

THE
NATIONAL
Ballet
OF CANADA

Karen Kain
Artistic Director

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The Naked Ambition of Karen Kain

Beneath her poised veneer is an exacting perfectionist, a tenacious fundraiser and a total control freak. Which explains how she turned the floundering National Ballet into one of the world's premiere arts organizations

BY EMILY LANDAU || PHOTOGRAPH BY EVAAN KHERAJ

THE BEST SEATS AT THE FOUR SEASONS CENTRE are on the right side of the grand ring, a few boxes back from the stage. From there, Karen Kain, the 63-year-old artistic director of the National Ballet of Canada, surveys her dancers, assessing every arabesque, wincing at every shaky landing.

On the slushy evening of December 13, Kain took her spot for the opening-night performance of *The Nutcracker*, the twinkling Christmas bauble whose annual three-week run pads the company's pockets for the rest of the year. Kain is willowy and austere, favouring a gallery owner's uniform of tailored leather pencil skirts and expensive slouchy knits. She resembles a lovely alien, her pale face framed with wide-set eyes and lofty cheekbones, her black pixie cut pointing into blades. Everything about her appearance seems manicured, a costume of controlled rigidity. As the curtain rose, she sat upright, tapping her chin to the beat of Tchaikovsky's opening allegro.

The Nutcracker is the company's most challenging production, featuring 50 professional dancers and 98 students from

the National Ballet School. The mammoth motorized sets are so heavy that the crew uses a different material, a hard slate, for the stage to support the weight. It creates a slippery surface, and at that evening's performance, four ballerinas—two waltzing snowflakes and two cycloning flowers—had wiped out on the slick floor.

Guillaume Côté, a rakish danseur noble and the ballet's biggest star, was dancing the title role, one he's performed every year since 2001. In the middle of the second act, he was bouncing off the stage like a basketball when a ligament snapped in his knee. An audible gasp rippled through the audience as he buckled to the ground. Côté hobbled off, his face screwed into a grimace.

Kain arrived backstage seconds later. While the other dancers vamped for the audience, she stickhandled the situation with brisk exactitude. Her staff ensured the standby, Keiichi Hirano, was properly warmed up and costumed for his pas de deux, notified the cast of the change and checked that the orchestra had its cues, while Kain focused her attention on the ego-battered Côté. It turned out that he had torn his ACL and would be unable to dance for at least six months. "Poor Guillaume was sitting alone in the wings while the staff ripped off his jacket. He had no idea how it happened," Kain says, her voice wounded, as if she'd been the one to fall. "He was in shock."

It's that blend of ardent sensitivity and commanding rigour that fuelled Karen Kain's artistry and made her the finest Canadian ballerina ever to float across the stage. For a quarter century, she was the marquee star of the National

Ballet of Canada, performing the most coveted and complex roles in the canon. Kain's celebrity sprinkled the company with stardust, transforming a Canadian sideshow into an international attraction.

But her most impressive feat came much later. By the time she took over the directorship in 2005, the National had atrophied: the productions were time-worn and the dancing slipshod. Under the reign of Kain, it has flowered into one of the most thrilling companies in the world. She sharpened the dancing, holding the performers to the same punishing standards she set for herself. She exploited her star power to attract blue-chip donors and corporate sponsors. And she enticed the world's top choreographers to create full-length, multimillion-dollar productions. Her taste is schizophrenic in the best possible way: for every tufted tutu ballet, Kain offers something weird and wonderful. She's particularly fond of sexy contemporary works, the kind of bizarre dance experiments that attract pouty art students alongside blue-haired society matrons.

Kain rarely takes credit for her achievements—like so many successful women, she's afflicted with imposter syndrome. Where most men would trumpet their accomplishments, Kain attributes her ascendancy to luck, timing and benevolent mentors, waving off her exploits with genuine modesty. When she was a dancer, her favourite part of the job was the acting—transforming into a fluttering Juliet or a guileless Giselle. Now, in her second career, she's still playing a character: the formidable businesswoman with the gut of an artist. But a funny thing happened while she was busy portraying a formidable businesswoman. She became one. At an age when most retired ballerinas have faded into obscurity, Kain is at the peak of her power—and her ambition keeps growing. She's like the Swan Queen, the role that made her famous: stoic to the naked eye, but furiously paddling under the surface.

