

From domestic to dancer

When Lucy Msomi heard Indian classical music, her feet started to move. And it did not end there. Rosalee Telela found out what happened

A woman stands outside hanging washing on the line. But her mind is not on the domestic work she is paid to do.

Lucy Msomi is dreaming about dancing in a Punjabi to soft Indian music in front of thousands of people. She can hear and see them applaud her performance. She can see the surprise on some of their faces that an African woman can perfect an Indian dance.

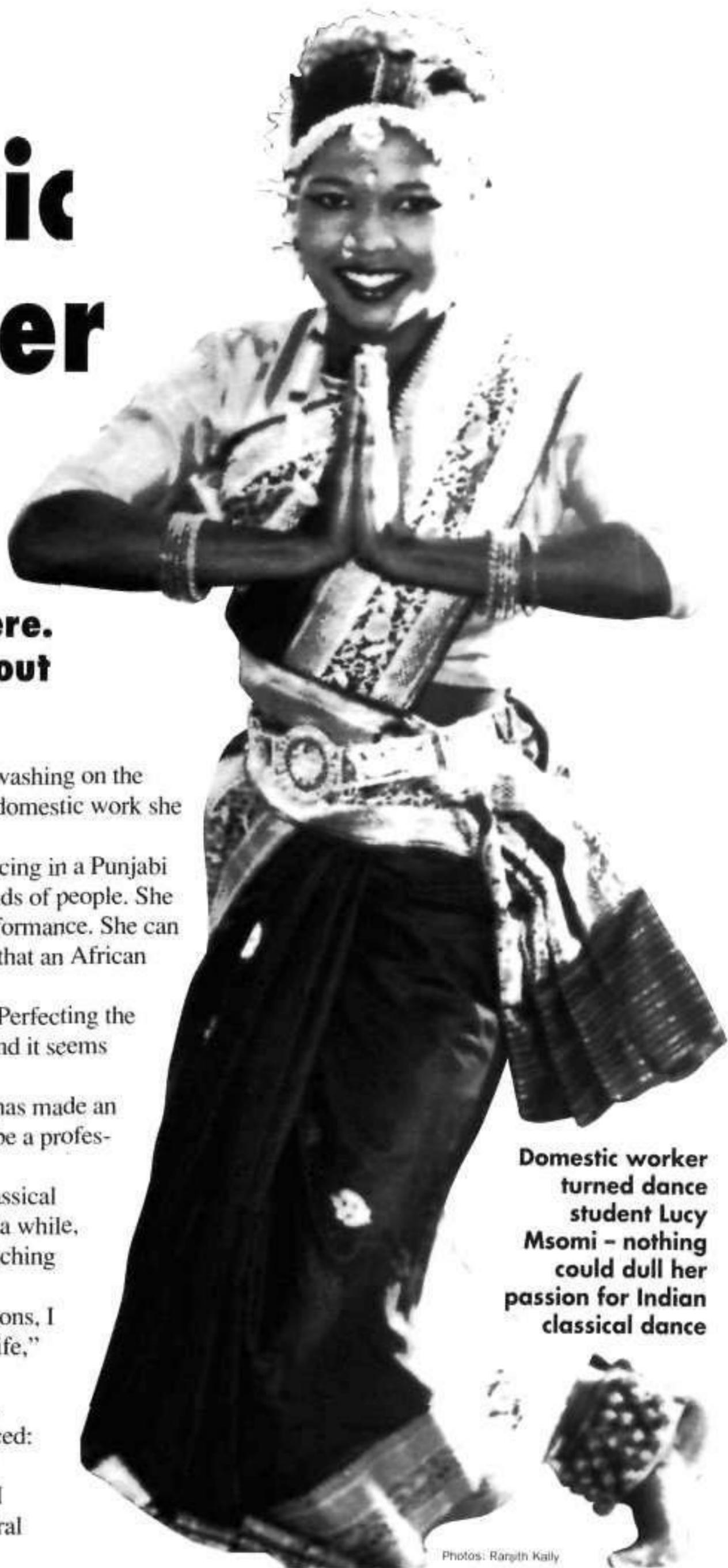
For Msomi this is not just a dream. Perfecting the Indian dance is what she is aiming at and it seems nothing is going to stop her.

Msomi (20) from Tongaat in Natal has made an unusual career choice — she wants to be a professional Indian dancer.

After she fell in love with Indian classical dancing, she began taking lessons. For a while, on her days off work, she had been watching pupils of the dance practice.

"Since I began taking the dance lessons, I feel I have achieved something in my life," says Msomi.

Kumari Ambigay, Msomi's teacher, remembers the first time her pupil danced: "Lucy took a liking to the dancing and asked if it was possible for her to join. I know that all African people have natural



Domestic worker turned dance student Lucy Msomi — nothing could dull her passion for Indian classical dance

Photos: Rangith Kally

rhythm, so I asked her to do one or two steps. She was absolutely beautiful.”

Ambigay, who runs an Indian classical dance school, told Msomi that Indian classical dance was difficult and takes a long time to learn. “I saw what they were doing was difficult, but I was determined to try it out,” Msomi says.

Her second lesson was on a Saturday and Msomi showed up dressed in her Punjabi outfit, ready for the big step.

“The first time I went into that dance class I just simply loved it,” she says.

Msomi is learning a difficult dance called Bharatha Natyam. This is one of the most famous dances in India.

Although Msomi was different from the rest of the class because she is older, African and speaks very little English, Ambigay says she fitted into the class easily.

“Dancing is international. All you have to do is understand the rhythm. Also, my pupils do not know the languages where the dance came from, so Lucy is not that different from them,” she said.

Msomi herself does not feel threatened or shy by being different. “I feel comfortable and I believe that, if one wants to do something one has to start somewhere — even in a class full of young girls.”

Her mother is pleased with what her daughter is trying to achieve. “My mother said she would not stand in my way and would support me in any way she can.”

Msomi says although her partner wants to have children,



Lucy Msomi with her dance teacher, Kumari Ambigay

she is not yet ready for such a commitment: “If I had a child now, I would have to give up dancing.

“He knows what dancing means to me and has agreed to wait.”

Although her mother and partner support her dancing, she said some people are against it: “They say I should not do something that is outside the African or Zulu culture. They call me a fool.”

But Msomi does not let them get her down.

“People have to realise this is something I want to do with all my heart and nothing is going to stop me. Those who say this do not understand what dancing, no matter in what culture, is all about.”

For her, a successful career in Indian dancing is not impossible. Ambigay explains: “Forty

one of my former pupils now run dancing classes. My son and daughter who were students in Indian classical dancing are now full time performers.”

Although Msomi has almost finished her basic training, she still has a long way to go.

“It takes five years to complete the course. Lucy has to know eight different dances in order to graduate. Then I will take her to India to learn more,” Ambigay explained.

Msomi can't wait to dance her way to India. “It will be wonderful to travel to the country where the dance I do comes from. I want to show them that anyone, even a Zulu woman, can learn their dance. I will work very hard to make my dream come true.” ❀