

## **BY FLORENCE AVAKIAN**

**NEW YORK CITY, NY-----**The excitement was palpable as close to 370 supporters, friends, dancers, parents and alumni members enthusiastically applauded and cheered the 15-year accomplishments of the Shushi Armenian Dance Ensemble under the artistic direction of Seta Paskalian-Kantardjian. Held on Friday evening, May 30, at a gala dinner dance at New York's Kavookjian Auditorium, it was held under the auspices of Armenian Diocese (eastern), and its Primate Archbishop Khajag Barsamian.

Following the invocation by St. Vartan Cathedral Dean Rev. Mardiros Chevian, welcoming and congratulatory remarks were made by several attendees including Serda Belekdanian, Shushi senior dance member Rita Kahvejian and Ani Setrakian Manoukian who 15 years ago asked Seta Paskalian-Kantardjian to teach her and a few school friends an Armenian dance for a school recital.

### **CONNECTED ME WITH MY HERITAGE**

“Paying tribute to the extraordinary dedication and talent of artistic director and choreographer Seta Paskalian-Kantardjian, Ani Setrakian Manoukian said, “Being a Shushi dancer connected me to my heritage, and taught me grace, poise, determination and discipline in my life. Dancing transcends age and music.”

That was the beginning of an amazing 15 years that started with only 7 girls in 1992, and has grown to 110 members, including 21 males, some as young as five years old. The group has had sold out performances in New York, New Jersey, Philadelphia, Boston, California, Canada, and Armenia and Artzagh. The group has also

been featured on the March 2004 issue of *National Geographic* magazine depicting their Khor Virab performance in Armenia.

Guest speaker Vartan Abdo, Director of the *Armenian Radio Hour* program of NJ, in congratulating Paskalian-Kantardjian, the dancers, their parents and grandparents, said that the group “has given community pride, inspiration, energy, and has helped expose the youth to Armenian culture. They remind us of our difficult past, and promising future,” he said and pointed out the important role of the Diocese in sponsoring the group.

Abdo also noted that Paskalian-Kantardjian serves as vice president of the Tekeyan Cultural Association, and comes from a “gifted family” which includes Sarkis Paskalian, the originator, choreographer and director of the Antranig Dance Ensemble which performed for many years in the United States. “We need courageous visionaries such as these individuals. We will find our way out of our forest when we learn to integrate our resources,” he declared.

## **A MEMORABLE PERFORMANCE**

It was then time for the much-awaited performance of the Shushi dancers, who delighted with the numbers audiences have come to love for years. With the younger members performing on stage, and the senior dancers in the middle of the hall, the group performed Khachaturian’s “Karoun Yerevan”, Ara Gevorgian’s “Arakads”, “Sardarabad”, “Lernabar”, and “Ardashad”, and the popular “Potpourri” and “Shourch Bar” with featured popular singer Salpi Mailian.

But for this viewer it was Khachatour Avetisian’s “Im Love Im Love” danced by the senior females with elegant hand movements, delicate choreography, and magnificent S-shaped costumes, half red and half silver that was most impressive. By the time the last

number was performed, the ever popular “Zartir Lao-Artiok Ov Ker En”, the festive crowd, by now in a frenzy of deafening cheering and rhythmic clapping, gave them a lengthy standing ovation.

Closing the formal program, the Primate following his tribute to Paskalian-Kantardjian, the dancers, and their parents, pointed out the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. Vartan Cathedral this year, and its original builders, most of whom were survivors of the Genocide. “They were leaders of hope. Because of their profound faith and vision, we are here today. And tonight’s 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Shushi Dance Ensemble is a wonderful expression of their vision and belief.”

Following the dinner, a 15<sup>th</sup> Shushi anniversary cake was cut by Paskalian-Kantardjian, with another cake marking the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Armenian Radio Hour* presented to Vartan Abdo. An anniversary raffle drawing took place with donated gifts, and dancing to the Melik Ohanian Band continued for the remainder of the event.]

Seta Paskalian-Kantardjian, imbued with the art of dance since the age of five, had already performed on Lebanese TV when only seven years old. Three years later, she instructed her classmates in cultural dancing, and by age 12, she was teaching dance in her hometown of Beirut to the AGBU students. The group won first place in a dance competition.

She continued her dance career, dancing in the Lebanese Baalbeck Festival, and won the first prize in all the AGBU and Tekeyan Cultural Association dance competitions. Emigrating to the U.S., she became a soloist and dance assistant to the Antranig Dance Ensemble, and taught in several Saturday Armenian Schools in NY and NJ, before creating the Shushi group.

## **AN OBSESSION**

In a conversation with this writer, Seta who now holds a full time job, comments, “Shushi is an obsession for me. Otherwise, I couldn’t do it. I don’t have time to socialize.” Originally, she had five interviews with the famed Estee Lauder Cosmetics Company, but didn’t accept the position because of the dance group. “When you see the kids sing and dance, it’s my payback.”

She recalled the first time the group was created with seven females, “Shushi was a fun thing to do. Then I saw how enthusiastic they were, and that more and more wanted to join. When the kids go on stage with their costumes on, they take ownership. Now they feel they are Armenian.”

In 2001, 12 girls danced in Khor Virab in Armenia with 3000 youth attending from all over the world. “The girls came from the back carrying Armenian flags. It was a very small performance, but the most memorable, inspirational, and emotional,” she gushes. This followed with performances in Montreal, and Armenia again in 2005.

“The discipline in our group is strict but loving. When we have a break, we meet and go over coming events, birthdays, etc. The members are not allowed to eat junk food. I never feel that we are good enough. We are always striving for the better. Seta Tantig” (aunt) as she is affectionately known to her dancers, explains that rehearsals are held in home and hall basements, and the 1000-plus costumes are stored in the home of Krikor and Arpi Arslanian.

“The most difficult aspect is having no time,” says Seta who confesses to worrying a lot, getting little sleep, eating sparingly, and having chest pains. But the positives are many. “What drives me is the Armenian music, and the youngsters’ enthusiasm, their

inner feelings, and excitement in learning more about their heritage.” She gives much credit to her husband Zareh who has donated his professional services, making hundreds of costumes, her son Ara, and brother Sarkis for their “unconditional support”

The future? “Shushi is not a business. I would like to find people like me, and I would like to make the group bigger and better. I want the authentic Armenian music to be preserved forever. My inspiration is from the music,” she repeats. “To listen to Khachatour Avetisian’s music tires me because it draws all my emotional feelings to a great height. My choreography translates from adapting it to any authentic Armenian music. Until I select a song, I listen to it many times. It is my inspiration.”

The ensemble named Shushi in 1994, in honor of the third anniversary of the liberation of Shushi in Artzakh, is scheduled to perform in Yerevan’s Opera House on July 3, under the patronage of the Hayastan All Armenian Fund. On July 6, it will give an exclusive performance to the Armenian Army at the Nubarashen military base in the suburbs of Yerevan. And from July 11 to 18, it will perform on the Armenian Heritage Cruise. For more information you may visit [www.shushidance.org](http://www.shushidance.org).