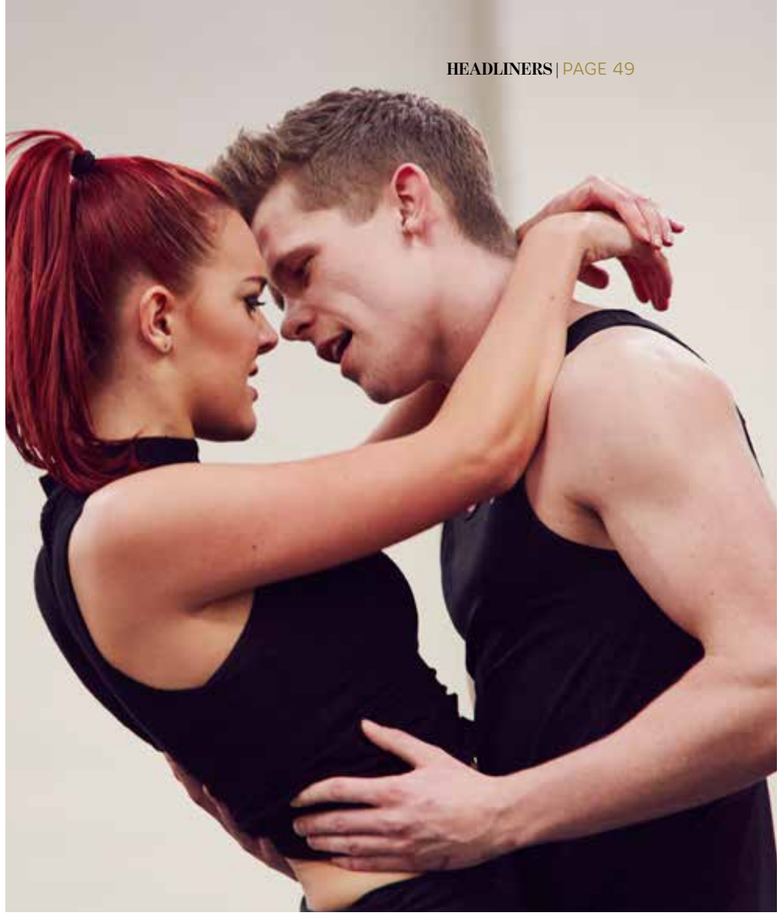
SHOW TIME

And 5, 6, 7, 8... We go behind the scenes at rehearsals for Headliners' electrifying new production, War Dance

WORDS **SAMANTHA WHITAKER** | PHOTOGRAPHY **ALUN CALLENDER**







Picture the scene: in a bright, mirrored studio, a group of lithe performers huddle around their choreographer, listening intently, nodding. 'Remember you're really angry,' he says, clenching his fist. 'Show me how angry you are.' Behind them, two dancers work together to nail the timing of a tap sequence, while another group takes five, stretching, marking routines and testing out their singing voices. In the corner, the producers sit at a table surveying the action.

We're in The Academy in Southampton, home of Headliners Theatre Company, and this is Ventura's crew rehearsing a brand-new show, *War Dance*. It's about two rival dance troupes – one Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers fanatics, the other street dancers – both competing for the chance to perform in a top new production by a mysterious producer, whom none of them have met. It's an explosion of music and dance, with an exciting twist.

