

ICE THEATRE OF NEW YORK AND THE ART OF SKATING

By Mindy Aloff, author of "Why Dance Matters"



In 1984—when Canadian gold medalist in ice dance, world champion in professional free-dance on ice, and erstwhile law student Moira North gathered together a handful of colleagues to found the first nonprofit dance-on-ice company Ice Theatre of New York—the association of theatrical dance and figure skating enjoyed international glamour. That year, at the winter Olympics, the British ice-dance partnership Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean were awarded perfect scores of 6.0 by a dozen judges for Dean's choreography to Ravel's "Boléro," an achievement unequalled in world ice-dance competition before or since. The choreography not only engaged the music in detail but it also had a movement and

gestural arc that endowed the work with an inevitable beginning, middle, and end, thereby sustaining the magnetic tension of a story. It was thrilling to follow.

Furthermore, just eight years before, the Olympic gold medalist John Curry (also from Britain) had magicked audiences with a personal style of skating derived from his obsession with the line, deportment, rhythmic diversity, and adagio character of classical ballet. He seemed to continue the balletic refinement of Peggy Fleming, the much-admired women's 1968 Olympic gold medalist. And the bronze men's Olympian of '76, Toller Cranston, also presented a personal style based on aspects of classical dancing. Cranston continued to compete, while Curry went on to found his own ice-dance company in the United States, where he built a repertory based largely on musical scores and visual fantasies associated with ballet, commissioning prominent theatrical choreographers to work with them. One of his earliest choreographic commissions for himself to perform, in '76, was *After All*, a three-part solo to Albinoni by the prodigious stage and screen choreographer Twyla Tharp, which—as the Tharp Foundation describes it—"explores the weight and rhythm shifts possible in dance, yet unexplored in competitive figure skating." Curry was a devotee of the school figures that once underwrote championship fig-

ure skating, and the first section of *After All* enunciates them. The solo ends with an action that represents a pure statement of Curry's sensibility as a skater: Pushing off on one skate, the soloist circles the edge of the rink in one long, unbroken glide, which spirals into the center of the rink and slows to a stop on the last note of the music. It was in the midst of this era, when competitive skating seemed to long for the lyricism of dance, that Ice Theatre of New York came into being.

Over the past forty years, the innovation and tremendous discipline by Christopher Dean and John Curry have provided ideals for North's choices as artistic director of Ice Theatre of New York. They took risks, and so has she, yet the risks are in service of bringing together the essences of dancing and skating and of exploring their opposing extremes as well. Dean has inspired North especially, and, in 2022, ITNY honored Torvill and Dean for their achievements in the field. Meanwhile, Curry's legacy to the company has been profound. For his own company, Curry developed an "Edge" class, taught to an ensemble, which focuses on the way the skater shifts bodily weight between inside and outside edges.

The choreographer and teacher Rob McBrien, who worked for Curry, also worked for Ice Theatre of New York from 1986 to 1996 and devel-





oped the Edge class here. (He made ballets for the company, too, to music ranging from RunDMC to Mozart.) “The skater of the future will be the one who combines the athleticism of the triple/quadruple jump with the artistry that comes only through the mastery of the edges,” the web site reads. In support of these classes, Ice Theatre of New York offers workshops with four points of emphasis: The knee bend (the use of the balletic plié, which initiates nearly everything in skating), the dynamic action of the working (free) leg, the contrapposto of the upper body and the arms, and the use of the eyes “for balance and style.”

American skater Ilia Malinin, the “quad g0d,” is appearing at the 2025 gala and appeared at the gala in 2024; however, for ITNY, the delicacy and excellence of the landings of his quadruple jumps—rather than their elevation or their number of revolutions per se—are what matter most. As the ITNY’s web site explains, Curry’s edge work is equivalent to what artistry means in figure skating. Curry’s company inspired other skating organizations in North America, such as Nathan Birch’s *The Next Ice Age*, but

none compares with ITNY in terms of its continuous existence and intensity of Curry’s teachings.

Tharp’s *After All*—restaged for Taiwanese competition skater and choreographer David Liu, in 2007, when he was making his own ballets for the company—is in ITNY’s repertoire. It may be the most beautiful work yet made for that ranging collection. However, a close second in terms of experimental adventure with the niceties of skating technique and surprise is *Alberta Biography* by the Canadian competition skater, coach, and skating journalist Frank Nowasad. Performed at Ice Theatre of New York in 1988 by the unique Gary Beacom—a skater who developed for himself the breathtaking off-balance technique once associated with the skating clowns of the *Ice Follies* and *Ice Capades*—the solo, in a lumber jacket, of unpredictable stances, footwork, and stops was set to bird calls recorded by the great avian naturalist Roger Tory Peterson. And, in 1987, Curry’s mentee the ballerina-figure skater Katherine Healy joined Rob McBrien to co-choreograph an ITNY skating solo for Healy, *Diva*.

