

The elegance and grace of Karen Kain



Ballerina Karen Kain loves that SYTYCDC brings dance to larger audiences.

Updated Wed. Sep. 16 2009 8:05 AM ET

Lindsay Zier-Vogel, CTV.ca

"Dance is something that is part of our makeup as human beings," Karen Kain says from her chair in the makeup room backstage at So You Think You Can Dance Canada's Top 14 show. "It is human to move and express ourselves through our bodies," she continues.

For someone whose legacy is larger than life, she is a petite woman, with an elegance that affirms her illustrious career as a prima ballerina.

It's clear I'm in the presence of a great artist and I wonder if this awe I'm feeling is similar to Kain's experience when she first met her long-time dance partner, Rudolph Nureyev.

For many, Kain defines ballet in Canada. As a graduate from Canada's National Ballet School, she joined the National Ballet of Canada and soon became a principal dancer, performing with the world's great ballet dancers, including Nureyev and Mikhail Baryshnikov.

Exploring the many facets of dance on SYTYCDC

Kain is thrilled to be a part of the SYTYCDC judging panel. "I hope and believe that something like this helps young people think about exploring dance themselves, and offers them the chance to see dance in all its many facets. There are so many facets of dance!" she says with enthusiasm.

"The truth is, I am no expert in all of these other forms of dancing, I'm really only an expert in ballet and nobody's doing ballet," she laughs and gets a quick lesson about the history of hip-hop from fellow judge Tré Armstrong.

"That doesn't mean that I don't have an eye for form, rhythm, shape, articulation, musicality and a dancer's general charisma," Kain points out.

Highlights of an illustrious career

When asked about a highlight from her performing career, Kain laughs. "One highlight?" she

asks.

I guess it's an unfair question. In addition to her work with Canada's National Ballet, Kain also danced with The Bolshoi Ballet, Hamburg Ballet, London Festival Ballet and the Paris Opera Ballet and is a Companion of the Order of Canada, an Officer of the Order of Arts and Letters in France and in 2002, she was honoured with a Governor General's Award for Lifetime Artistic Achievement.

After thinking for a moment, she says, "I suppose performing with the National (Ballet of Canada) in New York at the Met in the summer every year for a decade."

"I would love to be able to provide that kind of opportunity for this generation of dancers," she adds.

From dancer to dance advocate

Though Kain's career as a prima ballerina ended when she stepped off the stage in 1997, her involvement with dance and arts advocacy continues. She is the founding board president and current chair of the Advisory Council for the Dancer Transition Resource Centre, an organization that focuses on helping dancers make necessary transitions into, within and from professional performing careers.

From 2004 to 2008, Kain was also the chair of the Canada Council for the Arts, a national organization that supports, promotes and celebrates the work of Canadian artists and arts organizations.

"I believe that we're very lucky to have the Canada Council, but I don't believe it's funded well enough to serve the artistic activity in this country," she reflects, asserting art and artistic expression as an integral part of Canadian culture.

She is currently the artistic director for the National Ballet of Canada, Kain has brought in young Canadian choreographers to inspire and engage the dancers.

"When I was a dancer in the company, I loved dancing 'Sleeping Beauty' and 'Swan Lake,' but I also loved when works were created for us. We got to work with some of the greatest choreographers in the world at that time.

"For me, it was the most pleasurable part of being a performer was to be part of creating something, so I want to provide that for these dancers now."

Kain takes pride in being involved in an organization that continues to push its boundaries and focus on fostering creative. "I don't ever want it to become a museum," she reflects.

SYTYCDC: Bringing dance to a larger population

If anyone understands hard work, it's Kain. "I'm a believer in theory that it takes 10,000 hours of practice to be good at anything," she laughs and says she hopes that SYTYCDC helps audiences appreciate "the incredible athleticism and dedication and incredible hard work that goes into being a dancer, no matter what form it is."

"I'm interested in being part of (So You Think You Can Dance Canada) because I feel it is bringing dance to a larger population," Kain says thoughtfully. "It's helping dance become something that's more accepted in everyday life."