

## **Ice Theatre of New York:** **The First Decade** by Edward Z. Epstein

In the summer of 1984, a young ice dancer, Moira North, a Canadian gold medalist living in New York, embarked upon what would become the adventure of a lifetime: she conceived Ice Theatre of New York, an organization devoted to artistic ice skating and to its recognition as a performing art form.

At the time, there were four individuals involved ("we called ourselves the 'ice cube'"). Their goal (again recalls Ms. North): "To establish a forum, so to speak, in which top choreographers and skaters would have the freedom to create new works with absolutely no restrictions other than those imposed by their imaginations. We offered artistic carte blanche. The result: works of art that might find a home nowhere else."

Moira coordinated a group of professional skaters, at the old Sky Rink on 33rd street in Manhattan, to begin rehearsals. This group comprised the original Ice Theatre Company, and all were dedicated individuals: "They had to be," recalls Moira. "Ice time was only available at 3AM!"

By the end of the year, Ice Theatre of New York (ITNY) was incorporated as a not-for-profit arts organization.

(During this period, Moira continued to pursue a competitive career as an ice dancer. She and her partner Patrick Dean placed third in the Riedell US Open Professional Championships, and placed first in the free dance portion of the World Professional Championships, winning an award for the best music, Vangelis's Heaven and Hell.)

Early in 1985, Ice Theatre received its first foundation grant, from the Lila Acheson Wallace Theater Fund. The next year, another milestone: Rob McBrien joined as Ensemble Director. The goals of Ice Theatre were further amplified and focused:

- With a new repertory on ice, to feature a professional skating ensemble interpreting works by choreographers from diverse dance and skating backgrounds.

- To establish educational outreach programs for professional, competitive and recreational skaters.

- To secure for Ice Theatre a home at a first class facility appropriate to the performance and educational goals of the company.

In 1986, Ice Theatre performed at an event that had resonance for skating enthusiasts everywhere: ceremonies commemorating the 50th anniversary of the opening of the famed Rockefeller Center skating pond. Audiences and critics were highly enthusiastic about ITNY, and the Company has performed at this venue since then on a regular basis.

The Plie Power Workshop, an innovative on-ice class based on a format pioneered by John Curry and developed by Rob McBrien, was introduced by ITNY in 1986. (In reviewing an Ice Theatre Performance in the New York Times in 1992, critic Jennifer Dunning described the program's opening number in its application of Plie Power as the Company's "statement of purpose ... [suggesting] exhilaratingly the possibilities of ice dancing and the performers' individual gifts.")

Ice Theatre received its first grant from The Curtis McGraw Foundation in 1987. The first National Endowment for the Arts grant came through in 1990, as well as support from the New York State Council on the Arts. A grant award from the Lila Acheson Wallace Theatre Fund made it possible for Ice Theatre to obtain its first general manager.

In June, 1992, Ice Theatre inaugurated a program that delighted skating buffs - the "Past Masters" series, which honors great skaters of the past and provides financial support for the ice time that is required for the Company's rehearsals. The initial Past Masters Rehearsal Fund Benefit honored Belita, the British-born figure skater who became an American movie star in the 1940's. Belita's balletic style was a prototype for succeeding generations of skaters. Subsequent "Past Masters" honorees include the renowned two-time Olympic pair champions, Lumilla and Oleg Protopopov, and America's two-time Olympic, five-times World champion, Dick Button.

Ice Theatre's goals continue to be brilliantly realized. There are over thirty works of original ensemble ice choreography. Ann Carson, Laura

Dean, William Whitener, Donlin Foreman of the Martha Graham Dance Company, Alberto Del Saz of Nikolais and Murray Louis Dance Company, Eva Carozza of the Lar Lubovitch Dancers, and David Dorfman are among the creators of this unique repertory.

Major dance presenters such as the Flynn Theater in Vermont, Boston's Dance Unbrella, New York City's Dancing in the Streets, Canada Ice Dance Theater, Ice Theater of Toronto, and Palau de Gel in Andorra, have all proudly presented performances by Ice Theatre of New York.

Legendary skaters such as the late John Curry, Toller Cranston, Gary Beacom, Maia Usova and Alexandre Zhulin, Judy Blumberg and Michael Siebert, and Katherine Healy, have all appeared under the aegis of ITNY.

The Company hopes to film its repertory for television in the near future. (By late 1993, figure skating had surpassed baseball, basketball, boxing - everything except NFL football - as the most popular sport on television. For many, figure skating had become the number one spectator sport.)

As Ice Theatre of New York embarks on its second decade, it has realized another of its goals - it has been named the Ice Dance Company in Residence at the state-of-the-art Chelsea Piers Project, which includes a spectacular twin-rink complex that promises to launch a new era in skating, propelling the sport beyond the nineties and into the next century.

We all look forward to the journey.

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Edward Z. Epstein is author of seventeen books, most recently PORTRAIT OF JENNIFER: A Biography of Jennifer Jones (Simon & Schuster). His play, AVA, based on the life of Ava Gardner, will be produced by David Brown. Epstein, a lifelong figure skating enthusiast, is a former Middle-Atlantic States Novice Champion.

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