ITNY’s repertoire also includes dance and movement references to such traditions as Argentine tango (choreographed by Peter DiFalco and Peter Martins), aerial ballet, waltzes (JoAnna Mendl Shaw with Douglas Webster), the silk-and-light dances of Loie Fuller (Jody Sperling), and Flamenco (Carlos Orta and others). Such choreographers as modern dancers Lar Lubovitch, Alberto del Saz, Ann Carlson, Elisa Monte, Laura Dean, David Parsons, Jacquelyn Buglisi, the late Johan Renvall from ABT, and the New York City Ballet principal and former Miami City Ballet artistic director, Edward Villella, come from the theater to choreograph for the ice and may need help translating their ideas for the skaters. Other choreographers—such as Douglas Webster; Rob McBrien; John Curry (a 1990 untitled solo to music by Nino Rota); and Moira North herself—unspooled choreography from their personal body knowledge as skaters. Indeed, North alone has studied, in addition to ballet, Martha Graham technique, dance traditions of Haiti and Africa, and Butoh (with Sankai Juku). Given the



diverse dance background of its Founding artistic director, Ice Theatre of New York's explorations could expand considerably.

This company does much more than perform at Chelsea Piers and, outdoors, at Rockefeller Center, Bryant Park, and other New York City venues. Its outreach programs to city youth, its appearances at museums (using a synthetic "ice lake"), its hospitality to local skating clubs, its visits to national and international festivals, keep North and her highly organized and knowledgeable staff hopping. (For my own part, the annual award gala offers an education in itself. From the awards over the years, I learned much about the late, irreplaceable Olympian and skating commentator Dick Button, the brilliant and musical skating choreographer Sandra Bezic, and the genius of a British goddess who, in her feature films as a skater of the '40s and her performances as a classical dancer with ballet companies, went by the one-word name Belita (Belita Gladys Lyne Jepson-Turner 1923–2005). Talk about strong ankles!: Belita brought a pair of her skating boots to New York, and they were made of leather as thin and flexible as chamois.

Throughout the twentieth century in New York, dancing and skating were in each other's pockets. Before the second

decade, Charles Dillingham had brought the German skating star Charlotte to perform on skates at Manhattan's (now-lost) Hippodrome, where Anna Pavlova, also dancing there, coached Charlotte in *The (Dying) Swan* and, legendarily, for at least one show, danced that famous little solo by Michel Fokine next to Charlotte, who skated her version to Pavlova's admiration.

During the 1940s, one could see the ice shows and films of Sonia Henie that were choreographed by Catherine Littlefield, who, for her own ballet company, choreographed the first full-length production in America of *The Sleeping Beauty*. In the late 1980s, when ITNY was housed at the "old" SkyRink, at the top of the office tower at West 33rd and the West Side Highway—where the skaters could only rehearse after midnight because that's when the company could afford to make use of the ice—one could sometimes find skating there a woman named Darlene Gilbert, who had invented a way to dance across the rink on the full point of a toe shoe to which a small skating blade was attached. Once, thanks to ITNY, I even saw John Curry in a solo to an aria from an opera. At the end of it, he softly dropped from an upright position to a full-out fall, drifting softly across the ice

until the music stopped. I still don't know if what I saw was planned or an accident. Doesn't matter. The one thing I know it was, was art.

In the nearer term, Ice Theatre of New York continues with its regular New York programming. This includes the City Skate Concert Series at Rockefeller Center and other metropolitan rinks, an outreach program for New York public school children (the New Works and Young Artists Series), edge classes, and the annual Home Season performances. ITNY is delighted to have been invited to participate in Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in Beckett, MA this summer.

Said Executive Director Jirina Ribbens, "it's amazing how something that started in Moira's loft has survived 40 years and grown into, essentially, a large modern dance company. Moira has been fabulous at finding choreographers like Parsons and Buglisi, who don't know the medium but come to it with fresh, curious minds. Since our work straddles dance and sport, on the economic side our challenge is to find visionary funders who see in us the opportunity to create a new art form: dancing on ice, taking the virtuosic element of the sport of ice skating and expanding it to a soul-felt activity that goes beyond the physical into the poetic.