

# Biography

## Mary Nassibian

Mary Etienne Nassibian (née Kouvari) was born in Alexandria, Egypt, in 1941, from Greek parents. Her childhood was spent between the cities of Cairo and Alexandria. She matriculated from Ahilopoulio, Cairo in 1958.

Mary's passion for dance started long before she could walk. At the age of 8, she started dancing classes in Cairo. At age 14, she travelled to France to meet her mother's elder brother, her famous uncle, George Guetary (né Lambros Vorloglou) (Lead actor in the film "An American In Paris") for the first time. He immediately offered to take her under his wing, though being raised in a relatively conservative household, her mother denied his proposition.

After studying dance for 10 years in Egypt, Mary was to go to England to study choreography in 1959. However, as the Egyptians were on friendly terms with the Russians at the time, and as ballet and folkloric dance was to be promoted, she postponed her trip to England.

At the age of 17, and concerned about her mother's opinion, Mary secretly auditioned for the National Dance Group, Founoun L El Shaabeyia, who were then being instructed by Russian Ballet Masters.

She was selected from over 2500 candidates, where she was a Principal Dancer of the Egyptian National Folkloric Ballet, Cairo Egypt in 1959. The Performing Arts Advanced Diploma was a 5 year contract involving full time training, performing, and teaching.

In the 1960's, though political times were very challenging for the Europeans in Egypt, Mary was allowed to stay in the country and continue working with the Egyptian Folkloric Ballet. As she did not want to be separated from her family who had left the country, she decided to break her contract in 1964 and follow them to Athens, Greece.

### **A New Beginning in Australia**

In 1963, Mary married Ashod Nassibian, a family business printer at Nassibian Studios in Cairo. They migrated to Australia in 1964. Their focus was starting a new life together in a foreign country and a few years later they had their first child, a son.

In 1972, Mary was approached by Mrs Margret Walker (founder of the Melbourne Ballet Club and the Borovansky Ballet Company in 1941). She was eager for Mary to pursue a career in folkloric dancing and endeavoured to obtain a grant from the Australian Council of Arts. Though she was a busy young mother, Mary was able to continue her life's passion in dance and worked as a dance instructor at St Mary's, Sydney.

As Folkloric dancing is not restricted to any particular type of nationality, Mary continued to obtain work from Mrs Walker, who established a centre for Folkloric dancing, the Margaret Walker Folk Dance Centre, obtaining numerous grants from the Australian Council of Arts.

The first time that Mary raised funds for a Charity was in 1973. She raised \$55,000, in today's equivalent, for the Deaf and Blind Society, and won an award for the highest funds raised by an individual.

In 1974, Mary returned to Greece for intense Folkloric dance training with renowned Greek dance master, Mr Karabetsos. From 1974, Mary taught dance to many children and adults from various ethnic groups, including the Greeks from Egypt Association, Parramatta, Stanmore, Burwood, Manly, and Marrickville Greek Community Associations to name a few. At the end of each year, she held a concert at various theatres (the Seymour Centre, the Footbridge Theatre Sydney), and she was awarding students with medals for their accomplishments.

Alongside teaching dance in Sydney, Australia, Mary continued to raise money for other charities like the Heart Foundation and the Red Cross. During this time, Mary became known amongst the Greek and Egyptian communities within Australia, and who were supporting her philanthropic quests.

### **The Mary Nassibian Folkloric Dance Society**

In 1978, the Mary Nassibian Folkloric Dance Society was created, receiving a number of grants from the Premiers Department and other Government bodies.

Over the years, Mary's students participated in many festivals and events, Paradise Gardens Greek Day, Folkloric Festival Sydney, Stanmore Greek Community Australian Islamic Cultural Society, and the Sydney Festival.

Mary was often hosting dinner dances, and presenting shows, while supporting the Greek and Egyptian communities, and educating Australians about different cultures and their art.

Mary's professional dance group toured Australia often for various Greek and Egyptian events, festivals, conferences, private productions.

