



KURT & SONIA: TWO FOR THE SHOW

by EDWARD Z. EPSTEIN

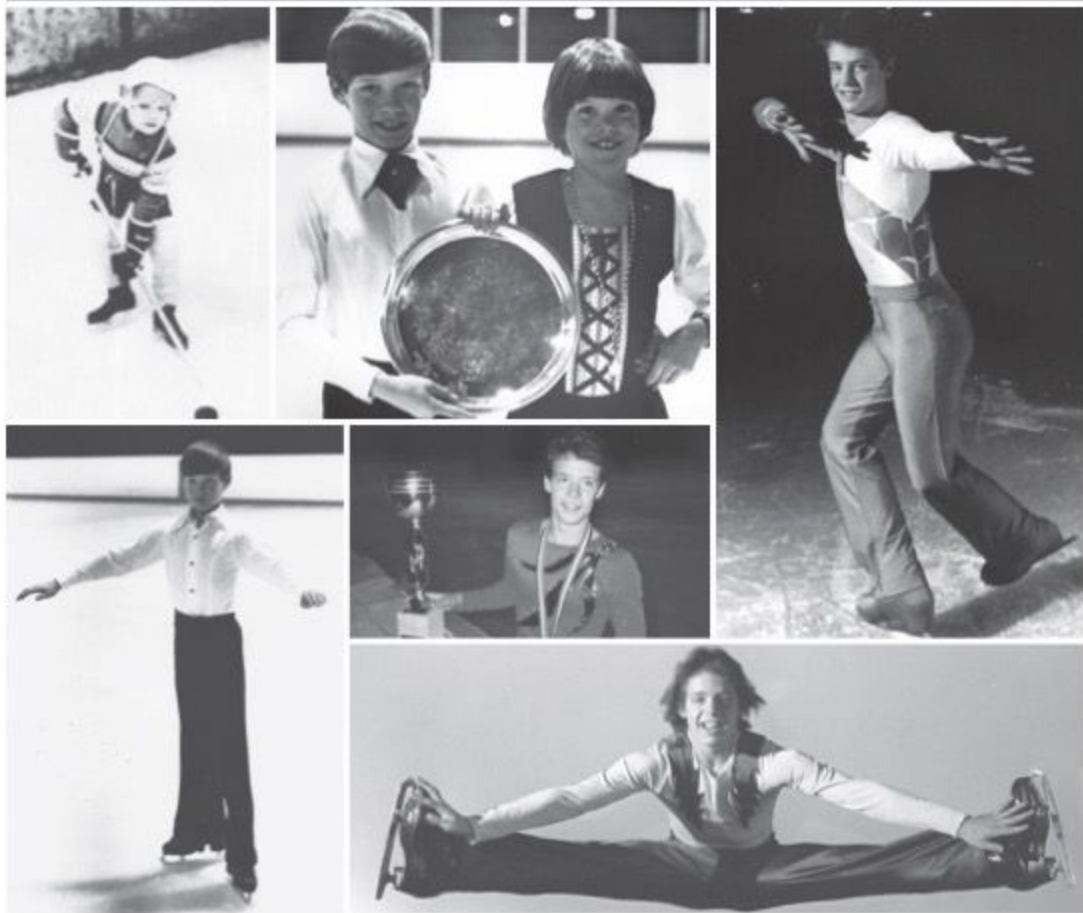
Sonia, on point, and Kurt, on ice, both reflect Gene Kelly's definition of genuine artistry: "The final result must appear effortless — that goes for a dancer, a skater, singer, actor, musician. The more visible the mechanics, the less talented the artist."

Famous for the consistent and innovative quality of their work over the years, both Kurt and Sonia continue to weave their spells, and then some, delivering seemingly effortless performances (Kurt is also a superb choreographer). Interestingly, on one of his TV specials, "You Must Remember This," Browning performed a breathtakingly accurate rendition on ice of Kelly's immortal "Singin' In The Rain" number from the classic film of the same name. One of Browning's outstanding competitive long programs was skated to the soundtrack from another film classic, "Casablanca."

"As I kid, I saw and enjoyed a lot of movie musicals. But I never saw myself as Gene Kelly or anyone else!" explains Browning. Often described as a boy next door with a talent for skating — self-described as "a very casual kid, still am" — Browning's modesty belies his accomplishments, his talent, and his drive. In the world of skating, with its obsession with multi-revolution jumps, Browning was the first skater to complete a quadruple jump in world competition (a toe loop), a feat acknowledged by the Guinness Book of World Records. He is a four-time World Champion, three-time Olympian, four-time Canadian champion, three-time World Professional Champion, four-time Canadian Professional/Open Champion, and two-time U.S. Professional Champion. And that's only a partial list (he was also voted Canada's Male Athlete of the Year, in 1990).