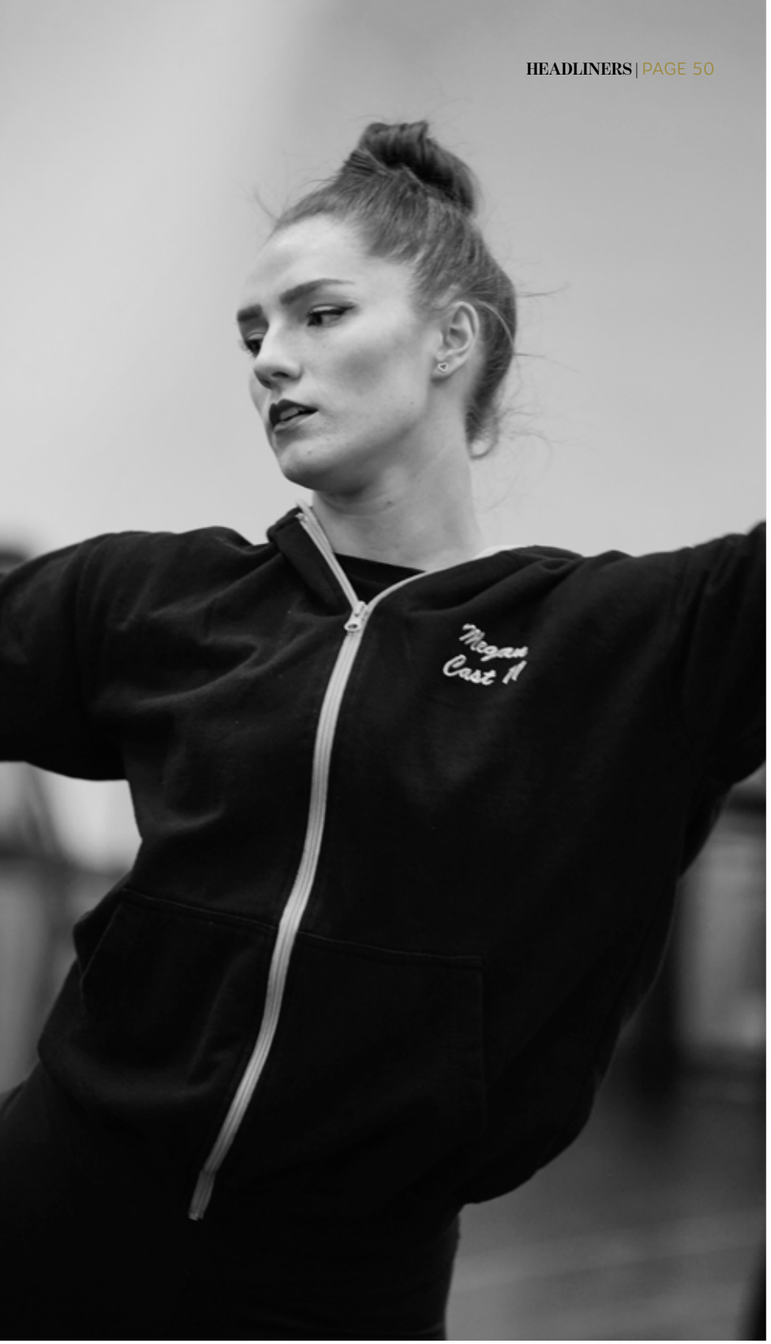
Here in the studio, life is imitating art – but, fortunately, instead of bitter rivalry, there's just watertight teamwork as the cast rehearse for the final time before they go on board. 'For a producer, the trick is choosing the right people to work with,' explains Deke Arlon, who has been producing shows and managing talent with his wife Jill for more than 40 years. Deke has represented stars such as Dennis Waterman, Elaine Paige, Ned Sherrin and Michael Flatley (*Riverdance*), selling more than 200 million records in total, while the couple's current musical, *Sunny Afternoon*, featuring music by The Kinks, is touring after a West End stint that won them four Olivier Awards.

The original idea for *War Dance* was Jill's, conceived as a story that explores the evolution of dance. For one reason or another, she never found the right place for it, but now its home will be Ventura. Working with their son Jamie, also a manager, music publisher and theatre producer, the Arlons have condensed their full-length musical into a snappy 50-minute spectacle.

'We've had to adapt it drastically, but actually it really concentrates the mind and the energy,' says Jill. 'The dialogue is now absolutely down to the essentials of what the show is about.' In fact, the use of dialogue is what sets this production apart from others performed across the fleet. 'P&O Cruises was looking for a new kind of show, something more narrative,' Jamie explains. 'They've never done dialogue like this on board before.'

