her grandparents had used when they had immigrated to the States back in time. Upon arriving, she was abandoned by a non-English speaking taxi-driver in the woods somewhere north of New York. Stranded with no one to ask for directions, she told **TNH**: "I knew then the journey had begun."

TNH: What drew you to New York?

ICP: The dream I was chasing after was to study Choreography at the Tisch School of the Arts, which in my opinion is the leading educational institution in the performing arts.

TNH: New York is a tough place for an artist. What did you do after graduation?

ICP: After earning my MFA in Choreography and Performance, I founded two dance companies through which my creative ideas would come to life, and pursued the teaching of movement technique and choreography classes in a variety of educational and creative settings. Simultaneously, I would work as anything imaginable in an effort to feed the dream. I used to keep a written list of my endeavors, which I would periodically send to my family jokingly adding: A life of financial sacrifices is finally paying off! The list included: being a paralegal, lighting and costume designer, theater electrician, bouncer, physical therapist, gymnastics teacher, Greek language tutor, and insurance broker, from which I moved on to interior designer and building manager, where I was involved in construction and plumbing. And there was the socializing with the majority of the world in New York, meaning the business part of it, just another form of performing really.



Irina Constantine Poulos, consummate professional, has had a lot of day jobs to feed her choreographers dream in New York.

TNH: And your more recent endeavors?

ICP: I acted as the movement consultant on a project at the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California, which involved choreography for body movement-based social games for the rehabilitation of upper limb sensorimotor function of wheelchair confined individuals. To those letters, my family has always warmly smiled and replied: We're not worried, Bouboulina (my nickname), we know if you were to be thrown in the midst of the deep ocean you'd still find a way to swim your way out.

Well, as our good old Heraclitus would say *Panta Rei* - Everything flows. I am now the Artistic Director and Choreographer of Choreo Theatro (www.choreotheatro.org), a non-profit Greenpoint-based performance company, which has been making leaps of success over the past couple of years, all thanks to the talent, generosity of spirit and support of a big circle of artists and friends who believed in the idea which started years ago, during a February meeting within two non-heated, badly in need of renovation rooms at an industrial building facing Brooklyn's waterfront. With the support of the Kennedy Foundation, those

rooms looking at Manhattan's skyline from their 17 large windows have turned into a performance production studio, an inspiring home to dancers, choreographers, costume, set, lighting, sound and interaction designers, painters, photographers, composers, musicians, and writers — a space in which imagination prevails by bringing to life what is deemed by many people as the impossible.

TNH: What was Choreo Theatro's last production?

ICP: It was a collaboration with The Readers of Homer, which put Odysseus' adventures onto the stage of the famous 92nd Street Y. We are keeping our next one a secret until all publicity material is ready, but we promise that it will be a once in a lifetime experience. In this contemporary multimedia manifestation, a unique collaboration of modern dance, original music, and never before utilized virtual reality technology provided by the School of Cinematic Arts of USC will shape the timeless dilemma of an untold story.

TNH: What is required to be a good choreographer?

ICP: I sometimes relate being a choreographer to my idea of what genuine parenthood is; the love one gives, whether that is to one's students, collaborators, audiences, or art itself, comes back infinitely multiplied. But in order to give, one first needs to understand how the "other" feels, thinks, and perceives the world on its own. I call this the careful study of the human spirit and its innate contradictions. People are breathing oxymora, and so it is part of human nature to struggle, strive, fail and thrive

again within life's conjoined oppositions. With that always in mind I approach each person as a unique amalgam of thoughts, ways of sensing and interacting with the world. I can then connect those into a form of expression in dance. With its healing power we can confront life, death, and everything in between, through a poignant expression but wordless language.

TNH: Has your life path been influenced by your Ancient Greek heritage?

ICP: Undoubtedly, though in more abstract ways than perhaps expected. The Greek ideals I was taught as a young student at Athens College were embedded in my being in spite of the fact that I was never able to recite them verbatim. Funnily enough, it was not until after I came of age that I felt the irresistible urge to go back and read our philosophers' works, a second and a third time around, now truly being able to apply their views to today's world.

TNH: What's the greatest lesson you've ever learned?

ICP: Two years ago my father got unexpectedly sick with terminal cancer that gave him three months of life at the early age of 68. In an effort to prepare our mother, my little sister and myself, he said certain "whys" do not have an answer. I later on realized through reading the journals he left for us that what he truly meant, but was hard to say aloud, was that certain 'answers' are as simple as learning how to let go. We live in an era that promotes a never-ending struggle for success, which is a great goal to have overall, but I have found that what we are almost never told is that we are not invincible, and that we are certainly not infallible. And so when faced with those irrevocable turns of life, we remain numbed, instead of gracefully accepting our loss and carving a path towards a new future.

TNH: Do you have role models?

ICP: Kipling's poem "If" encompasses all that I was raised to strive for. I do think it relevant to our Greek ideals, and the way our ancestors wanted us to lead our lives.

TNH: What's your ultimate goal in life?

ICP: To live a full life. It is what brought me to New York, the inspiration behind founding Choreo Theatro, the reason why I laugh when faced with adversity.

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