Born on June 18, 1966, in Rocky Mountain House, Alberta, he grew up in Caroline, Alberta. He was the youngest of three children and the Brownings were a colorful family. Kurt's grandfather, Jack, had established the Bighorn Rodeo (still going today). Brother Wade, and sister, Dena, were always supportive of their kid brother, and the whole family was athletically inclined. Parents Dewey (Arnold) and Neva "were athletic too, but not in a typical way," recalls Kurt. "My mother could do backbends and cartwheels. My Dad was a mountain climber, he did that for a living." Was he a John Wayne type? "He was John Wayne," says Kurt, who had "a really great relationship with my family. I could tell them anything."

Over the years, there has been a mistaken impression that Kurt's heart had been set on becoming a world-class hockey player. "Not true, not even close."



I loved playing the game, but I was a kid! Hockey was never a career choice. I was good at it, and won trophies, but I wasn't big enough or strong enough to play professionally. It was strictly for fun!" At five foot seven, he was the perfect height, weight and build for a figure skater.

Very slowly, figure skating started to get more attention. "I really just fell into it. I began around the age of ten-and-a-half. By twelve, I could do the triple-toe." Around that age, there was a brief encounter at skating with a partner — with Michelle Pollitt, the couple won a pre-juvenile dance championship in Alberta.

But Kurt's serious training didn't begin until a very late age — around sixteen, and it was his Dad who "pulled the plug"

on Kurt's hockey days. "One day," recalls Kurt, "as I was piling my heavy hockey gear into the car, my Dad said, 'What the hell are you doing?' I didn't know what he was talking about." But Mr. Browning had made a decision regarding his son's future: hockey was out. "It was okay with me," says Kurt. "As I said, becoming a world class player was never a career choice."

Kurt subsequently became the first skater to win, one after the other, the Novice, Junior and Senior Canadian championships. He was setting new standards for triple jumps (in combination, no less); his spins, footwork, and musicality, were unique.

"When I watched Scott Hamilton skate, I was really impressed with his footwork

— really fast feet, that was cool, and certainly influenced my skating." (In later years, when he was Canada's premier figure skater, he had the opportunity to put his hockey gear back on, big-time, and skate a couple of practice sessions with the renowned Edmonton Oilers. "Hey, we should make him captain of the team!" joked one of the players.)

Skating wasn't the only sport that captured Kurt's interest. To the present day, he's an avid golfer and tennis player, admiring tennis's system for ranking players. He notes that, for a skater, in World or Olympic competition, it all comes down to a four-minute program. On the tennis court, "if you don't perform well on one occasion, you still have a second chance."



Sonia was born in Toronto, Ontario, on December 19, 1972. The family relocated to Spain when Sonia was five. Her dream was to become a ballerina, and she had the love and support of her family. "At one point, though, she had a change of heart," says Kurt. "But she kept going." She was trained by the noted Pedro de la Cruz. She also trained at the Princess Grace Academy in Monaco. At the age of seventeen, the five-foot-one dancer won the coveted Enrico Cecchetti award at an international competition in Capri, and subsequently returned to Canada where she was invited to join the National Ballet of Canada.

At twenty-three, she became second soloist, performing "Rum and Coca Cola" in the premiere of Paul Taylor's "Company B." She later danced the role during the National Ballet of Canada's 1996 performance at a Toronto Raptors/Orlando Magic basketball game at Skydome. That year she performed the balcony pas de deux from "Romeo and Juliet," and the pas de deux from "Sylvia" at a ballet gala in Madrid.

And, that year, she fell in love.

They met at a reception, at a ballet event, in Alberta. "We were very aware of each other," recalls Sonia. "I'd seen him many times on television, and, meeting him, found him to be very genuine, down to earth."

"She said she wanted to see me skate," remembers Kurt. "The next day was a Saturday, and I never practiced on weekends. But I said, 'Sure, 10AM tomorrow.' So, to impress a beautiful girl, I skated on a Saturday!"

There have been many versions of Kurt's romantic proposal to Sonia "on the ice." "What actually happened wasn't planned," she recalls. "It happened in Toronto, during a performance of the Stars on Ice tour. They were taping the performance, and, after the show was over, they wanted the audience to remain in their seats because some retakes were necessary. Kurt took to the microphone, and, to keep people from leaving, asked for questions from the audience."

"I thought I'd introduce my girlfriend," recalls Kurt. Sonia stood up and waved.

Sonia recalls: "There were finally no more questions from the audience, but a little girl stood up, and asked Kurt if he was married."

"It wasn't the first time I'd wanted to ask Sonia to marry me," recalls Kurt, "but I'd always chickened out. I got down on my knee, in front of 16,000 people, and proposed. I remember thinking, 'She's gonna kill me.' I hadn't even bought a ring."

