

Dancers become scuba divers to perform new underwater ballet

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Underwater dancers, mostly French and Greek and including three who are disabled and three children, perform during the dress rehearsal of "Drops of Breath" in Sounion, about 50 miles south of Athens, Greece, Sept. 24, 2015. AP Photo/Nikos Chalkiopoulos

SOUNION, Greece — Divers usually look more like astronauts than ballerinas.

Yet 14 dancers climbed into scuba gear last week for an underwater ballet. The performance took place in Cape Sounian. It is near Athens, Greece. They swam beneath an ancient temple of Poseidon, the Greek god of the sea.

The scuba-diving dancers could be the first ever in the world.

The ballet, called "Drops of Breath," was shown for three days.

In the dance on a round stage on the seabed, the dancers swim together and apart. Their hands move, turning their breath into tiny bubbles. Music comes from two underwater speakers. The music was written after studying how sound travels in water.

Audience On Land Or Underwater

When the water is clear, 40 people can watch from underwater seats. They sit on the seabed about 16 feet below the surface. They wear air tanks. Another 40 people can swim on the water's surface with snorkel gear. On land, a giant screen shows the underwater dancing.

Unfortunately, Friday's audience had to watch a movie of the performance from seats on the beach. The water was cloudy, so they would not have been able to see much.

The dancers are mostly French and Greek. Three are disabled and use wheelchairs, and three are children.

The performance was the idea of French choreographer Sophie Bulbulyan and Greek choreographer Apostolia Papadamaki. Choreographers create dances.

Creators Met During A Dive

The two women are both divers. They met three years ago during a dive.

"We liked each other," Papadamaki explained. They began talking about dance. One day after a fun dive, they suddenly came up with the idea for an underwater ballet. "Let's see if it's possible, an underwater dance performance," she said.

It was possible, but not easy.

"This project is like going to the moon on a bike," said Bulbulyan. "There was an enormous amount of difficulties."

For a start, the dancers had to learn to dive. Even harder, they had to learn to control their breathing. They needed to hold their breath and carefully let it out in order to hover upside down and sideways, or rise and fall. Most of the performers became divers only in the last year.

Project Took Planning And Money

Also, there were many things to arrange. The two women had to find diving gear, transportation and the money to pay for the project. They also had to deal with bad weather and problems in Greece.

The music needed much thought and planning. Trifonas Koutsourelis wrote the music. He had to learn how sound travels underwater. His music had to be heard clearly and also the dancers had to be able to move to it. Water slows down movement.

It took him two and a half months, said Koutsourelis. He said he has not slept for the last three weeks at least.

For Dancers, A Feeling "Beyond Words"

For the dancers, especially the disabled, the experience was "beyond words," said Papadamaki.

"They feel equal. For the first time they can move without a wheelchair," without somebody having to carry them, she said.

Irini Kourouvani is one of the dancers who uses a wheelchair. She has been dancing for 15 years. At first, Kourouvani was worried about the water because she needed a flotation board to swim.

But she loved it from her first dive.

"I forgot to be afraid and to get scared," Kourouvani said. "I felt like I was floating in space, like I was on earth and the wind was coming and lifting me up."

Now, she said, the sea is something "I won't part with."