

Top National Ballet dancer never rests on her laurels

STORIES By ALEXIS SHIELDS

It is not pure glamor in the life of a top female dancer with the National Ballet of Canada.

Karen Kain, although she has reached a pinnacle in her chosen career of dancing, knows she cannot afford to stint on the daily classes that keep her limber for the nightly performances of such classical ballets as Swan Lake, Giselle and the Sleeping Beauty.

The one-time student of Mississauga's Springfield Public School has honed her craft to a point where critics and balletomanes in such major cities as London, Toronto, Moscow, Paris and New York rank her highly. Included in her many achievements was being ranked as one of the four second best soloists in the world, under the age of 28 at the International Ballet Festival held in Russia in 1973. Pairing up with Frank Augustyn, she also took the award for the best pas de deux at the festival.

So, wearing a black leotard, tights, and two pairs of woolen leg warmers, she takes to the floor at an afternoon class, still tired from a performance of Sleeping Beauty the evening before and, along with the rest of the class, sweats, grimaces, stretches and bends to keep supple. The discipline and concentration, so important for a dancer, continues.

Following the hour and a half class (taken six days a week), she relaxes in a dressing room shared with three other young dancers with the company. The small room is almost overwhelmed by dozens of ballet slippers lying in pairs, street and dance clothes and mirrors along one wall over a vanity with even more slippers, some makeup and odds and ends lying haphazardly. Here the interview takes place.

Kain is obviously confident of her dancing and discipline but doesn't let this confidence take her over. Quiet, self-assured, she answers questions, smiles and laughs as she remembers incidents or considers an

answer and shares common knowledge for the dancer and athlete.

She remembers Mississauga, specifically the area around her old school, with "its wide open spaces, orchards and lots of frogs."

"It really freaks me out to see all those apartment buildings up there now," she says. "What a difference from when I went to school there."

Kain's parents live in Erindale Woodlands; her father is vice-president of the Canadian division of Westinghouse Ltd. and commutes to Hamilton for his work. Kain was born in Hamilton but moved to Mississauga with her parents when she was about eight years old.

Comparing dance in Canada with dance in the Soviet Union, Kain says that in the U.S.S.R., dancing is a tradition and one of the most beautiful things they have. The Russians are proud of their ballet because it is so good. All over the country dancing is close to their hearts. That feeling is developing here too, but it takes time.

Kain was in Russia for the month of January, performing before some of the most knowledgeable and appreciative audiences for her art in the world in Moscow, Tallin, Vilnius and Kiev.

For her the best part of the tour was the actual performances, dancing with the Russian dancers and working with their teachers.

Another thrill for Kain and Augustyn was working in classes with Asaf Messerer, a brilliant performer formerly and now producing what are considered the best Moscow dancers. For an entire week both Canadians worked with Messerer and his students, learning their way of exercising, and the rigors of a faster-paced class, taken alongside principals and soloists of the Bolshoi.

"This kind of change is always good," says Kain. "There is a lot I like about the Russian school of

dance. I don't agree with people who say only their method is the best."

"That's one of the best things about the National Ballet of Canada," she notes. "We take the best from all the different methods and yet have developed a style of our own."

Preparation for a performance includes controlling nerves as well as technique and Kain admits she becomes high strung, edgy and temperamental before a performance.

"If the dance is a new one, I have to go over it many times before a performance," she says. "I have to try the problem areas before the performance so I can feel them before I step onto the stage."

"Some areas never stop giving me trouble, especially a couple of moves in Sleeping Beauty," she notes. "The minute you think you have something, you lose it."

"Concentration is important. A dancer can do something well in a rehearsal and not put out the effort for a performance and lose it."

But with all this work the dancer still relies on a good audience, according to Kain. An audience can help a performance go up or down, she states, a fact that most audiences don't realize.

"It really makes me feel good if I can move an audience during a dance," she says.

Her philosophy as a performer is to think of the performance as a whole, keeping the entire picture in her mind, in order that she doesn't feel too strong in one place in the dance. "I can experiment with this feeling," she adds, "with help from ballet people."

Does Kain ever think of retiring? Yes, she says, but plans to cross that bridge when she gets to it.

"I might teach dancing, or may just marry," she says. "But it will probably be hard for me to retire. I just don't know how long I will dance."

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