They were married on June 20, 1996. They subsequently performed together — Sonia, off-ice, on point, Kurt on ice, then on ice together, Kurt holding her aloft, Sonia lovely in flowing red chiffon. The number was "First You Have To Dream," and if there were echoes of Gene Kelly dancing with Cyd Charisse, it was not an



unflattering comparison (one description: it was "pure emotion on ice").

Both husband and wife understood the extraordinary pressures and demands each faced in their careers. "We're both very driven people," she later told a reporter, recalling today that it was "a very grueling lifestyle, the touring, and training, and all that went with it."

Their careers flourished. She was promoted to first soloist and won great acclaim dancing the lead in the Canadian premiere of the ballet version of "The Red Shoes," gorgeous in the role of the doomed ballerina created on screen by Moira Shearer (Shearer had been a fiery redhead, Sonia was dramatically brunette).

In 2000, Sonia became a principal dancer of the National Ballet of Canada.

The Brownings became parents on July 12, 2003. "I loved being pregnant," she later recalled. She felt beautiful, "but I looked funny dancing with this great big belly." She was able to be back on stage four months after giving birth, but baby Gabriel brought about a major change in the Brownings' modus-operandi. Balancing careers and parenting was "a hard thing to juggle," said Kurt. Focusing on a career was one thing; "By having a child, that focus has to be shared," he noted.

That goal, too, was achieved (Kurt and Sonia had a second son, Dillon, in 2007).

Meanwhile, Sonia was chosen by Suzanne Farrell to dance the role of Dulcinea in the world premiere of Farrell's re-staging of George Balanchine's "Don Quixote" at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., and Kurt's skating career remained in high gear.

Browning has written a best-selling memoir, "Forcing the Edge" (the term means you are pushing against the natural running edge of your blade). He is a highly sought-after sports commentator, and, for the first time, has been a judge at selected skating events.

He has been, and continues to be, recipient of many awards — he was inducted into the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame, the World Figure Skating Hall of Fame, Canada's Walk of Fame; the ISU has awarded him the Jacques Favart Trophy. His talents as a choreographer have run the gamut, working with such stars as Tara Lipinski, Elvis Stojko, Alissa Cizisny, Brian Joubert.

In 2012, Sonia (who has been described by some as the Margot Fonteyn of Canada) joined her husband on Canada's Walk of Fame.

A shared sense of humor, and sharing it with their kids, has been very important in the couple's maintaining a strong and healthy family dynamic. The public may perceive a prima ballerina as a beautiful, but highly controlled, and slightly aloof, diva. But Kurt has observed how Sonia, at home, is fun loving and charmingly unpredictable: "People who don't know her might be surprised."



A career as an actress — she has already played a few roles — is not out of the question. She has already appeared in a couple of films, and has recently been cast in "Remedy," a Canadian TV series. "Ballet necessarily lends itself to acting," notes Kurt.

Kurt's place in the pantheon of skating? "At the very top," says Dick Button. "He's the most extraordinarily talented, musically inventive of skaters. His edging, and choreography, are unparalleled. One word encompasses it all: *talent*. I once saw him, skating with Barbara Underhill, in "Battle of the Blades," doing a side-by-side pair routine that was unforgettable. Both were wearing hockey skates, which have a narrower blade, and uncomfortable boots, yet they were able to achieve incredible edging, flow and lean of the body. It was a refreshing antidote to the endless windmill swirling of arms, the incessant ditsy body jerking movements we see too often in today's rule-controlled environment. It was elegant skating, which is all too often ignored in the contemporary skating world. Kurt is one-of-a-kind."

Both Kurt and Sonia have obviously avoided the artists' pitfall described so accurately by legendary actress Vivien Leigh: "You don't want audiences to become accustomed to how you present yourself — then there are no surprises."

The couple's charitable interests are children-oriented, and have included the Kids Help Line and raising funds for muscular dystrophy. "I have to believe in something before I get involved with it," Kurt has said. "For me, it's a real commitment, not a marketing move."

Ice and Dance are more closely related than ever, never more evident than in the theme of this year's ITNY Gala — ICE:DANCE. The Company, last season, in conjunction with the Film Society of Lincoln Center, inaugurated the concept of Ice and Dance on Film.

"To have Kurt and Sonia as our honorees this year is particularly timely and appropriate," states ITNY's founder Moira North. "Ice and Dance are what the Company has always been about, and will continue to be about. Kurt and Sonia epitomize the best of both those worlds — and, as we strive to widen our horizons, as long as we have the inspiration and support of artists like them, the future will continue to be an exciting adventure!"

Edward Z. Epstein, a graduate of NYU and a native New Yorker, has written a number of books, including biographies of Mia Farrow, Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, Lucille Ball, and Jennifer Jones. A long-time figure skater and former Middle Atlantic States Novice champion, his biography of Michelle Kwan, "Born To Skate," was published by Ballantine. AVA, Epstein's play based on the life of Ava Gardner, is in the works.