KAREN KAIN IS EXCRUCIATINGLY SHY. Her husband, the actor Ross Petty, refers to her as “ma souris,” or “my little mouse.” It's the kind of paternalistic pet name that spikes my feminist hackles, but it fits. At the height of her dance career, Kain used to stiffen with stage fright, sometimes vomiting in the wings before making her entrance. It took her years to inure herself to public speaking. These days, she tackles the task with composed fortitude, though there's still a slight tremor in her voice. “I can act like an extrovert, but that's a performance,” she says. “It takes a lot out of me.”

Initially, she comes across as guarded and wary, casting a mercenary gaze from over those Maleficent cheekbones, her voice quiet yet sharp. That's a performance too. Once she's comfortable, her arms uncross, her tone softens and she starts to smile—first prettily, then broadly.

Kain and Petty cocoon themselves from the world in a large red brick Victorian farmhouse near Hogg's Hollow. Inside is a menagerie: dozens of wooden duck decoys, which Kain collects at Ontario antique markets; a giant swan that a fan fashioned from a twisting vine; decorative plates painted with cartoonish cat faces; and, guarding them all, Kain's Maine Coon, Eddie Petty, who looks more like an Ewok than a house pet. One of the few nods to Kain's career is a life-size bronze dancer by the mid-century Italian sculptor Marino Marini. The publishing executive Lawrence Heisey, a long-time major supporter of the National Ballet, left it to Kain in his will. “I think he thought I'd be destitute after I retired,” Kain tells me. The statue is called Sophia, and she stands en pointe at the foot of the stairs.

Kain's 1873 homestead was built 50 years after her maternal great-great-grandmother, Frances Stewart, came to Canada. Stewart is a well-known Canadian-Irish epistolary pioneer and a contemporary of Susannah Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill. Kain's parents, Winifred and Charles, both grew up in and around Winnipeg. They eventually settled in Ancaster, just outside Hamilton, where Charles had taken a job as an electrical engineer for Westinghouse. Kain was born in 1951, the same year as the National Ballet of Canada. Her three siblings—twins Sandra and Susan and brother Kevin—followed in quick succession.

When Kain was eight, her parents took her to see the National Ballet's touring production of the ghostly melodrama *Giselle*. The Kains didn't own a television, and Karen had no idea what

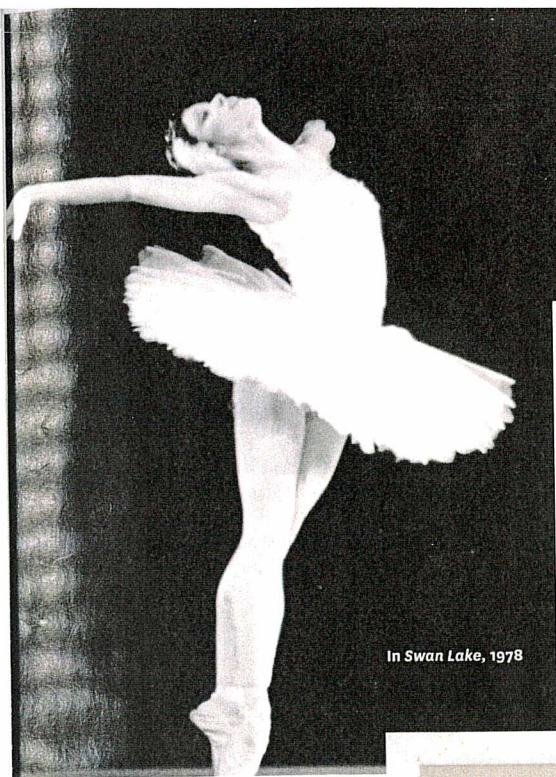
ballet was. Dancing the title role was Celia Franca, the company's imperious British founder. “Celia was mesmerizing,” she says. “I was hooked.” Her parents found a teacher who offered private ballet lessons in her basement. “I remember a couch, a kitty litter box and a record player playing Patti Page's ‘Tennessee Waltz’ on a loop for the whole hour,” Kain recalls with a shudder. Within a year, Winifred transferred Kain to a more credible program at the Ancaster Old Town Hall. Her technique wasn't perfect, but she was a natural artist. “During classes, the other parents would ask, ‘Who's that little girl?’” says Kain. “It's as if she's in a trance.”

