

TOLLER CRANSTON THE MAN WHO "INVENTED" FIGURE SKATING

By Martha Lowder Kimball

Toller Cranston liked to say that he had invented figure skating.

On an outdoor rink in the little Northern Ontario community of Swastika, the young boy in his sister's white skates responded to his insistent internal rhythms by creating spins, patterns, and arm movements that he had never seen performed on ice. Someone told him that what he was doing had a name: figure skating. Sadly he was wearing the wrong color skates.

Wrong and out of sorts, out of time and out of place, was what the boy Toller often felt. He believed that he harbored a fully mature adult soul, ready to express his inner urgings yet forced to wait until chronological age brought him sufficient freedom and credibility. He complained, perhaps inaccurately, that his mother locked him out of the house on nice days, hoping that her son would run around and play in the fresh air. But all that he wanted to do was to create art on paper or canvas, movement on ice.

This duality would define Toller from his earliest days until his last. Even when he stopped skating — partly because his body and vanity wouldn't allow him to perform at less than the level he demanded of himself, and partly because he had shrunk his good leather boots by jumping into his Mexican swimming pool in nothing but skates for the cover shoot for one of our books — he painted tirelessly all day and

skated in his dreams every night.

The two forms of expression were actually one. I once observed, with no malice, that he had a repertoire of a single routine, set to a variety of music. Caught in something of a ruse, he smiled and pleaded guilty. Toller harbored particular feelings that came out in particular ways through a wide and unusual, yet consistent, vocabulary of movement. His painting, too, had a consistent vocabulary, though the theme and influences changed greatly over time. The key to understanding Toller is that both were the same, flowing from one color- and music-infused creative reservoir that demanded to be emptied over and over. The skating images gave life, movement and depth to the images on canvas. Toller, in so many ways, became his own art.

Montague Toller Cranston was born in Hamilton, Ontario, on April 20, 1949, to parents who endowed him with exceptional intelligence as well as artistry (from mother Stuart) and athleticism (from father Monte). He grew up with three siblings in a comfortable middle-class home, first in Galt and Swastika, Ontario, then in Québec province, where he lived in Baie-d'Urfé, attended the English-language Macdonald High School in Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue, and competed as a credible pole-vaulter.

After high school, which he completed at age 16, Toller went on to the École



Photo:
Lander
Rodriguez

des beaux-arts de Montréal, all the while training seriously yet without adequate instruction. In spite of his dogged runs up and down the stairs of the École des beaux-arts, he lacked real conditioning and refined technique. The Canadian Figure Skating Association offered him a much larger measure of criticism and dismissal than of encouragement in those days.

During his first year in art school, at an age when many competitors are starting to hit their stride, Toller finished fourth at the 1966 Canadian Figure Skating Championships behind Donald Knight, Charles Snelling, and Jay Humphry. He was not mentioned in Skating magazine's report. Significantly, the Ladies field was dominated by Petra Burka, daughter of Ellen Burka, Holocaust survivor, Dutch champion and gifted coach. The next year, Toller dropped to fifth with the introduc-



tion of David McGillivray into the mix. Meanwhile, Petra had collected her laurels and gone on to professional performing.

Everything came crashing down around Toller at the 1968 Canadians in Vancouver where he failed to qualify for the Grenoble Olympics. Brian Pound reported the event in *Skating*: "Then there was Toller Cranston, Lachine FSC. Fifth in figures, he free skated last.... Those of the jam-packed audience of 4,000 who waited until the end were treated to an excellent performance of double axels, difficult combinations, double loops, double flips, superb footwork – a program jammed with content. He finished fourth with an explosion of boos following a display of marks ranging from 5.4 to 5.9."

That was when Toller famously begged Ellen Burka to take him on at her Toronto home base, both as a student and as a basement tenant. He told a sad tale of eviction from his prior lodgings due to the smells of paint and turpentine that inevitably surrounded him. The painting was not a deal-breaker for Ellen, a fellow artist, though she was very hesitant about the teaching commitment. It is a tribute to the power of Fate and of Toller's persuasive powers that Ellen taught him throughout the rest of his amateur career. She demanded commitment, conditioning, and studious attention to technique while allowing his creativity full reign.

