

Ice Theatre of New York 1997 Benefit Honoree



Palmer Baker

VIVA PALMER!

by Edward Z. Epstein

Enthusiasm, passion, determination, humor - R. Palmer Baker, Jr. possesses them all. His emotional response and commitment to Ice Theatre of New York has had an indelible impact on the nurturing and development of the Company.

No fan at the Houston Oilers cheers more appreciatively than Palmer after skaters have performed; no host has been more gracious on the many occasions the Baker apartment in New York has been the site for Ice Theatre gatherings. (It is with typical understatement that Palmer, if queried, will shyly reveal that several of the exquisite paintings on the wall have been created by his daughter, Mary. Two of her large canvases, breathtaking landscapes, reside in his New York office. Mary's young son, notes Palmer with pride, "is a hot-shot little league shortstop and pitcher and is already a world class juggler.")

It was indirectly through his family that Palmer took interest in skating; but it was a circuitous route.

Troy, New York, an industrial center, lies on the east bank of the Hudson River about 7 miles northeast of Albany. R. Palmer Baker Jr., son of Canadian parents, was born and raised in Troy, where he went to prep school. His father was Dean of the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

Palmer graduated from Harvard and enrolled in law school just prior to World War II. "I went into the first V7 Naval Training program, and got my Reserve Commission in 1940. The end of my first year at law school I got called up to active duty, served in the Navy four years, got married, came to New York and began my law career."

Palmer spent most of his professional life in the firm of Lord, Day and Lord, where he became a senior managing partner. He retired from the company in the late 1980's, opened his own office and consulting practice in estate planning and for the past several years has been an executor of the estate of Daniel Ludwig. "I spend a substantial part of my time as the chairman of his trustees and as the chairman of the Ludwig Institute for Cancer Research, which is an international cancer research institute."

Palmer became interested in skating "when I was in my early 40s," he recalls, "when my daughter was at Chapin, and she and her friends skated in the Junior Club of the New York Skating Club in the first days of Sky Rink at 33rd Street."

A passionate fly fisherman and skiing enthusiast, he began skating only because his wife, Alma, wasn't mad about the slopes. A noted interior designer, the late Mrs. Baker wasn't anxious to board a train or a bus, travel up to Vermont ("or wherever") on Friday night and "beat my way back Sunday night!"

Palmer made a joyful discovery: "Skating is so much fun, when you get loose and really get going, it's a really great feeling!" As a youth, with his pals,

he'd skated on hockey skates, "and got the big tubular racing skates. But the first pair of figure skates I put on my feet I rented at Rockefeller Center rink, and I got one of the guys there to skate around with me and decided, 'Hey, there might be something in this!'"

There were Saturdays spent with family and friends "at the rink at the old tennis club on the East Side. We used to go there, have a hamburger and a Coca-Cola and hack around on the ice!" Joan Scribner was a fellow enthusiast.

Palmer developed an interest in ice dancing ("I now have two avocations," he says with a smile, "fly fishing and ice dancing"), and began taking "a few lessons" first with Phyllis Azzara, then Susan Ceci.

"Around 1984," he recalls, "at the 33rd Street rink, I saw a very accomplished skater who proceeded to perform both the man's and the woman's part of the Argentine Tango, and I thought it was the very best tango I'd ever seen skated." The skater was Moira North. "So, in due course," recalls Palmer, "I began taking lessons with Moira."

(Pressed for hard advice for adult beginners, Palmer doesn't mince words: "Don't start unless you start with a good teacher; don't underestimate the value of learning the basics. Otherwise, you spend all of your time getting rid of mistakes, weaknesses that would not be troubling you if you'd dealt with them earlier.")

That summer of 1984, Moira North, a gold medalist, was embarking on what would become the adventure of a lifetime: she conceived Ice Theatre of New York, an organization devoted to artistic ice skating, and to having it recognized as a performance art form.

Palmer observed the skaters Moira was working with, "and realized what a tremendous lode of talent was in those skaters - and they had no place to perform."

He became an avid champion and supporter of Ice Theatre, and believes that what Ms. North and her colleagues have created has had an enormous and influential impact on figure skating.

"Ice Theatre is a true company," declares Palmer, "It's thrilling to observe how the ensemble continually renews itself, how the choreography has an effectiveness and clarity that I think is brilliant. And they've been able to do this via the double devotion (1) to the techniques of skating; and, (2), to the idea that it is a unique and dramatic form of the performing arts."

It has not exactly been an "easy" undertaking. Palmer views the recent establishment of Ice Theatre as the resident company at Chelsea Piers as "an important step in the life of the company, because in no place except New York could you have a company quite like it..."

"New York, with its many attributes in music, theater, dance, and the rest, provides a background and culture which attracts new skaters and choreographers into the group, as others 'graduate.' And after skating with Ice Theatre and spending time in New York, they've developed into entirely different artists."

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For Palmer, involvement with Ice Theatre continues to be a richly rewarding experience. He was thrilled when the company appeared at the Aids Benefit and for the first time skated at Madison Square Garden. "There wasn't a more riveting piece skated than 'Black Ice'," he exclaims enthusiastically.

Palmer pauses thoughtfully while reflecting on his vision for the future of Ice Theatre: He is of course looking forward to an increase in the number of home performances at Chelsea Piers, but "the next real jump," he declares, "is to find a television sponsored vehicle - I think Ice Theatre has the credibility and background to become very successful in this venue."

As always, Palmer will be behind the effort with characteristic enthusiasm, passion, determination and humor—**VIVA PALMER!**

Edward Z. Epstein's latest book, BORN TO SKATE: The MICHELLE KWAN Story, will be published by Ballantine in November. A skating enthusiast since childhood, Epstein is a former Middle-Atlantic States Novice champion.

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