The Shell National Folkloric Festival at the Opera House was one of the many highlights for Mary's performances and choreographies. Working closely with Guillermo Keys-Arenas (the major artistic producer-director of the annual event), the Mary Nassibian Dancers were representing the Greek and Egyptian ethnic groups, for several years.

From 1979 to 1984, Mary's interest in dance and choreography was broadening, and her work appeared on Australian National Television. She joined forces with Mr Harry Michaels (Host, Producer), performing and choreographing, developing contemporary Greek dance and Folkloric numbers for his programs, The Greek Affair, and The Greek Variety Show.

While working for several years as a choreographer and performer in studios at Channel 10 and 7, and in Newcastle, Mary expanded her talent into acting, where she did a number of voice overs in Greek, for several advertisements, Joyce Mayne, Joe Hasham of Electronic Sales and Services, etc. Including acting roles for television films and commercials, and her face was on billboards throughout Australia for Sunwhite Calrose Rice.

During this time, Mary's directing skills lead to her collaboration with Mr Geoff Millichamp, as co-ordinator of his shows and productions.

In 1981, Mary became a presenter for Channel 0-28 (SBS), for a number of years, with a main focus on Greek shows, both in English and Greek. Her highlight moments were interviews with Telly Savalas (American actor & singer), and a meet & greet with Prince Charles (the present King of England).

In 1982-1983, Mary prepared various productions for the Egyptian Show at the Hordern Pavillion.

Mary and her dance group appeared at the International Dance Festival, from their first year in 1982, until 1984.

Despite a car accident later that year causing her major injuries, Mary continued to work as much as she could, while being a single mother of 3. She kept her dance schools running, and continued to be involved with various organisations, including the Greek Young Matrons Association, in later years.

The Mary Nassibian Dance schools ended in 1989, with their last successful concert. Mary moved to Greece in the early 90's, where she continued her creative career.

Mary was invited to teach workshops and seminars at her sister's ballet school in Athens, Greece, Kouvari Dance School during the 90's and early 2000's.

In collaboration with Mary's daughter Tania, they co-created very unique choreographies combining both modern and traditional dance that were performed by Mary's students at the amphitheatre, Veakion Theatre, Piraeus, for several consecutive years, with further performances in Australia.

Between Europe and Australia, Mary continued to instill her knowledge and dance creations to a new generation of dancers, including at the Nassibian Dancers which is still in operation to this day. Ms

Christina Efthymiades, a long time outstanding student of Mary, is running the school in Burwood.

### **The Athens Olympic Games 2004**

In 2004, Mary was a production assistant at the Opening and Closing ceremonies for the Olympic Games – Athens Greece.

In 2007, returning back to live in Sydney, Australia, Mary's career as a performing artist, dance teacher, choreographer, actor, and fundraising machine has spanned throughout many decades.

Mary's endless life passion to help and to inspire others, led her to become one of the founding members of The Bloody Great Committee, in 2012. She was instrumental in the creation of the Foundation, and actively gathered the community each year to the event starting in 2013, which laid the groundwork for the amazing accomplishments during the years that followed.

In 2022, the foundation reached their goal of raising \$1.0m for blood cancer research for Sydney Hospital. Mary's last creation and Egyptian dance choreography was a triumph at the event in October 2022. She died in Sydney on November 18th, 2022.

Written by Tania Nassibian  
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*“ I feel that every human being has a  
God-Given gift,  
a talent that they can choose to  
develop.*

*I have always known that my purpose in life  
has strongly been related to Dance -  
To Teach, To Choreograph,  
and this way to bring  
a smile to people's faces.*

*What a pleasure it is indeed  
to find students with that same spark,  
the same motivating love of Dance.*

*Through teaching, I fulfil my purpose.”*

**Mary Nassibian**

### **Photo Link:**

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/obaboibo1c7vff6055cga/h?dl=0&rlkey=rm0yoabvr701pnbugmxwy0qfn>