

ROHENE WARD

A KALEIDOSCOPE OF TALENT

By Lynn Rutherford



Rohene Ward is, rightfully, being honored by Ice Theatre of New York® (ITNY) for his achievements in choreography, but that is just one facet of the man. He is equal parts performer, creator, coach, and activist, all tempered with the sensitivity of a finely tuned violin.

ITNY's association with Ward stretches back a decade, with his appearances as a guest artist during its home seasons and with the company at Rockefeller Center during Black History Month. In 2020, he hosted a Choreo Lab, sharing his knowledge of hip hop.

"We always knew Rohene as a great performer," says ITNY founder Moira North, citing her two favorite Ward programs, to Samuel Barber's "Adagio for Strings" and to Dinah Washington's rendition of "Bitter Earth."

"He has a very spiritual, delicate sense of glide on ice," North said. "There is a part of him that is profoundly poetic. He can also be just plain fun and entertaining, with his Prince ("Purple Rain") tribute, he performed with us in 2016."

I first appreciated Ward's power as a performer at the 2002 U.S. Figure Skating Championships, held in Los Angeles' Staples Center. My pals rose at ungodly hours, and sacrificed sit-down dinners, to watch his practice group. Guys like Todd Eldredge, Timothy Goebel and Michael Weiss were the stars of the day, but Ward was the skater we talked about most.

He had a quad — a relative rarity for U.S. men back then — and could do triples in both directions. His spirals, layback spin and Ina Bauer rivalled those of Sasha Cohen. He had flair, but his showmanship was never shallow.

As I sat down to write this tribute, I called one of those friends — Emma Abraham, a founder of ice-dance.com — to reminisce about those days.

"Rohene wasn't like anybody else," she said. "He looked different. He had a different approach. He wasn't out there just trying to jump — he could do great jumps, but they weren't his focus. Winning wasn't the main thing. You saw him once, and you had to keep seeing him."

Ward placed 14th in Los Angeles, his best result of four trips to senior nationals. His competitive programs had flashes of brilliance, but they weren't as consistent as his practices.

"I thought I was supposed to be the best in competition, in order to have the career I wanted, instead of understanding from childhood I wanted to be a performer," he said. "In order to be a respected performer, I thought I needed to be an Olympian. We're told we're not anything unless we go to the Olympics. So, for me, it was about getting there to be respected. My path was not to be that; I was supposed to be performing, regardless."

His path was always different, ever since getting his first pair of skates from

the Salvation Army when he was seven, growing up in a single mother household in Minneapolis. Financing lessons, ice time, and travel was difficult. Early mentors and coaches, including Gailene Norwood and, later, Richard Zander, his ballet instructor Deirdre A. Kellogg, and Page Lipe, his primary coach throughout most of his career, recognized his enormous talent and helped him endure. But he was a Black competitor in a sport that was predominantly White.

Recently, a prominent coach remarked that if only Ward had trained with him as a youngster, he would have been a world champion.

"That's easy to say, but you have no idea what I really needed," Ward replied.

Ward enjoyed a long, successful career with Holiday on Ice, performing throughout Europe from 2009-2015, and 2017-18. During those years, he also made a name for himself as a choreographer, and began his famous association with Jason Brown, the 2015 U.S. champion, who was a young teenager when Ward began working with him and his then-coach Kori Ade in Chicago area rinks.

"Growing up with Rohene and his influence since I was a young kid, he has introduced me to so many different genres and styles of music and dance," Brown said. "He introduced me to Alvin Ailey and always pushed me to watch different styles of dance from a variety of cultures. It's always amazing to learn from him."

Together, their body of work is astounding. A YouTube of Brown's 2013/2014 free skate to "Reel Around the Sun" from Riverdance went viral, cementing his reputation as a superb showman. Other programs – the entertaining "Room Where It Happens" (from the Broadway hit "Hamilton"); the bravura "Sinnerman"; and Brown's most recent short, an emotionally engaging program set to Alexey Kosenko's "Melancholy" – are equally renowned.

The Professional Skaters Association (PSA) and U.S. Figure Skating (USFS) have three times recognized Ward as choreographer of the year, in 2015, 2017, and 2021, the first Black choreographer to be so honored. He is again nominated this year. His collaboration with Brown has grown and deepened over the years, as Brown grew into maturity and, especially, since he moved to Toronto to train in 2018.

"We talk about being unapologetic about who we are, and living authentically to ourselves, versus being people pleasers," Ward said. "That it's okay for him to be an artist and an athlete, versus an athlete first and then an artist. That it's okay for him not to have quadruple jumps, that he is valued."

Brown was certainly valued, as both an artist and an athlete, this season, when he performed two Ward programs to win a silver medal at the U.S. Championships and

place fifth at the world championships.

"We no longer apologize to people for not doing what others think we should do," Ward said. "We are living our truth. Let the sport be a sport, and let's just see who does the best that day. You know, he's been counted out a lot, and I've been counted out. And over the years we've learned not to care about that, to use that as our fuel."

Ward has choreographed for many other prominent skaters, including two-time world women's champion Kaori Sakamoto; Madison Chock and Evan Bates, 2023 world ice dance champions; and 2022 U.S. women's champion Mariah Bell, among many others.

Sometimes lost in the accolades for his choreography is Ward's coaching career, which began when he was still a competitor himself. Currently, he and his coaching partner Amber Gil train students in Chicago, including Alexa Gasparotto, who competed at the 2023 U.S. Championships and is a new member of USFS's international selection pool, and Nathan Chapple, who represented the U.S. at the 2023 World University Games.

"It's a big deal for me," Chapple told the Chicago Sun Times. "There aren't that many of us out there. It's 2023, and I'm the first Black figure skater at that competition. It should be a really good thing for me, and

people like me."

Both Chapple and Gasparotto, who is Black, are ambassadors for Diversify Ice Foundation, a network that connects skaters of color with coaches and other families in skating. Ward works with the organization, which was founded in 2017 by Joel Savary, a figure skating coach and author of "Why Black and Brown Kids Don't Ice Skate."

"We have some Mexican skaters, we have a little Black girl who is seven, about three or four Asian kids, a Romanian girl, a diverse group," Ward, who also sits on the PSA's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion committee, said. "I reach out to people, try to make them understand inclusivity and that we're a safe place at our rink, that we're here to help them facilitate their journeys."

All this, before Ward's 40th birthday. In a way, he is just getting started.

"When I hear music, I see color first," Ward said of his work. "And then I see someone skating to that through the color. And then, maybe, I see what they would be wearing while they're skating to it, and how powerful they would look. It really is all personal towards the athlete I'm working with at that moment. It's important to understand they all have something different to value."

