

ANNA KISSELGOFF

CHAMPION OF DANCE ON ICE

By Daniel Gesmer



During its 40-year history as America's first not-for-profit dance company on ice, Ice Theatre of New York has honored dozens of notable skaters, choreographers, individual supporters, and corporate donors at its annual gala celebrations. But no journalist, historian, or critic has been a gala honoree before now.

Ice Theatre's 2025 Ice Angel, Anna Kisselgoff, was the New York Times' Chief Dance Critic for nearly three decades, from 1977 until 2006. Earlier dance critics, including Edwin Denby, John Martin, and Clive Barnes, had occasionally written about prominent skaters or skating shows on tours through New York. But Kisselgoff was the first to write regularly and seriously about skating as a medium of artistic expression on equal footing with concert dance.

ITNY founder and artistic director Moira North called Kisselgoff "a staunch

champion for the credibility of dance on ice. Her incisive and generous reviews made a huge difference for Ice Theatre in its earliest years."

North cites in particular Kisselgoff's concluding comment in a review of the then-fledgling company's May 1988 Sky Rink performances, which featured John Curry, Gary Beacom, and the ITNY ensemble: "The Ice Theatre of New York is onto something, and it deserves greater support."

The very title of that article, "Focusing on Ice Skating's Choreographic Aspect," suggested a paradigm shift that Kisselgoff arguably propelled at The Times, and which in turn helped propel Ice Theatre.

"That review became a pivotal point in the evolution of our company," said North. "Because it was Anna Kisselgoff giving her stamp of approval, more and more funders deemed Ice Theatre worthy of support.

Choreographers and organizations from the dance world also took notice. This definitely put wind in our sails."

Kisselgoff pressed this perspective with great care and precision in numerous reviews of skating performances. She heralded Canadian legend Toller Cranston as a "Nureyev on Skates" in 1977. In subsequent years her reviews also considered Torvill and Dean, John Curry, and, more than once, Ice Theatre of New York. She assigned other Times dance critics, such as Jack Anderson and Jennifer Dunning, to cover skating performances, too.

This serious and respectful attention in America's newspaper of record marked a breakthrough for the medium of dance on ice. But Kisselgoff had appreciated the natural connection between dance and skating from a tender age.

She tried skating as a young girl, when



she and two ballet school classmates rented skates at Rockefeller Center. With ankles strong from dance training, “everyone was surprised that I got up and skated right away, but only in one direction,” Kisselgoff recalled. However she was too busy with ballet and academics to take skating further, and even ballet training fell by the wayside when she matriculated at Bryn Mawr College, which at that time had no dance program.

Kisselgoff joined the New York Times staff in 1968, as the second dance critic after Clive Barnes, and she still contributes to the paper despite formally retiring in 2006. As far back as the late 1960s and early 1970s, she reviewed touring shows like the Ice Capades and Ice Follies.

In 1976 she reviewed newly-minted Olympic gold-medalist John Curry performing “After All,” choreographed by Twyla Tharp, at Madison Square Garden. Despite Curry’s balletic purity and Tharp’s dance-world pedigree, “that did not yet tell me where ice skating could go further,” she said.

For Kisselgoff, it was the British ice

dance team and 1984 Olympic champions Torvill and Dean who “made the breakthrough in extending the form, even though they did not have ballet training like the Russians. They knew how to use the skating vocabulary on an artistic level.” She dubbed them the “Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire” of skating in a lengthy and glowing review of their performances in the Ice Capades’ January 1988 shows at Madison Square Garden.

Her game-changing review of Ice Theatre came just a few months later.

Kisselgoff had always been interested in writing about skating, regardless of whether or not the cognoscenti considered it an art form. She found it natural to cover ice dancing in terms of choreography and artistry.

“The pioneering role played by Ice Theatre of New York had a lot to do with that,” she said. “Moir North commissioned professional dance choreographers who were not originally skaters.”

North was not the first skating impresario

to turn to dance-world choreographers, but she was arguably the first to do so consistently and strategically. “I wanted to build a durable bridge between the skating world and the dance and theatre worlds,” she explained.

North and Kisselgoff each acknowledge an ongoing prejudice that ranks skating works more artistically legitimate if the choreographer is native to the concert dance world versus the skating world. But both push back on this bias, seeing no necessary difference in quality or credibility.

“Ice skaters who have never been stage choreographers create differently from stage choreographers who have not previously worked with ice skaters,” reflected Kisselgoff. Yet “each idiom exposes the other to new movement possibilities, borrows from the other, and extends the other.”

Daniel Gesmer is the founder of Seismic Skate Systems, a prominent brand manufacturer of high-performance skateboard products. He also writes about the arts for publications far and wide.



Congratulations Moira
on the 40th anniversary of the
Ice Theatre of New York.

I am sincerely thrilled for you
and happy to serve you on
the Board of Directors.

Douglas Haw