

Wade Corbett: Doing it All—and Why Not?

By Lynn Rutherford

Wade Corbett found his life's calling relatively late: he was an experienced dancer, aged about 25, when he hit the ice – literally – at the old Sky Rink on West 33rd Street.

“I had command of my body and I knew how to distribute my weight,” Wade says. “But what I did not know from dance was how to deal with the toe pick. So, when I tried doing an arabesque or a spiral, my chin and face and everything else met the ice! I thought to myself, ‘Well, that’s the end of my skating career.’”

But the chance to blend his dance training – he holds an ASS in Dance and Theatre from Borough of Manhattan Community College and performed with the International School of Ballet at Carnegie Hall for 12 years -- with gliding around the ice on an eighth-of-an-inch blade, was too strong a lure. He signed up for lessons, three a week, and practiced daily. Within nine months, he was competing; his best jump was a double flip. He continued to compete as a septuagenarian, right up through the 2018 Gay Games in Paris.

“Wade’s choreography is beautiful, and how he moves is beautiful,” Linda Frances, a fellow adult competitor and former longtime student of Corbett’s, says. “People would see him skate and then ask him, ‘Can you choreograph a number for me?’”

Around 1982 or so, our other 2022 ITNY alumni award winner, Darlene Parent, asked Wade if he would like to teach learn-to-skate classes. His answer? “Sure, why not?” A few years later, ITNY founder Moira North saw Wade skate and asked if he would be interested in joining the company.

“I just said, ‘Sure, why not?’ So I joined ITNY in, I think it was, 1984,” Wade says. “There were several before, however, one of my early favorite performances was in maybe 1986 and it was on synthetic ice at Studio 54. It was just outrageously fun and beautiful; it was when Studio 54 had Steve Rubbell and all of the stars there.”

“We were doing variation on a schedule of 12 a.m. to 5 a.m. rehearsals, three times a week,” he adds. “Rehearsals, ballet first and then on-ice. It was pretty

grueling but it was for the cause. We knew that this was something different, something new, and we wanted to support it. And now it's blossomed into this big, wonderful thing, and those of us who are left, we really appreciate it and love it."

Of Wade's many performances, a few stand out in his mind.

"When John Curry was working with ITNY, I took lessons with him," he says. "During that time, he choreographed a "Plié Power" class and being in the corps de ballet behind him was so special.... It was an honor to be on the ice with him.

"And then came 1994 when John died. We had the Gay Games here in New York and for the first time, skating was in the Games. And I said, 'I gotta do this,' and I worked real hard for that one. I happened to win gold there and I dedicated my exhibition piece, set to Mahler's Adagio, to John. If you know that piece of music, it's sad, but it's beautiful. That was a special, special moment in my life."

Wade developed a specialty in character roles and performed alongside ITNY founder Moira North and the late Kenny Moir as a bartender in "One for My Baby," choreographed by Rob McBrien, and as an (annoying) admirer of JoJo Starbuck in another piece choreographed by McBrien.

"That was at the original Sky Rink; I was JoJo's man in 'Crazy,'" he says with a chuckle. "I didn't do a lot of skating, I was more of a prop, but it was fun to perform with JoJo, who is a sweetheart And being in "Plié Power" was always fun. The audience loved it."

As a longtime skating teacher, including stints as director of both the skating school at Sky Rink at Chelsea Piers, and Riverbank State Park, Wade often had three words for his students: Posture, posture and posture.

"I say, 'You must have your jumps, your spins, but everything comes from your plié and your posture,'" he says. "I made out pretty well with that, I had quite a few students. And of course, I would take competitors to the ballet room upstairs at Chelsea Piers and we would work out at the barre, just on movement.

"I had a lot of minority children. I was very happy and proud of that I had a lot of Black students that I brought to Skating Club of NY, and I had some good young competitors. That was fun."

Frances competes to this day, building on the technique she learned in lessons from Wade. “He was very exacting; he made me do three-turns around the rink in the public session for so long, I was absolutely embarrassed,” she says. “Because Wade started skating as an adult, he was very insistent on my learning proper technique to land and soften the moves I did – ‘You have to soak in deep, you need to be on an edge’ -- those are the things that have led to my longevity in the sport.”

Now retired, Wade is a keen follower of the current scene, including the recent Olympic Games in Beijing.

“I find ice dance is the most entertaining,” he says. “I appreciate Nathan (Chen) and all the rest of them doing quads, trying to do quad axels and that sort of thing, but that’s really not my cup of tea. I want to see skating, I want to see posture, form, balance, edgework. That’s what fills me and that is why I love Ice Theatre of New York®.”