

SATURDAY OBSERVER



THE FACE OF TORTURE

'American Taliban' John Walker Lindh figures in the debate on whether torture is ever justified.

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STEPS TOWARD TYRANNY

In fighting terror, we risk losing our freedom, writes Peter Zimonjic.

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21st-century Cinderellas



The Citizen goes behind the scenes as the debutantes of 2004 prepare for the biggest, flashiest social night of their lives.



ISABEL TEOTONIO

They twirled left, she went right. They twirled right, she went left.

"Exams — that's all I kept thinking about," says a frustrated Nadia Mostafa, explaining why she was out of synch with the others.

"Hopefully it was the exams. It better not be that I have two left feet."

Her fears are shared by some of the other girls who suspect they too have mismatched feet — a major drag when you're supposed to be a graceful debutante dancing the polonaise and the waltz.

But, it's the start of January and they have a month of practice to go before the big event tonight: the Viennese Winter Ball at the National Gallery.

"I'm scared I'm not going to get it. I keep trying and sometimes I keep messing up ... I'm not having nightmares, just panicking a little," says Nadia.

But she'll keep plugging away at it, even if some of her friends don't get it. She's never been centre stage at such a grand event, and she's determined not to let the comments of others, or her unruly feet, wreck things.

Few of the girls chosen to be debutantes for the ball have ever done anything like this. Some have heard tales of the ball from parents and grandparents, others have heard past debutantes rave about it and some just think getting a chance to go to such a classy event is pretty damn cool.

At \$350 a head, it's the kind of ritzy shindig none of the teens would be attending if they weren't performing in the ball's opening ceremony as Viennese debutantes and cavaliers.

Selected from local high schools, they've been meeting each Sunday for two hours since mid-December for lessons at Fred Astaire Dance Studios.

Initially, 24 teens were chosen from a pool of volunteers, but that number will change. By tonight, 26 will dance in the troupe. One of them is a university student who replaces a boy who dropped out after breaking up with one of the debutantes.

Not even the gala of the year, which should draw about 450 of this city's glitterati, can compete with teen heartache.

The weeks leading up to the ball felt a bit like an emotional roller coaster ride: excitement, frustration, panic, self-discovery and even some sadness — not in that order, not applicable to everyone and not always rooted in reality. The twists, turns and loops were higher for some than others, but it was a ride none will soon forget.

There'll be plenty of time for all the girls to drum up worst-case scenarios — worse than even discovering a fresh pimple on prom night.

"At the back of my mind, I'm thinking about all sorts of crazy scenarios, like dancing with the prime minister, or telling him off about some policy of his, or stepping on his toe and sending him to the hospital," says Anne Murphy.



PHOTOS BY JEAN LEVAC, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Lauren Edwards, Cheryl Mason and Sarah Argent prepare for the Viennese Winter Ball at the National Gallery tonight by trying on gowns by designer Justina McCaffrey. Top, Nadia Mostafa, left, and Touran Reddaway often can be seen twirling through the hallways of their school (Lycée Claudel) practising the waltz.

Years of performing in theatre have imbued her with a flair for the dramatic, and the snafus she's imagined are no exception.

"What if I accidentally swing my arm and whack someone in the face?"

Sarah Argent, a petite blond whose explosive energy makes her the group's most animated, worries she'll wipe out in front of everyone.

"My worst fear is tripping on the ball gown and going flying while everyone else does their pirouettes."

"Yesterday, I stabbed myself with a mechanical pencil and today I stubbed my foot," she says, trying to

prove she's a klutz.

Before the ball, there will also be ample time to dream of a "magical night" — the kind they've only read of in storybooks.

"Every girl dreams of being like a princess," says Sarah, a self-described "tomboy to the heart."

"We're getting the opportunity to do all that and get dressed up and be part of that fantasy."

The potential for "magic" isn't lost on Cheryl Mason's boyfriend, who jokes he doesn't want to hear about her wearing a wedding gown and dancing with some other guy.

"I think what bugs him is hearing

me talk about how magical (the waltz) is and that he won't be a part of it."

The formality of the event, is what most appeals to her. It's like the "olden days."

"It's so formal and different from how we dance today ... Not many people are that proper today or have that much respect — the guys bow and the girls curtsy. It's sad that not everyone gets this experience."

Getting decked out in the gown, the gloves and the heels, and going to manicure, makeup and hair appointments is like a modern-day

Cinderella story, says Marielle McGovern.

"It's like a fairy tale, we get to be Cinderella for a night ... The modern-day Cinderella who plays rugby and goes to the ball."

Not the Cinderella who is a damsel in distress.

All the teens seem to be looking forward to the ball, but the excitement is only palpable amongst the girls, particularly when they launch into descriptions of their dresses, many of which are gingerly tucked away in their closets.

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