



# Review of Ice Theatre of New York, Inc

© 1998 MADELEINE L. DALE

On May 20 and 21, 1998, at the Sky Rink of Chelsea Piers, Ice Theatre of New York, Inc., gave its final performance of the season. The group's mission "to develop, foster, and promote ice skating as a performing art," was not fully realized in this show, although by the effort alone "the importance of artistic, ensemble ice dancing as an innovative form of ice dancing," was clearly communicated. That this was a program about if not completely of artistic skating, was achieved even in those numbers that were of the competitive genre.

The smile-all-the-way-through opening number was a "special presentation" by the company's Junior Performance Club, an ensemble of 17 children and teens. Eight little girls in powder puff pink fluttered their arms and, courted by four junior cavaliers, maneuvered into changing bird formations over the ice. Five adolescent girls in shades of rose pink showed their professionalism by successfully executing their floor patterns despite the obvious absence of a sixth skater. A skated grand right and left was smoother than a danced one, and was very appealing to see. The boys' jumps, completed with manly determination, and the girls' smiles, were captivating. Victoria Lyas dressed her skaters in traditional outfits and choreographed simple but attractive patterns to lovely music by Verdi, allowing her skaters a chance to look good

and project their performance artistry and showmanship.

Both choreographing and skating with the company, partnering five-time U.S. National Ice Dance Champion (with Michael Seibert), is Douglas Webster, whose background is in amateur and show skating and acting. For this program, three of his works were presented. The first, *Danse Macabre* (1997), set to Saint-Saens, was performed by the ensemble made up of Yuri Chesnichenko, Jamie Coffey, Andrew Naylor, Yaroslava Nechaeva, Susan Pereira, Max Sevostianov, Rosanna Tovi, and Tian Yi Zhang. All display the sport's athleticism, but it is Ms. Zhang, a New York high school student, two-time National Ice Dance Champion of China (1995 and 1996), and a ballet student, who displays the art's grace. She is lovely.

Webster's *Cabaret Manana* (1998) to music by Juan García Esquivel was showy and entertaining. With two round cocktail tables set with three candles each, the night club mood was suggested and fun-lovingly secured by the glitzy costuming by Leonardo Iturregui. The club's patrons included two women in hot, multi-colored dresses with feathers in their hair. Judy Blumberg's blue bundle, cocked side-wise, was the size of a hen a good butcher would recommend. Ms. Zhang's yellow feather topping was only canary-sized, but then her entire jacket was of white

plumage. Another skater wore a simple A-line pumpkin orange mini dress. Then there were the two molls in black semi-sheer baby-doll nighties and day-glow orange pageboy wigs. Looking like pals of Nathan Detroit, the guys wore slacks, solid colored shirts and ties matched to the doll's dresses. In this number, patterns and solos by the skaters showed off the requisite skills. Ms. Zhang's choreography might have been more seductive; her maturity as a performer would have tolerated it, despite her age. The double trouble girls' tease and fight over a man filled out the story. There were some thrilling smooth as ice lifts with the catcher also in motion.

*Appalachia Waltz* (1997) was choreographed by Webster with JoAnna Mendl Shaw. Ms. Shaw is a New York-based choreographer who knows dance and movement. She holds an M.F.A. in Dance from the University of Utah and is the recipient of two NEA Choreographic Fellowships. She is a Certified Movement Analyst, having completed her Laban Movement Analysis Studies in 1996. Ms. Shaw's work has been presented at established New York venues such as Dance Theatre Workshop, St. Mark's Church, and the 92nd Street Y. She has a broad teaching background that includes the New York University Tisch School of the Arts and the Limon Institute. She has also performed. This happy marriage

of the showman and the dancer/choreographer yielded a piece in which ice show and dance finally meshed in what was the last number of the evening.

Supporting the dance was well-blended music by Yo Yo Ma, Edgar Meyers, and Mark O'Conner, such that the rhythm and tone were clear. Floor patterns and movement styles were ho-down heel-down-toe-up jig steps with waltz grace. A long interlude danced by Blumberg and Webster seemed to wear her out, while the remaining couples, unlit, slunk around half the periphery of the rink in different configurations of single file and pairs. Their skates scraping the ice, this roaming about the fringes was eery. Ms. Blumberg's years of ice dancing with a partner shows. She fits to Webster's body whether they are front-to-front or she is front to his back, and she is fearless when lifted. Webster, meanwhile is trying to do a lot of things at once. Practice and experience should enhance his confidence. A fireworks ending was projected with alternating leaps in a circle and some exciting lifts to a classical musical composition's multiple endings.

Dancer Shaw's *A Conversation with Angels* (1998) is to skating what skater Webster's solo choreography is to dance. They are better together. To music by Cam Miller, a trombone-bearing Cam Miller on skates, glided dully on ice with two angels, Susan Pereira and Tian Yi Zhang. This was representationally a conversation between a man seeking immortality talking with angels, but who is well-advised to keep his feet planted on earth. Only by reading the poem in the program could one know that. Angels on ice works well because wings can flutter, and indeed, Susan Soetaert designed beautifully effective costumes of white body suits with gossamer wings from the arm to the rear waist that worked well in the wind created by skating across space.

