

A Love Affair With Skating

starring

Joan Scribner

by EDWARD Z. EPSTEIN

When I first saw Joan Scribner, one sunny morning in the mid-nineteen eighties at Sky Rink, I thought for a moment that she was the actress Dina Merrill. There was not only the physical resemblance; Joan, wearing bright green, was centerice, working with a flowing piece of multi-hued chiffon, experimenting with it as a prop for a program she was working on. I smiled – leave it to a gifted actress to think up such a theatrically effective concept.

Joan has always displayed the instincts of an artist, a flair for the dramatic. Her romance with the ice began at a young age: "I was around seven. My parents enrolled me in the Junior Club at the

Skating Club of New York," she recalls. Classmate Nancy Streeter, the same age, shared Joan's enthusiasm (they were close friends; their fathers were partners in the same law firm, Davis Polk). "That's how one started skating in those years," recalls Nancy. "You joined the Club, which, back then, was organized in a more traditional way than in later years."

A native New Yorker, Joan Sunderland "from the beginning, was a born performer," says Nancy Streeter, "and very single-minded about it."

Interestingly, competitive skating was not Joan's *raison d'être*. Joan's coach, the renowned Pierre Brunet, was accustomed to pupils who were fiercely competitive. "I never concentrated on that," states Joan. "I've always been interested in interpreting the music; the artistic side of skating always appealed to me, expressing myself on the ice, communicating with the audience. I loved the audience."

Joan and fellow club members had golden opportunities to perform annually, for thousands of people, at Madison Square Garden (at its original location, 50th Street and Eighth Avenue) whenever the Ice Capades and Ice Follies came to town. "Junior Club skaters opened the show," recalls Joan.

"We'd perform an elaborate number, then the Senior Club did its routines, and then the ice show came on." Yvonne Sherman (later United States champion) and Lucy Brennan (later a distinguished judge) were among other young club members who performed at these events.

"Those were fun times," recalls Joan. "Afterwards, we'd mingle with the stars of the ice shows and get their autographs."

When Joan attended Chapin, she told her mother she wanted to skate fulltime. "Mother said, 'no,' and that was that!" Joan's passion for the sport never diminished. Nancy Streeter observes, "While I stopped skating in my teenage years (and came back to it later), Joan never stopped, not through high school and four years at Bryn Mawr. Even after she married and had children, she kept it up."

"There was a beautiful rink near Bryn Mawr," recalls Joan. "I love to skate very early in the morning. So, at dawn, I'd phone for a taxi (the ride cost fifty cents), go to the rink and train, then it was back to school and the task of getting an education."

Through the years, Joan skated many exhibitions, in many venues. "Performing at Rockefeller Center for



Peter Dunfield, was especially thrilling. At night, standing on that mirror-like surface of ice, waiting for my music to begin, looking up and seeing all those lights, the people – it was a dream. There was something spiritual about it. It inspired me."

No matter where she skated, spectators always remarked on how lovely she looked. Few realized that "I designed – and made – my own costumes," she declares with pride. And she edited her own music.

Joan married book publisher Charles Scribner, Jr., and the couple had three sons: Charles III, Blair and John. Joan's skating was an enthusiastically supported fact of family life.

At the old Town Tennis Club, on Manhattan's East Side, there was a period when "they flooded and froze their two courts," recalls Palmer Baker, "and a lot of New York Club members would go there to skate with their kids. I was there one morning with my wife Alma and our daughter, and Joan was there with her eldest son, Charlie. Young Charlie leaned across to Alma, and said:

'Mrs. Baker, I think Mr. Baker has eyes for my mother.' And I did! I think every one did."

Joan laughs, remembering the occasion. Her eyes were strictly on her skating. Her positive attitude rarely faltered, but there were moments. When Joan's good friend (and legend in the skating world) Richard Dwyer, of *Ice Follies* fame, invited Joan to perform at the opening ceremonies of Central Park's Wollman Rink (newly renovated by Donald Trump), she declined.

"I can't, Dick," I told him. "I've got new boots! They're not broken in!" Dick

wouldn't take no for an answer. 'Look,' he told me, 'you won't have to do a whole program. I'll skate with you – you do half the program, I'll do the other half.' 'Dick, I'm not that great a skater,' I said.

'You are!' he said. 'I saw you skate at Sky Rink!' Well, I did it – and it turned out fine."

There was the time Joan promised Ice Theatre of New York's former Associate Director/Choreographer Rob McBrien she'd do a performance at Sky Rink. "I practiced at a public session, my blade got stuck on a piece of chewing gum, and I fell. I looked down, and there was blood all over the ice – mine! I'd slashed my leg. I stumbled over to the manager's office and called my son, Charlie. 'I'll be right over and drive you to the hospital,' he said. I was very upset – not because I was injured, but because I wouldn't be able to skate that night! They stitched me up at the hospital, and the doctor confirmed my fears: 'You won't be able to skate.' That did it – I went back to the rink, determined to perform but certain I'd give a poor performance. When I arrived, a great calm came over me. Instead of being afraid and worried, I said to myself, 'I can do this. I'm going to be alright.' And, thank God, I was. I skated very well that night."

In recent years, "Joan has done something very interesting," observes Palmer Baker. "She turned professional, and began appearing in commercials." "I was on an airplane a couple of years ago when the ads preceding the movie flashed on," recalls Nancy Streeter. "And there was Joan, on screen, part of a commercial for Rockefeller Center!"

Joan's desire to explore all possibilities on the ice (she's added ice dancing to her repertoire) has enabled her to discover new ways to express herself.



"The dedication and concentration skating requires has such a positive impact in all other areas of one's life," she notes.

Joan has been a vital force in helping Founder/Director Moira North to launch and sustain Ice Theatre of New York. "Joan Scribner was one of those who was instrumental in bringing Ice Theatre to life, contributing on all levels – personal and financial. She has an innate understanding of what it takes to be able to create and perform with artistic integrity; of the importance of establishing a climate in which artists can function successfully. Her enthusiasm for the sport, and the joy it brings her, are contagious. And she is a wonderfully practical woman – on more than one occasion, she has been right there as a volunteer working in our office! To me, and to many others, Joan Scribner will always be a genuine star, on and off the ice."

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