

JUDY BLUMBERG

A LIFE OF ARTISTIC EXPLORATION

By Lois Elfman



Even as a competitive skater, alumni honoree Judy Blumberg pushed artistic boundaries. The five-time U.S. Ice Dance Champion, two-time Olympian and three-time World Championship medalist and partner Michael Seibert defied ice dancing conventions in their music, costumes and program themes.

"Our gift was our speed, our power, our depth of edge and our willingness to bring new things to the forefront that weren't considered, let's just say, ice dancerly," said Blumberg. "That's what drove us. That's what made us go year to year. And our passion for what we were putting out there, whether it was Fred & Ginger or Scheherazade or our exhibition pieces. ... The whole thing was how are we going to move ice dance forward?"

Following the 1983 season as they planned their free dance and original set pattern dance for the upcoming Olympic season, a friend who worked with American Ballet Theater (ABT) asked if someone affiliated with the company would work with Blumberg. Ballet mistress Georgina Parkinson began working with her at the Metropolitan Opera House, where ABT performs and has rehearsal space. Blumberg would enter through the backstage and go to the ballet studios.

"We worked on extension, stretching, an awareness of body and flow through the space, and she mentored me like I had never really been before by someone not in my field," Blumberg recalled. "It was

life-changing and I am forever grateful... for her understanding of what I needed."

Then-ABT principal dancer Robert LaFosse worked with Blumberg and Seibert on the lift that closed their Scheherazade program, which came from the George Balanchine ballet "Prodigal Son." During that time, Blumberg was able to watch ABT rehearsals and sometimes sit in the wings during performances.

"I took it all in because I was hungry for it," she said. "It wasn't that I wanted to be a ballet dancer, but I wanted to have that serene beauty and quality and understanding of the movement. I will never forget that time and how it changed my trajectory in skating."

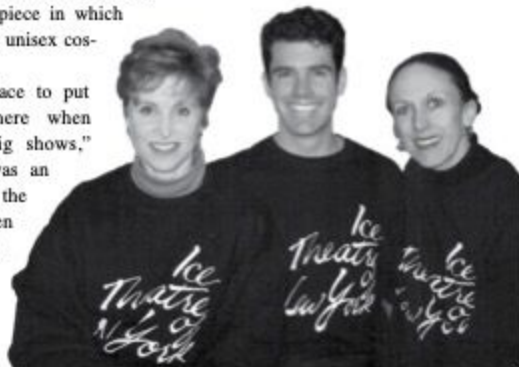
After turning professional Blumberg and Seibert became guest artists with Ice Theatre of New York (ITNY). Former artistic director Rob McBrien had choreographed two pieces for them, "Adagio for Strings" and a tango piece in which they both wore similar unisex costumes.

"It gave us a place to put performances out there when we weren't doing big shows," Blumberg said. "It was an opportunity to show the work that we'd been doing with Rob to those who we skated with every day and perform in that environment where an

audience is close. You feel the energy and the connection in a very different and more profound way than you would in an arena. It gave us a way to find the nuances in the work."

When Seibert retired from performing, Blumberg teamed up with ice dancer Jim Yorke, with whom she also performed for ITNY. The company gave them a space to develop new programs and hone performances that they took to professional competitions.

Over time, Blumberg's involvement with ITNY grew, becoming co-ensemble director. The position involved leading edge classes, supervising performance quality of the programs the company would perform and working in tandem with choreographers—particularly those from the dance world—to make sure their visions were coming to life on the ice.





"More than anything, it was making sure that all the performers were packaged correctly from head to toe before stepping out on the ice," Blumberg said. "Did they have the hair that was the look for the piece? Did their boots, if they had beige boots, match their skin? Were their laces tucked in? It was a refinement that I wanted to make sure that they were owning for the sake of the choreographer and their vision."

She would work with new company members on pieces she had skated, allowing the skaters to develop their own personalities in the performance while also maintaining the integrity of the choreography. Also, she worked with skaters to grow their movement quality, always making sure that each skater tended to every detail.

"Sometimes the smallest detail missed could be the most giant detail, and I'm a detail person," said Blumberg. "I loved working with the ensemble. It wasn't about any one star. Working with the different choreographers was interesting. ... It was a great experience to develop a new vocabulary."

ITNY led to a most unexpected and wonderful partnership for Blumberg. After Yorke decided to coach full-time, co-ensemble director Douglas Webster asked her to skate with him in a piece. She questioned the pairing of an ice dancer and a free skater, but Webster pushed her to try.

"It ended up being a beautiful col-

laboration on 'Appalachia Waltz' with JoAnna Mendl Shaw and Douglas being the co-choreographers," she said. "It was very much a signature piece for us and Ice Theatre at the time."

"My greatest gift was being able to work with Douglas," she added. "In 'Appalachia Waltz' I felt so strongly about what this piece was, how I felt when I was in it and the passion I had for performing with him and the music."

"It was such a wonderful feeling to know that my work with Michael was fantastic and amazing, and it would continue to morph and change and be just as magical with someone else."

Blumberg was in the ITNY office when she received notification that she was a mother and she should come to China to unite with her daughter, who she named Etienne. After finalizing the adoption and bringing Etienne home from China, they settled in Sun Valley, Idaho, where they began their journey together. Blumberg was recently inducted into the Sun Valley Winter Sports Hall of Fame.

"When she came into my life in 2006, nothing changed and everything changed," Blumberg said. "I was still able to be passionate about the world I was in and be passionate about making sure I was giving this youngster what she needed from me in so far as health, mentoring, love, support and being present through her life. She's an amazing kid."

"I've learned so much from this journey with her," she added. "She was very

independent from the get-go. We stand together and we stand with strength apart with love. She'll be with me at the gala."

Today, Blumberg coaches and works as a technical specialist as well as mentoring young ice dancers, which she finds very fulfilling. Skating continues to inspire her, taking time to skate by herself after giving a student a lesson. The greatness of today's ice dance teams and those of the past decade is also inspiring. She loves seeing great skaters move into coaching and cultivate new talent, creativity and innovation.

She is also grateful to share this evening with Sandra Bezic, who choreographed Blumberg and Seibert's Patsy Cline program that they skated to victory at World Pro. Also, it is wonderful to be with Tanith Belbin White and Ben Agosto, who were the first ice dancers since Blumberg and Seibert to win a World Championship medal.

Looking back on her career with Seibert, Blumberg remains incredibly proud of their Scheherazade program performed at the 1984 Olympic Winter Games, even though it was penalized by some judges who deemed it "not ice dance music." It makes her proud that tonight's fellow ITNY honorees Meryl Davis and Charlie White selected Scheherazade for their Olympic gold medal winning free dance.

"That makes me feel like it had redemption," she said. "I was passionate about that music."