Off the mark for Ice Theatre of New York were two numbers by David Liu. Both were competitive-style pieces one would expect of an Olympian. Having just completed his amateur career at the 1998 Winter Games in Nagano, Mr. Liu has not yet

made the transition to either show skating and/or artistic dancing on ice. His performance was cold and he seemed nervous. There were long periods of not much happening artistically leading up to "big jumps," several of which he missed. In *M.A.Y. in the Backyard* to music by Ryuchi Sakamoto, angled hands and head jerks were his nods to choreography.

Liu's *I've Got Rhythm* has two great things going for it - George Gershwin's music and Jo Jo Starbuck's choreography. The piece should either be retired or re-named "I've Got Slow Rhythm." The number begged to be danced in a tux. Liu's shirt and pants were okay, but what was the point of the necktie around his waist? If he'd misplaced the waistband of his costume, a belt or nothing at all would have been preferable to this makeshift look. Skated with speed by any of your favorites, (or mine, Brian Boitano and Paul Wylie) or everyone's favorite, Scott Hamilton, this choreography would be knock-out. There are jumps and changing sit spins, a marking movement of relaxed gliding by face-front to the audience, doing essentially nothing with a cute shrug of the shoulders, and a wiping of the brow in relief after what was a truly huge jump, that should have blown the Sky Rink's roof sky higher.

Sebastian Britten, the 1995 Canadian Men's champion, is now skating and choreographing in Montreal. He presented artistically effective competition style pieces, harmonizing movement, music, a title, and costuming. For *Nightmare*, dressed in black tights and a tattered black and brownish-soiled shirt by Line Perijny, he utilized not only head movements but also the music to help build tension between jumps. He defied gravity and falls, maintaining his balance in off-angled leans that would be just as interesting on the floor, as he used the ice as part of his medium in David Wilson's choreography. In *Saraswathy* with music by Majoly and choreography by the composer, Mr. Wilson, and the skater himself, we have a sense of how personal is Britten's full artistic expression. With no costume credit, Britten appeared in white balloon pants with a

brown velvet insert to his shirt. Here he offered fast footwork, well-arched back, tension and release that displayed his knowledge of dance.

Also polished, experienced and complete as skater, dancer, and performer, was 1980 Olympian Lisa Marie Allen. In her first selection, *Scent of a Woman*, Ms. Allen was elegant in a sheer-skirted, black Tango-style dress with flower-flocked bodice, bold red rose in her blond bun, and rhinestone earrings. The feeling of the music and the attitude of the character were well-conceived and sensually personified. Ms. Allen choreographed *It's Time* (song by Linda Eder) for herself, taking advantage of her self-knowledge and creating a program that showed off her dancing and audience communication skills. Bedazzling in a bright red, halter-top cocktail dress with glittery narrow cross bands, she held her head high and confidently covered the ice.

The choreographer, Donlin Foreman, has stellar credentials. In an 18-year association with the Martha Graham Dance Company, he was coached and directed by Martha Graham in every male role in the repertory. He has performed with the Feld Ballets of New York; La Scala Ballet, Milan; the International Dance Festival, Prague; and Jacques D'Amboises, National Dance Institute, originating some roles. He is featured in the WNET/Dance in America films *Conversations with Martha Graham*, *Clytemnestra*, and *Trailblazer of American Modern Dance*. He is Associate Professor of Dance at Barnard College, and developed *Extasis* for the company, an ensemble work in progress. The skater/dancers, three well-matched couples, were beautifully dressed in grape and lemon gum drop colored costumes. The ponytails of two of the women were sloppy against the elegance of the costumes. (Leave it to Ms. Zhang to have her hair in a tight bun.) The piece was busy and boring as though Mr. Foreman were still testing ways skating can use dance elements in its artistic expression. The spacing among the couples was uneven. There were a couple of unusual lifts with the woman in front of the man taken airborne on his bent

arms. Apart from these two elements, this piece has potential, but was not ready for presentation.

Herein lies the challenge Moira North has set for herself and others. Since founding this, the nation's first not-for-profit ice dancing ensemble, similar companies have been spawned elsewhere in the United States and in Canada. But in her company, none of the performers or choreographers, not even Mr. Donlin, fully succeeded "in the development of figure skating as a performing art, distinguished from skating as a competitive athletic event or as part of a commercial entertainment program." The company's repertory includes commissioned choreography by such major modern dance choreographers as Elisa Monte, and Lar Lubovitch. It would seem Ms. Monte's style of choreography would work on ice with its interesting runs and lifts. American Ballet Theater's *Cruel World* or adaptations of anything by Petipa, the Black Swan *Pas de Deux*, for example, with its "spins" seem like they would be worth trying on ice, so it really would be dancing on ice.

The Founder/Director of the Ice Theatre of New York was named to the 1997-98 25 Most Important Names in Figure Skating by *International Figure Skating* magazine. She is a Canadian Ice Dance medalist and student of jazz, modern, Japanese Butoh, Haitian, and African dance. Maybe it is Ms. North's young skaters, those of the Junior Ensemble and a skating dancer like Ms. Zhang, who, upon cultivation, will realize the dream.

The company's promotional literature maintains it has "developed an audience whose interests encompass 'the athleticism of skating and the artistry of contemporary dance,'" but this night, it was clearly a skating audience that loved jumps and show. Capturing (and convincing) a dance-appreciative skating audience may be the lesser yet more difficult goal. Dancers should watch with an open mind and encouraging heart. 

