

Local dancer prepares for first soloist season

By DIANE SHUBALY
Peter Ottmann has plenty of catching up to do. At 24, he's enjoying the hobbies he lacked as a child.

But Ottmann was no deprived youngster. In fact, the best of both worlds were his — life with his family in Mississauga and a career at the National Ballet School in Toronto.

"Some of the other kids had their families out in British Columbia but I was able to go home every weekend. I had as close as possible to a normal childhood," he said.

Now, rehearsing for his sixth season with the National Ballet of Canada and as a first soloist, Ottman said the years invested in dance along with academic studies have paid off.

An apparent perfect gentleman, his manners haven't suffered. Neither has his appetite. "I eat like a horse. I have a very fast metabolism and I'm constantly trying to keep my weight up," he said.

Ottmann is a beginner, despite years of training. Leisure time is precious. He sails, skates, canoes, works out with weights and practises woodworking, renovating his house in Hyde Park. "I lucked in a few years ago. It was a very good deal," he said.

Good deal or not, much of his dancing season is spent away from home on tour, to Western Canada, New York and overseas. The company has a total of 65 dancers, who work a five day week and get three weeks annual holidays.

Dancing came naturally to Ottmann, who was enrolled in ballet class at the age of four, by his parents, David Ottman, an electrical engineer and Enfys, who emigrated from Germany in the 1950s.

"There were six of us kids and we all had to take some ballet lessons and play at least one musical instrument," recalled Ottmann. "My father wanted us to be



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able to appreciate the arts when we grew up."

He said the early conditioning seems to have worked. All his siblings are artistically inclined, from the oldest, Mary, an actress, to the youngest, Gemma, who is interested in drama and dance. His brother John, 17, is training at the National Ballet School.

Peter was accepted by the school at age 10. "My father simply said:

"Would you like to go to the ballet school?" There was never any pressure. Still, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. The first year was hell but it was fine after that," he said.

His career ambitions were threatened by a knee injury several years ago. "Doctors were saying: 'This is the end! That's when I started thinking, what am I going to do with my life?' he said. "And I realized outside interests were important."

With the help of a physiotherapist who had worked with figure skaters and other athletes, he returned to the stage, after four months of intense therapy.

The sensitive tendons give him trouble occasionally but barring serious injury, Ottmann said he plans to dance another 16 years at least, followed by a teaching career.

"I'm a slow developer and I'm hoping that way I'll last," he said.