In 1962, at the age of 11, she began studying at the National Ballet School, where she lived in residence on Jarvis Street. For the first few months, she was intensely homesick—she didn't even know how to tie her hair in a bun without her mother. The principal, Betty Oliphant, lavished Kain with praise and attention, inciting the jealousy of the other students. The alienation at school, combined with the distance from her family, made Kain terribly lonely. She picked up a puppy from a boy giving them away on the street and hid it in her dorm room for a couple of days before its yips caught the attention of her wardens.

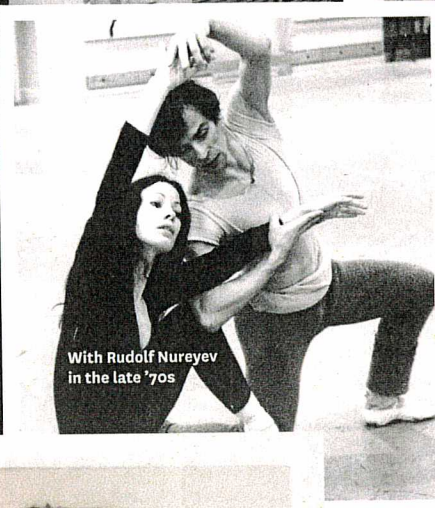
Puberty, like ballet, is a kind of body horror: a crucible of warping physiques and paranoid self-scrutiny. By the time Kain was 17, she was five foot seven and 130 pounds—a healthy weight for most people but heavy for a ballerina. Once she was caught buying almond cookies from a bakery down the street from school and sent to bed without dinner. Her changing body triggered her own insecurities but also obliterated her privileged status at school. She was so desperate to get into the National Ballet corps that for the two weeks leading up to her auditions, she subsisted on a diet of lettuce and tomatoes, burning her body back down to ballerina measurements.

Even after she lost the weight, Kain was pathologically obsessed with her flaws. She saw a chubby ostrich with thick legs and short arms. Everyone else saw a lithe, athletic dancer whose movement was liquid and spontaneous. Her height and brawn equipped her to execute the kangaroo leaps usually reserved for male dancers. In Kain's second year with the corps, Celia Franca cast her as the lead in *Swan Lake*—the kind of star-making moment that Natalie Portman's character killed for in *Black Swan*. Her performance was rapturously received (though she obsessed over one reviewer's remark about her “scrawny wings”), and she quickly climbed the company's ranks, earning the title of principal dancer within a year.

Two magical things happened to make Kain a star. The first was Rudolf Nureyev, the Russian dance icon, who came to the National Ballet in 1972 to stage his production of *The Sleeping Beauty*. An irascible, brilliant man, Nureyev had sneering lips, a bulbous brow and nostrils that flared like a Pamplona bull. He was tyrannical and conceited and accustomed to getting what he wanted. The first time he saw Kain dance in rehearsal—she was playing a fairy godmother—he exploded at Celia Franca. “He demanded to know, ‘Why she not doing Aurora?’” Kain remembers, parroting Nureyev's brusque Slavic accent. From then on, Kain became Nureyev's protégée: he called her “my angel,” insisted on partnering her on every opening-night performance and threw parties in her honour. His boosterism was a tonic for Kain's confidence. When he wasn't around, she'd sink into withdrawal, questioning whether she had any talent or deserved her spot in the company.



