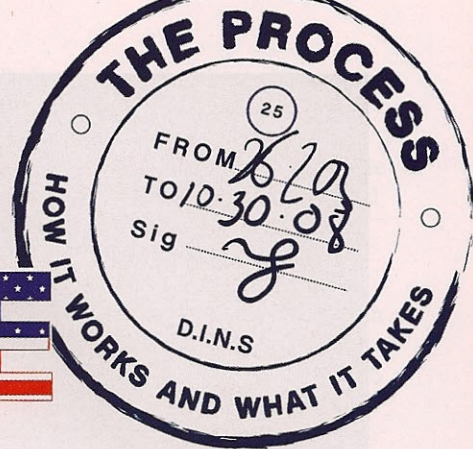


Dancing STATESIDE



New York-based immigration expert **Amanda Gillespie** offers advice to dancers seeking work opportunities in the US

The start of a new year is always an incredibly busy time in immigration, and every year I watch, mystified, as my calendar fills to bursting with new appointments. There is no obvious cause until I start meeting with clients and then the most important reason – that human reason – makes itself clear. Clients come in with passport in pocket, their press clippings and awards in a binder and expressions ranging from mild trepidation to downright terror. And then they explain. “Getting my visa sorted out is my New Year’s Resolution,” said one, then another, and yet another. They then fix me with a look of dread I imagine colonoscopists, tax inspectors, and parking attendants have suffered

every hour of their professional lives. But I can tell you that most people depart with a smile on their face. “That wasn’t bad at all!” they say.

If you have ever been interested in seeking work opportunities in the US but dreaded the thought of the work visa process, I hope the following advice I offer will transform a dark tunnel into a well-lit corridor with clear markers and a US visa at the end of it.

My office, Amanda C. Gillespie Inc., specialises in preparing the all important portfolios for the O-1 visa, or the category for “aliens of extraordinary ability.” Arriving in New York with a Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, and the hope of chiselling out a small nook for myself, I landed a legal-writing job at an immigration law firm more than happy to have me draft the extensive O-1 visa petitions. From there, I worked with every kind of creative you can imagine – from ballerinas to breakdancers, from film directors to fashion models. I was pretty sure I had the best job in the world and completely certain that my clients were just as I wrote in their petitions: truly extraordinary. My office often serves as a first stop for artists considering making a life in the US.

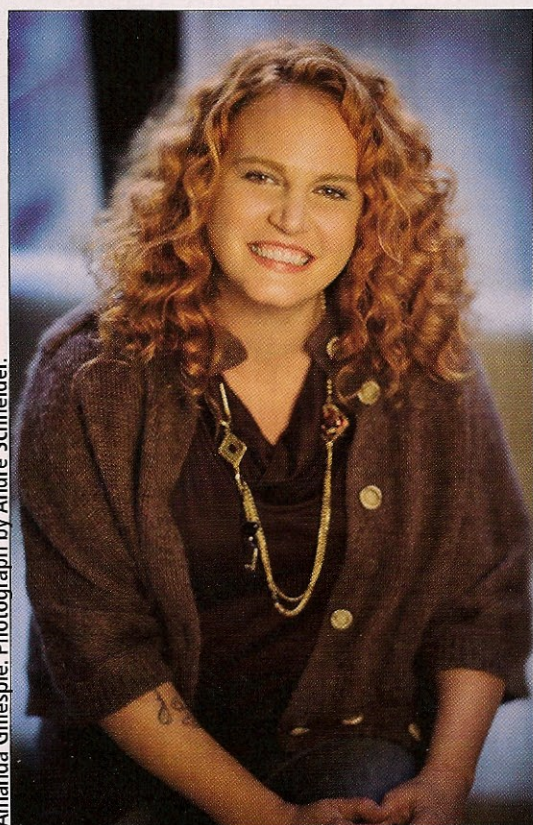
With the current economic slow-down also affecting the US, I wondered whether the office would be as busy in 2009. Lo and behold, on January 2, the phones were ringing off the hook with new clients as well as older clients ready to renew their visas and take on the new year. One was a dancer who in just a few years became a favourite of Mikhail Baryshnikov and now choreographs worldwide.

Another was a hip hop dancer who with just one visa had begun her own dance company and put on productions that drew smash reviews. When I asked them how things were going, they answered “good! Too busy, but good!” Dance remains alive and well in New York, and it continues to open its doors to people of talent and audacity.

The O-1 visa category

Any dancer thinking of coming to the US should know about the O-1 visa. A three-year employment visa, it is a category that applies to artists, business people, athletes, scientists, and so on. While “extraordinary ability” is a high bar – the best – the first thing you can do is understand the standard and see where your career falls according to it. I give a lot of good news to people who thought they wouldn’t qualify when in fact they do. Importantly, if someone is not quite ready for the O-1, there are other visa categories we can consider as alternatives – like the O-2 visa for critical assistants to an O-1 holder. Some of my favourite clients are ones who, if they didn’t quite qualify when we first met, kept hard at work, and now have a new O-1 visa in their passports.

The good news is that determination of your extraordinariness will not come down to whether the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) agent had a tasty lunch or a hair-raising commute. The government grants O-1 eligibility on a kind of point system – your ability to qualify comes down to how many categories of evidence you’re able to submit with your case. There are seven categories in total, and the O-1 requires that you present a minimum of three. The sort of evidence that might satisfy the visa includes press notices on you or your projects, evidence of your participation in productions like dance performances or competitions, letters from experts in the field, your ability to charge high fees for your expertise, proof of teaching, and so on. Submitting just a few examples won’t do, so accept as many jobs as you can to get your name out there. A great



Amanda Gillespie. Photograph by Andre Schneider.