Jill and Jamie have also used the music to help drive the story, with songs chosen ▶

OPPOSITE AND TOP LEFT Headliners Theatre Company, Ventura crew
ABOVE Scenes from the dressing room









specifically for their lyrics. Well-known numbers, such as Cole Porter's *Night and Day* and Michael Jackson's *Smooth Criminal*, and lesser-known tracks have all been rearranged and brought up to date by Deke's good friend and long-time musical collaborator Mike Moran, who has worked with the likes of David Bowie and Freddie Mercury, among other music legends. '*War Dance* features a truly eclectic mix of styles, which is something that's not done very often,' says Mike. 'Sometimes the genres are even mixed within one song, so it's quite a challenge to make that work.'

Of course, there's also an equally exciting mix of dance styles represented and, to manage this, Gary Lloyd, a highly successful West End choreographer, was chosen to choreograph and direct. It's the first time the Arlons and Gary have worked together. 'I'm used to choreographing different dance styles, but I come from a ballroom and Latin American background, so a lot of that has gone into the show,' says Gary, whose West End production *Thriller Live* is currently touring the world. 'It's been a phenomenal learning experience for the cast to go from tango to Fosse to Lindy Hop to street dance and then back to ballroom,' he adds. For the intense rehearsal period, Gary has passed his choreographer's hat to his two assistants, Rose and Jason, so that he can concentrate on directing the show.

It's fair to say that Gary and the Arlons were all slightly nervous before they met Ventura's crew. 'The ships use the same cast for all eight shows performed during a season, so they have to be incredibly versatile. The demand on them is huge,' Gary explains. Ventura's 14-strong crew is made up of 10 'returners' and four new members, who were selected during open auditions in September last year. They began rehearsing at the beginning of January and have already learned six shows. *War Dance* is their seventh, and they've picked it up in just 10 days.

'They've not done a show like this before,' Deke explains. 'They're chiefly singers and dancers, but we're giving them the fresh challenge of really acting.' On the first day of rehearsals, the team held their own audition to allocate the right parts to the cast, and Jill has worked closely with each of them to make sure they really understand their character.

One of the crew's new members is Olivia Grace Beale, who graduated from Merseyside Dance and Drama School last summer. 'Even though I've studied singing, dancing and acting, I was a bit anxious when I found out I'd be speaking,' she says. 'But it's great, because it's pulled me out of my comfort zone and I love my character – she's quirky and feisty, a bit like me.'

In fact, all of the cast have really risen to the challenge. 'We took a risk, but the cast have come through with flying colours,' says Deke. 'Everybody's rehearsed more than their eight hours a day, then gone home and continued practising. And they come in every day with a smile. They're a tremendous bunch.'

'We've pulled every ounce of talent from them,' adds Jill. 'We didn't think we'd get this standard within such a short rehearsal period. I watched a run-through yesterday and was so entranced I forgot to write notes.'

The cast had a final 'welcome show' to learn, then in April they boarded Ventura, along with the production team, for their first cruise to 'bed in' the shows. Rehearsals began at midnight, when the evening's entertainment finished, and they polished the shows one by one until they were ready for guests.

The cast will be performing two or three shows a night on Ventura until September, when a new cast takes over. 'I've never been on a cruise ship, so the first challenge will be finding my way around,' says Olivia, who'll be away from her family for around eight months in total. 'I really want to travel the world, and what better way to do it than by dancing.'

Towards the end of the afternoon, everyone gathers for a final run-through in front of a lively audience of other Headliners crews, who have been busy rehearsing in the adjacent studios. Even without costumes or props, the performance is slick and the characters shine through. It's truly captivating in a way that only the best musical theatre can be. ■

GET YOUR TICKET

See Headliners perform *War Dance* on Ventura. Book now at **pocruises.com**







OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT A dancer perfects her routine; the props boxes; (left to right) Deke Arlon, Mike Moran, Jill Arlon, Jamie Arlon and Gary Lloyd watch every move; dancers rehearsing **ABOVE LEFT** (front) Olivia Grace Beale. **ABOVE RIGHT** A model of the set and costumes