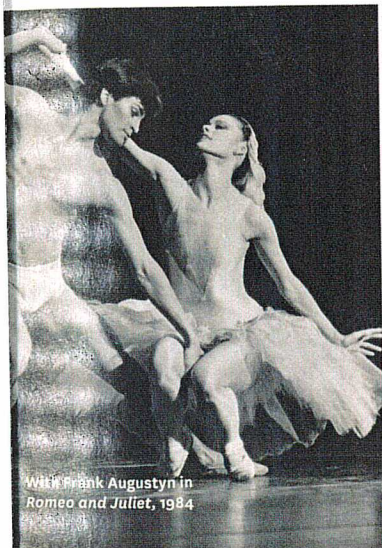
In *Swan Lake*, 1978



With Rudolf Nureyev
in the late '70s



With fiancé Ross Petty, 1982



With Frank Augustyn in
Romeo and Juliet, 1984



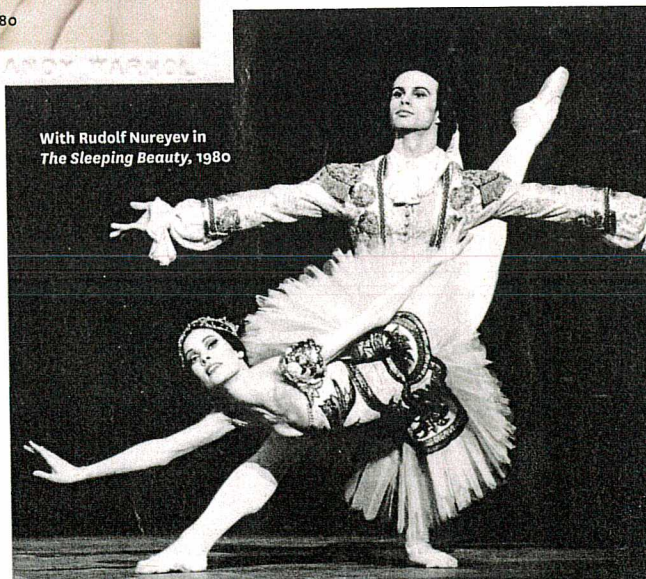
Polaroid by Andy Warhol, 1980



At St. Lawrence
Hall, 1979



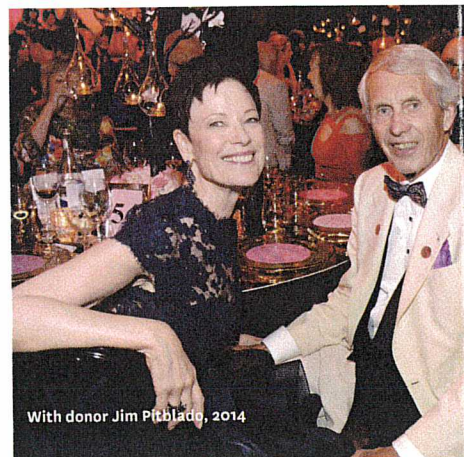
With Lee Majors
and Carroll O'Connor
in the late '70s



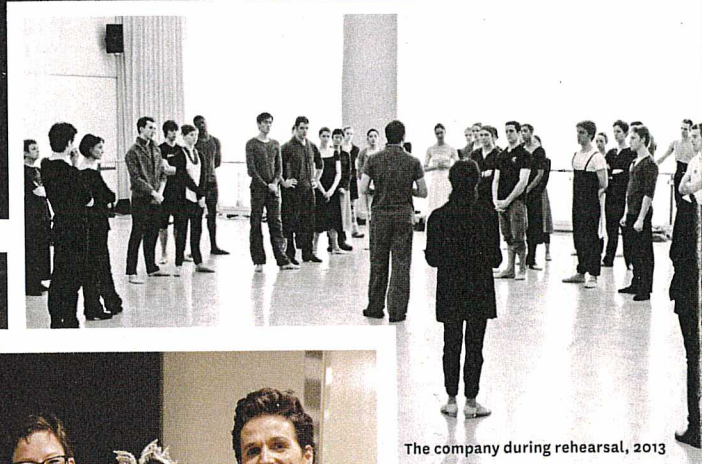
With Rudolf Nureyev in
The Sleeping Beauty, 1980



Jillian Vanstone in
*Alice's Adventures
in Wonderland*, 2011



With donor Jim Pittblado, 2014



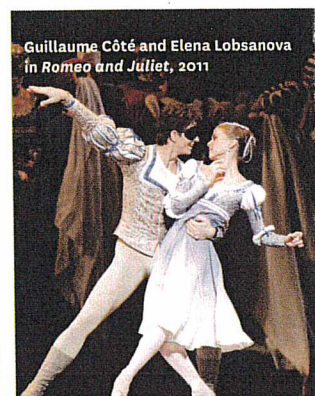
The company during rehearsal, 2013



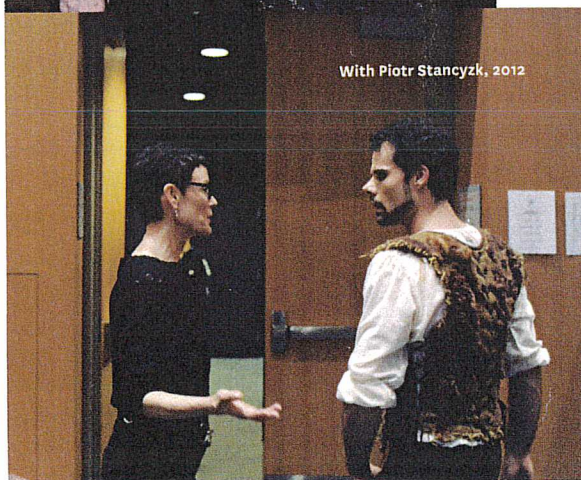
With Mavis Staines, 2013



With Greta Hodgkinson
and Guillaume Côté, 2014



Guillaume Côté and Elena Lobanova
in *Romeo and Juliet*, 2011



With Piotr Stanczyk, 2012



Donors Jonas Prince,
Ivan Fecan and Sandra
Faire flank Ross Petty
and Kain at the 2014 Mad
Hot Ballet fundraiser

