

Karen Kain  
Artistic Director

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Cover story



# KAREN KAIN'S ENCORE

It's been nearly 40 years since the once painfully shy ballerina danced with Rudolf Nureyev. But at a glorious and gorgeous 58, **KAREN KAIN** is still centre stage. As the artistic director of The National Ballet of Canada, she's nurturing a new generation of dancers and dance lovers. She talks to editor-in-chief **MARYAM SANATI** about managing with empathy and how confidence comes with age.

photographs by Monic Richard

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**K**aren Kain does not enter a room and take grand command. She is quiet, measured, her voice only a few shades deeper than the church-mouse squeak of her early twenties, when she rose to fame as the principal dancer of The National Ballet of Canada.

Now preparing to launch her fifth season as artistic director of the National Ballet, Kain communicates her charisma subtly and silently. In the midst of people, she stands with a dignified, shoulders-back posture. (Ever the dancer.) She wears her hair gloriously short, without a single wisp to hide behind. (How many women can pull that off?) At age 58, she has an imperturbable air about her that seems to say, "I know who I am," the ever-so-polite version of "I don't care what you think of me."

It's impossible to detect the younger Kain here, the ingenue who suffered from stage fright for most of her career. But then again, she has been practising composure for a very long time. "People say that I look very calm but I'm not very calm at all," Kain explained in a TV interview in the 1970s. "I'm very nervous."

Whether her confidence is skin deep or melts into her core, she has a presence. She also has a vision for her job that is as clear as it is certain. This, in the end, is what defines Karen Kain today.

**MARYAM SANATI:** *This is not the first time you've appeared on the cover of Chatelaine.*

**KAREN KAIN:** I was on the cover when I was just a young dancer, in my Snow Queen outfit. [The issue is December 1973, and Kain is wearing a white-and-silver costume from *The Nutcracker*, and a tiara on her head.] It seems so long ago.

**MS:** *Let me take you back to Rudolf Nureyev's *The Sleeping Beauty*, which will open *The National Ballet's* season this November. It has great meaning to your career. You danced it with Nureyev for the first time in 1972, at age 21, only three years out of ballet school. Describe Karen Kain at that age.*



*"Dance is about strength and courage. Just to be able to get through those ballets takes a kind of determination."*

**KK:** Mostly I was really, really shy. I could barely open my mouth. [CBC Radio's] Shelagh Rogers found an old interview that she had done with me where I couldn't say two words and my voice was so small that you couldn't hear me. I was painfully shy, except onstage, where I would lose my inhibitions. As soon as I got onstage, I wasn't afraid of anything. That propelled me forward in those early years. And that's what Rudolf recognized in me because I was the way *he* was. He loved to be dared onstage by the performers around him because it gave him energy.

**MS:** *He had a profound impact on *The National Ballet*.*

**KK:** Huge impact. His version of *The Sleeping Beauty* put The National Ballet of Canada on the international map in those days. Because of him, we went to all sorts of places that we wouldn't have been able to afford to go. [Before he arrived,] we wouldn't have been booked in those places because we didn't have a reputation.

**MS:** *Do you remember a time, then or later, when you grew out of your shyness?*

**KK:** I think I'm still shy at heart but I've had to step up and get over it. I don't like speaking in public, to large groups of people, but I make myself do it. I also never really got over stage fright. You get better and eventually you conquer it. But it doesn't just disappear.

**MS:** *The duality you just described is interesting. Many performers say that they aren't naturally inclined to jump onstage. They will it out of >>*

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themselves. There's also a duality in ballet for women – in classical ballet roles, such as *The Sleeping Beauty*, the women are in vulnerable situations. But a ballerina is anything but vulnerable. Underneath, she's all about stamina, athleticism and power.

**KK:** Yes, it's about strength and courage. Just to be able to get through those ballets takes a kind of determination – absolutely.

**MS:** As artistic director, you've programmed everything from classic works that we all know and love to ballets set to music by *The Rolling Stones*. You've shown that the ballet can find a balance between populism and high art. Is that the legacy that you want to leave?

**KK:** I've used that strategy in the last little while because I wanted people from different age groups to think about *The National Ballet* in a new way – not to think that the ballet is a museum piece. I'm trying to find a balance that lets the company perform the old works, the *Romeo and Juliets*, and lets young people know that ballet is not just for old fogeys.

**MS:** I want to change course a little bit and talk to you about the word empathy. You used that term once to explain your management style, saying, "I have such enormous empathy for the dancers."

**KK:** When you've been a dancer yourself, it's hard not to have enormous empathy. You know how incredibly hard dancers work, how much stress they have. They rehearse something for six weeks and then have one night onstage where they just don't know what will happen – it can go wrong. There's fear involved. I think my job entails a lot of support.

"I'm sure lots of women look at pictures of themselves and say, 'Gee, I wish I'd known how good-looking I was when I was younger. I would have relaxed a bit.'"

**MS:** You've talked before about the notion of beauty in dance and the heartbreaking beauty of some of the classic roles. What does the word beauty mean to you?

**KK:** In ballet, there are aesthetic requirements that we come to define as beautiful. It has to do with the line of the legs and the arms and the head and the symmetry and the way that it fits with the music and the way someone's spirit comes through their movement. Dancers can be the plainest, strangest little people and then when they dance, they can become very, very beautiful.

**MS:** Did you find it tough to recognize beauty in yourself when you were younger?

**KK:** Oh, I had absolutely no idea. I'm sure all women sort of feel this way. You're constantly criticizing yourself in the mirror and wishing your legs were longer or whatever you wish.

**MS:** What did you wish?

**KK:** I didn't feel I was flexible enough. I didn't feel I had certain requirements, technically. And I never thought about beauty. Sometimes, now, I'll see a picture of myself when I was young and I think, Wow, I was so beautiful and I never, for a moment, realized it when I was that age. [laughs] And I'm sure lots of women look at pictures of themselves and say, "Gee, I wish I'd known how good-looking I was when I was younger. I would have relaxed a bit."

**MS:** Let's turn to your home life. What is life like now for you and your husband [the theatre producer and actor Ross Petty]?

**KK:** We both work incredibly hard. He produces his own [holiday-themed family show] every year. He raises the money, he helps write the script, he acts in it himself, he hires the actors. We're both very committed to what we do, but we try hard to have a date night every week and make sure that we sit across from each other and talk. It sounds really simple but...

**MS:** ...but it works. And part of the reason that you're very busy is that you spend time advocating for the arts and for cultural institutions in Canada. That spirit was honoured last year with the opening of the Karen Kain School of the Arts in Toronto. I think that it's so meaningful that the children chose to name the school after you. One of the students said, "There aren't many schools named after women, and it's time."

**KK:** I was touched. I was so touched when I went to the school and they did a performance for me. And yes, who else has had a school named after her, Laura Secord?

**MS:** And [the author and educator] Ursula Franklin, too. Not many more.

**KK:** It's pretty rare. It was a very important thing for me. I burst into tears. Really, I couldn't control my emotions.

**MS:** At this point in your career – or at any point – it's a meaningful reward.

**KK:** It was lovely. ■



**SNOW QUEEN**  
Kain on the cover of *Chatelaine* in 1973 at the start of her career. Offstage, she was painfully shy. "But as soon as I got onstage, I wasn't afraid of anything," she says.