In the end, Toller won six Canadian senior men's titles, two world free-skating medals, an Olympic free-skating medal, and world and Olympic bronze, all the while fighting two raging demons. One was a bad reputation for the tedious figures that counted for a lot in his day and were subject to political sway. The other was a certain prejudice on the part of the skating establishment against his chosen costuming, theatrical mode of expression, and "unmanly" movements and positions: out-thrust arms; angled free leg; expressive torso; fanciful spins; almost impossible camel extensions; riffs and volleys of Russian splits. At a time when the standard was staid, stiff, and penguin-

like, Toller felt free – no, compelled – to express himself according to his inner lights, always one with the music. His pathos-infused interpretation of Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* stands alone in its class. Toller's style and persona served as inspiration for generations of little boys (and girls as well). Audience members of all ages responded viscerally. Europeans adored him, especially the Germans.

Toller flourished most, and with great longevity, in the professional world, going crazy in the costuming department and in everyday dress as well. He was named Officer of the Order of Canada and World Professional Skater of the Year. He created his own Broadway venture, *The Ice Show*, that displayed the sort of dance-based movement on ice that animates the Ice Theatre of New York. He created acclaimed television specials like *Strawberry Ice* and *Dreamweaver*, winning ACTRA and ANIK awards and the Grand Prix de Montreux. He taught; choreographed; designed exceptional costumes; delivered wry, caustic, spot-on commentary; wrote and/or illustrated books; acted in movies and television shows; and exhibited his art throughout the world.

I don't think that it was easy being Toller. Nothing was ever enough. He always wanted more – much of that an understandable but exaggerated and strangely persistent reaction to falling short of the Olympic pinnacle. He granted the gold to John Curry, if reluctantly, and felt some kinship with his troubled competitor. Curry was the classical to Cranston's baroque – equally valid, one might conclude. But he never could get over being placed third.

Esther Pierce, a remarkable woman, watched Toller from her wheelchair and was able to skate. A humanities major in college, she later was moved to write a paper contrasting the classical and romantic ideals using John and Toller as her examples. She found that John, the frustrated classical ballet dancer that he was, embodied control, and a drive toward perfection of form, without the open expression of emotion. In contrast, Toller personified

the baroque aspects of the romantic ideal. Skating was, for him, one of two ways of expressing his emotions. Though he might seem to be on the knife's edge of disaster, he too was in control. In Esther's opinion, he was Lord Byron to John's Voltaire.

Like so many people of genius and great artistic talent, Toller was a mass of contradictions. He could be egotistical — yet he was fascinated by the details of other people's lives and liked to pepper strangers and friends alike with genuinely curious questions about

themselves. He had a special fondness for the woman who dusted and swept his Toronto studio (granted, quite superficially), continuing to employ this "cleaning lady savant" because she appreciated his painting.

Toller could appear arrogant as well, yet he was wracked with self-doubt. He was often friendly, wickedly wry, compulsively surrounded by others, but he seemed ultimately alone and unable to form true and lasting bonds of love. He attracted people and

TOLLER

ARTIST,
INNOVATOR,
ICON



SKATECANADA





To Toller,
I wish we could have had
that horseback ride.



To Dick,
Thanks for giving me Landover
— it changed my life

Love *Kurt*

Credit: Lander Rodriguez

then purposely pushed them away. He was both caustically critical and lavish in his praise. He was interested in current events and social issues, often holding surprisingly conservative viewpoints; yet he was sometimes subject to destructive lapses like drug abuse.

Toller pushed himself like a workhorse in the studio while remaining charmingly undisciplined in everyday matters. I was always amused when he treated an ATM like a casino slot machine that might or might not dispense cash at any given moment. Cooking, cleaning, laundering clothes and paying the bills were not in his wheelhouse. His time was better spent producing art of one kind or another, conversing in depth, reading art history and biography, or perhaps shopping. It was fortunate that he had devoted daily help plus a few long-term friends for times of true catastrophe.

Toller passed away, too soon, mid-evening on January 23, 2015, the eve of the Canadian Senior Men's Free Program. Surely the cosmos arranged the event so that he could become the center of attention. His one great regret, no doubt, is

that he wasn't buried as he wished, fully costumed and made up, ready to spring onto the ice should he miraculously rise from the dead.

My favorite memento of Toller is a photo in which he leaps in a perfect stag jump, arms arranged dramatically, across and slightly above the façade of Notre-Dame de Paris, a young god making his mark upon one of the great symbols of Western Civilization. Like so much of what Toller did, that miraculous jump on an unseen trampoline was accomplished with complete self-awareness and no little irony. The joke was that his legendary flair for the dramatic was all part of the show. Sometimes drama and even crises overtook

him; at other times he sought them out, manufacturing the drama when necessary. What was the point of an episode if it wouldn't make a good story afterwards?

The things that finally matter, though, are the genius and talent that undergirded all the drama and the inspiration that lives on in others.