The other hairpin turn came at the 1973 Moscow International Ballet Competition. She and Frank Augustyn, a fellow principal dancer at the National, were honoured with a special prize for best pas de deux, and Kain herself won a silver medal. They were anointed the “gold-dust twins” by the Canadian media, and the ballet became a star-spotting circus. While in Moscow, Kain and Augustyn began an affair that would last seven years. In his memoir, he remembers Celia Franca sending them to bed to get some rest. “We took advantage, but not exactly the way she intended.” Onstage, they complemented each other perfectly—Augustyn’s laid-back nonchalance softened Kain’s perfectionism. That same dynamic ultimately shattered their romantic relationship: she thought he was lazy and imprecise, while he found her controlling and stubborn.

In New York, London and Paris, Kain consorted with movie stars and moguls. One night, while she was performing with Le Ballet de Marseille, Nureyev brought her to a supper club. “I looked to my left,” she says, “and all I saw were a giant pair of lips. It was Mick Jagger. He was very drunk and had his hand

Kain gave more than 10,000 performances in her dance career. She was satisfied with about 10 of them

up my leg.” Another time, after dancing at the Met, Nureyev invited her to a party at the Iranian embassy, a bacchanal of caviar and champagne and Gene Simmons. Kain had just danced *Swan Lake* and was covered in white makeup. “Andy Warhol walked up to me and said, ‘You look like an angel.’ It was really weird.” A few months later, the Toronto lawyer William Hechter commissioned Warhol to paint Kain’s portrait. Her own copy hangs in her dining room. “I hated it when I first saw it,” she says. “At the time I was embarrassed by how flamboyant it was, but I appreciate it now.”

In 1979, following a performance of *The Sleeping Beauty*, she received a stinging notice from Clive Barnes at the *New York Post*: “Miss Kain, a dancer of great promise, has not really developed much as a classical ballerina.... Here she lacks nothing so much as excitement.” After years of gushy praise, the press started calling her a has-been. Kain sank into a deep depression and took a leave of absence from the company, spending the next several months in France. She returned, to perform *Giselle*, in the fall of 1980.

Throughout her career, Kain had cycled through a series of affairs: a relationship with a fellow dancer, Timothy Spain, at the National Ballet School, that rocky romance with Frank Augustyn and an on-and-off assignation with Lee Majors, the cleft-chinned ’70s heartthrob best known for starring in *The Six Million Dollar Man*. In 1981, a friend introduced her to the Winnipeg actor Ross Petty, who’d played a scuzzy nightclub owner on *All My Children* and was a working actor living in Manhattan. These days, Petty is best known for producing a Christmas pantomime in Toronto, where he usually plays a

wicked stepmother in full drag regalia. He’s tall and languid, with a rumbling drawl and pointy eyebrows that look drawn on with a Sharpie. When they met, Kain didn’t take much notice of him. The following year, Petty returned to town, starring in a touring production of *Sweeney Todd*, and invited her to a performance. “I only offered her one ticket,” he says, grinning like the wolf at Grandma’s house. Kain tried to decline—she was leaving for Italy the next morning. “But his voice, it mesmerized me.”

Kain says she was drawn to Petty’s charisma, his humour and his total ignorance of her celebrity. “I’d been living in the States and around the world, so I had no idea of the adoration that surrounded her,” he explains. “There were guys back then looking for a ballerina as a lapel pin. I was just madly in love with her.” A few months after their first date, Kain proposed to Petty in the kitchen of his Greenwich Village apartment. The next few years were tempestuous, as Petty adjusted to living in his wife’s orbit. He resented giving up his Broadway dream for Toronto and was skewered by the local press. “The gossip columnists were always taking cheap shots at me,” he says. “They said, ‘Who’s this guy married to Canada’s sweetheart?’” The tension simmered until it came to a boil in 1988, when Kain was fêted for her 20th anniversary with the National Ballet at the Royal York Hotel. Petty turned the celebration into a roast, lobbing barbs about Kain’s past relationships and public persona. Kain was furious. “The event was a complete nightmare for both of us,” she wrote in her memoir. “I was embarrassed for him and myself. Worst of all, I was shocked by the depth of his anger.” He entered therapy, and they went to couples counselling. A few months before the anniversary dinner, at age 36, Kain had become pregnant but miscarried. “We wanted to have children, but we waited too long,” she says. “Our careers took over.”

KAIN RETIRED FROM THE NATIONAL BALLET in 1997, after 28 years—almost twice as long as most ballerinas. By then, she was 46. Her joints were stiff and arthritic, her ankles as fragile as glass. When she announced her retirement, the irrepressible impresario Garth Drabinsky sent her across the country on a sold-out seven-city farewell tour. All told, she gave approximately 10,000 performances over the course of her career. She was satisfied with about 10 of them.

When she left, the company’s artistic director was James Kudelka, a choreographer prone to fiery mood swings. “He was intense and could be difficult,” recalls the dancer Rex Harrington, who was Kudelka’s muse. “His emotional issues sometimes got in the way of his work.” Kudelka devoted much of his energy—and the company coffers—to developing his own multimillion-dollar ballets. At the same time, the province and the city drastically cut funding to the Ballet, attendance declined and donorship dropped off. In 1999, the dancer Kimberly Glasco sued the company for wrongful dismissal, claiming Kudelka fired her after she made a comment about the exorbitant cost of his productions (he maintained it was because her dancing wasn’t up to par). The company reportedly settled out of court for \$1.6 million. Under Kudelka’s leadership, the National Ballet dropped off the international radar.

A year after Kain retired, Kudelka offered her a management position. He invented the title “artistic associate,” and told her

she could make it into whatever she wanted. Kudelka's \$2-million *Swan Lake* was on the verge of cancellation because it was too expensive, so Kain devoted her energy to fundraising, exploiting the connections she'd made during her career. She tapped a trio of long-time donors—the manufacturing baron Jim Fleck, the investment executive Jim Pitblado and the late Harlequin president Lawrence Heisey—to fund the last \$250,000. Kain was happy to help, but she longed for artistic input. “I’m not a businessperson, I’m not a fundraiser. I’m an artist,” she says.

She got her opportunity in 2004, when the National Ballet remounted Nureyev's *The Sleeping Beauty*—a ballet Kain knew intimately. “She brought up the detail in the dancing. We were stunned by her leadership,” recalls Kevin Garland, then executive director of the company. The previous time they had staged the ballet, it hadn't done well. This time it sold out.

That year, Kudelka stepped down as artistic director. Garland and the rest of the board had been grooming Kain for the position. When Kain interviewed, she outlined three simple goals: to raise the calibre of the dancing, diversify the repertoire and restore the company to the international conversation. The board was also enticed by Kain's black book of contacts in the dance world—she had relationships with every dancer, choreographer, artistic director and donor in the business. They knew they could make money off her brand.

Kain brought back the fizzy star power she had generated at the height of her career

When Kain took over the directorship in 2005, the company was running at a \$1.14-million deficit. “Morale was low. Expectations were low,” she admits. The first thing Kain did was prune the corps, firing the dancers that didn't meet her standards. “The corps had grown unfocused. Many were suited to other forms of dance rather than classical,” she says in a stinging shot of faint praise. She found it difficult to adjust to a management role, especially supervising dancers who had been her colleagues a few years earlier. In 2006, she hired

Rex Harrington as an artist-in-residence. “When we used to dance together, she always thought I had a huge ego,” Harrington recalls. “And when I came back to the company as a staff member, she was always mad at me for missing meetings. It was strange to sit across a desk from her and have her review my work.”

Kain cancelled several seven-figure ballets from Kudelka's planned season. Not only did it save money, but it broadened the National's programming beyond Kudelka's vision, which often veered into doom and gloom. (His *Swan Lake* features a savage medieval gang rape straight out of *Game of Thrones*.) Quickly, the company started to see a surge in new donors, like investment executive Ira Gluskin and his philanthropist wife, Maxine Granovsky Gluskin; the producer Sandra Faire and former CTV head Ivan Fecan; gold titans Peter and Melanie Munk; media mogul Allan Slaight; and several Eatons—all

enticed by the messianic new leader. She also seduced several big-name corporations—TD, Thomson Reuters, Chloé and Chanel—to help mount the company's big productions. A year after she took over, the company had posted a small surplus—and it has remained in the black almost every year since.

Kain initially dreaded the schmoozing and boozing that came with her new position. What pushed her through it was the same thing that helped her overcome stage fright: her contagious ambition. “Karen likes to hide her light under a bushel basket,” says Jim Pitblado. “But when she's talking about the company, that reserve disappears. She's so natural in communicating her vision and commitment. It's like a supreme allied commander motivating the troops.” She courts patrons at restaurants like Nota Bene and Vertical, invites them to events at Lincoln Center and Covent Garden, and treats them to insider perks—watching rehearsals, meeting dancers and going backstage to look at sets.

Kain also helped to overhaul the company's marketing strategy, promoting the talents of individual ballerinas and danseurs—she featured them in publicity campaigns, pumped up their visibility at events, sent them to competitions abroad and even auctioned them off to give dance lessons to patrons at the annual gala. Kain wanted to bring back the kind of fizzy star power she and Augustyn and Nureyev had generated at the height of their careers. She highlighted the principal dancers Sonia Rodriguez and Greta Hodgkinson. She gave leading parts to prodigies like the sprightly Skylar Campbell and frenetic Dylan Tedaldi. She lured stars away from the world's biggest companies, like Evan McKie, a slender, stately dancer from the Stuttgart Ballet, and Svetlana Lunkina, a powerhouse ballerina from the Bolshoi. Above all, she bolstered the charismatic Guillaume Côté—he currently doubles as the company's de facto leading man and as one of its choreographers. So far, his short pieces have skewed dark and dirty: one psychosexual nightmare featured Hodgkinson under a bare Edison bulb, jerking and flinching her upper body like an escaped lunatic from *American Horror Story*.

By 2009, the dancing was honed and Kain was ready to expand the ballet's programming. Her goals were circular: exciting repertoire would attract the global spotlight, which would entice the best dancers, which would elevate the repertoire. She started at the top, calling the buzzy British choreographer Christopher Wheeldon, an elegant neoclassicist who'd created ballets for the New York City Ballet, the Bolshoi and the Royal Ballet. That season, the company performed Wheeldon's stark, strange *Polyphonia*. At the opening-night party, he told Kain he'd never seen it performed so well and asked her to co-produce his new revamp of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

This was the first time the Royal Ballet had embarked on a co-production: it's increasingly expensive to create new full-length ballets, especially the kind of carnival that Wheeldon imagined. In keeping with Lewis Carroll's novel, he created a hallucinogenic fever dream: a video projection of a helixing rabbit hole, a puppetized Cheshire Cat who dissolves onstage, a room that contracts and expands depending on Alice's size. The whole affair would run \$2 million, and Kain was responsible for half.

For the National, it was a serious risk—with a new ballet, especially one developed by another company, you never know what calibre of production you'll get or how audiences will

respond. Most companies would rather invest in short works, pieces that cost less to produce and pose a smaller box-office risk. In addition to corporate sponsorship from Thomson Reuters, Kain recruited some of the company's most devoted donors to help pay for *Alice*: lawyer and businessman Richard Ivey and his philanthropist sister Roz, the arts patrons Gretchen and Donald Ross, and french fry royals Wallace and Margaret McCain. In exchange for their support, Kain introduced her top-tier donors to Wheeldon, and flew them to London to watch the dress rehearsal and world premiere of the production at Covent Garden.

When *Alice* debuted in Toronto in June 2011, it was a huge hit, the kind the company hadn't seen since Nureyev's *Sleeping Beauty* 40 years earlier. Beneath his trippy technological tricks and baroque Victoriana, Wheeldon had created a feast of airy footwork, lyrical storytelling and giddy fun. Its universal appeal stretched beyond the usual ballet audience. "We couldn't quite believe it," says Garland. "We sold rush tickets starting

at 11 a.m. and had people coming at four in the morning to line up for seats."

Kain's coup kicked off a string of new pieces for the National Ballet, threaded among familiar staples like *Giselle* and *Swan Lake*. In 2011, they performed *Chroma*, a poppy jolt from the British choreographer Wayne McGregor, set to an original score featuring orchestrations of White Stripes songs. The following year came a moody steampunk adaptation of *Hamlet* by Kevin O'Day, a protégé of Twyla Tharp and Mikhail Baryshnikov.

Kain has an impressive

ability to balance the needs of the box office with the needs of the art, and a lot of the time, they overlap. Sometimes her choices don't quite work—*The Man In Black*, Kudelka's Johnny Cash hoedown, was folksy and too literal, the cowboy-hatted dancers toe-stepping like extras in *Footloose*, while an adaptation of Bizet's *Carmen* was lifeless and muddled, culminating in a shudder-inducing sex scene between the heroine and a man-bull. But they were provocative, and they lent Kain's programs bravado.

In 2012, the company debuted a new full-length production of Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*, created by Alexei Ratmansky, the biggest name in 21st-century ballet. Kain first approached Ratmansky in 2007, when he was leading the Bolshoi Ballet. "I knew every company in the world was after him to create new one-act pieces, so I offered him an opportunity he couldn't get anywhere else," she says. Ratmansky, an overbooked workaholic, spent five years talking about it. When he moved to the American Ballet Theatre in 2011, he visited Toronto for a few weeks at a time to work with the dancers. When he finally finished, *Romeo* was a staggering success, blending the elegance of classical ballet with the garrulous reels of Russian folk dance.

The new productions allowed the company to start touring internationally again—it has an exclusive North American touring licence for *Alice* and full ownership of *Romeo and Juliet*. "We're going to New York, we're going to London, we're going to L.A.," says Harrington. "And the world of ballet is taking notice."

A

DECADE INTO HER DIRECTORSHIP, Kain is slightly more comfortable in her dominion, accepting and even enjoying the clout she wields. "When she first started, she was almost too nice," Côté recalls. "Now, she knows that her opinion is the opinion." She's invested in every casting decision, every publicity image, every sequin on every costume. Sometimes she gets caught up in the minutiae: I've even seen her straightening the barely crooked picture frames outside her office.

The latest season has been one of the National's strongest yet. In the fall, they mounted an extravagant production of Kenneth MacMillan's *Manon*, an epic French soap opera about rape, greed and corruption, which Kain fought for seven years to bring to Toronto. In a savvy coup, Kain rented the production from the Australian Ballet for \$250,000; if they had staged it themselves it would have cost millions. They followed it up with their second run of *Nijinsky*, John Neumeier's expressionist opus about the Russian dancer who went mad after World War I. The National is the first company other than Neumeier's Hamburg Ballet that's been allowed to perform *Nijinsky*—Kain is a good friend, having worked closely with Neumeier during her time as a dancer.

Right now, the company is focusing its energy on *Le Petit Prince*, a new full-length production based on the fantasy fable by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry and choreographed by Guillaume Côté. He's envisioned a stark dreamscape of winged creatures, ballerinas in glass tutus and expansive video projections. At a planning meeting in December, he pitched a series of online videos to accompany the premiere. "I see the little prince dancing with a CGI rose," he mused, waltzing with his hands and staring starrily into the middle distance. As the team rhapsodized about the possibility, Kain sat back in her seat, arms crossed and forehead crinkled into skeptical dunes. Kain never quashes creativity, but she probes each whim with measured scrutiny. Privately, she agonizes over every decision. Publicly, she's cool, confident and pragmatic. If she's second-guessing herself, she's learned never to let it show.

Ballet doesn't have much use for women Kain's age—a ballerina is only as good as her innocence, bloom and creamy youth. For all its tulle and toe shoes, ballet is a masculine empire, a hive of testosterone-fuelled ego and power. Just about every iconic choreographer has been male, and most great female roles hollow projections of their Freudian ideals: she's either madonna or whore, fairy or witch, white swan or black. As a dancer, Kain was always in thrall to someone else's vision. She was a living doll, like Coppélia, posed and propped up by the Nureyevs and Neumeiers of the world, her own simmering drive smothered by their bombast. It's only now, in her second career, that she's the one in control. She's done more than resurrect a company: she's resurrected herself. Every stressful moment, every strategic decision, every glad-handing event—they all build up to that euphoric rush when the curtain rises and the orchestra strikes. And up in the grand ring, watching from her box, it's as if Karen Kain is in a trance.

TORONTO LIFE



National Ballet
artistic director
Karen Kain, p. 46

"One trustee called the other a 'fucking pig.... Pig, pig, pig, pig, pig!' he repeated in her face"

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ON THE COVER: photograph by Daniel Neuhaus

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