Female ballet dancers are like nuns, so the myth goes. They are single-minded, rigorously self-disciplined, dedicated almost to the point of fanaticism; their sexless or desexed bodies are sacrificed to the dance, and they live in a world apart from the 'real world'. Like all myths, this one contains an element of truth, but to bring it down to earth let us try it for size on Veronica Tennant, principal dancer of the National Ballet Company of Canada. Tennant is well-known even among her colleagues as a dancer of unswerving determination and dedication enough to triumph over several serious injuries. Yet, now at her peak as a dancer, she manages to combine marriage, motherhood, and, more recently, writing, with her dancing career.

Veronica was born in England, the eldest of two Tennant daughters. She started ballet lessons almost by chance at a local nursery school at the age of four. Her talent was apparent from the beginning, and when the family moved to Canada Veronica, then nine years old, continued ballet training under Betty Oliphant. This fine teacher—together with Celia Franca—was soon to found the National Ballet School where academic and dance training would be offered under one roof, and Veronica would be one of the few students chosen to attend. She looks back on her years at the School as a time when she could work at her own pace in an atmosphere weighted towards theatre and dance. Yet she would never want to go through those formative years again. 'It was exciting, but it was a painful time in many ways. I worked with a lot of tension. I made life difficult for myself and I worried about everything.' Nevertheless, she was outstanding as both academic and dance student; and she states simply, 'I have Betty Oliphant to thank for all my dancing expertise.'

In 1965 Veronica set a precedent: she joined the National Ballet Company as a principal dancer without ever passing through the ranks of corps de ballet or soloist. She was catapulted into leading roles in *Romeo and Juliet*, *Swan Lake* and other major ballets. Audiences were soon aware of new 'presence' on stage, a young dancer with unusual dramatic intensity and an assured technique. Her *Juliet*, in particular, was and is a marvelous achievement in dramatic dancing. Veronica says that she coped with those early challenges partly because she did not realize the enormity of her situation. Not until two or three years later did her awareness catch up with her—and with it new stagefright to control.

How does a dancer get those much sought after new parts to dance? Either the director casts her in a part from the established ballet repertoire, or (more rarely) a choreographer chooses her for a part in a new ballet she/he is creating then
and there in the rehearsal studio. Veronica always welcomes
the chance to re-create an established part, and she goes
through a long process of immersing herself in the music, then
learning the steps, committing those steps to 'muscular memory'
and gradually developing her interpretation. Even the first per­
formance is a mere sketch, she says. Months and even years
are required to flesh it out.

Building a part from scratch with a choreographer has its own
excitement. The dancer must have real respect and belief in
the choreographer who is then at his or her most vulnerable.
Veronica has worked with young Canadian choreographer, Ann
Ditchburn: their most notable collaboration being, Mad
Shadows. ‘Ann,’ says Veronica, ‘knows exactly what she wants
when she comes into rehearsal. She works to get the dancers
to live up to the image she has in her mind’s eye.’ James
Kudelka, another Canadian choreographer whose most recent
work is Washington Square, has a different approach. He
comes to rehearsal with his ideas more fluid. He is open to in­
put from the dancers; indeed, he says he is ‘hoping for ac­
cidents’—that is, hoping for a dancer to make a fruitful error
that will give him new inspiration. Veronica finds this very
intense and delicate relationship between dancer and choreo­
grapher one of the most creative experiences in a dancer’s life.
Perhaps only the thrill of performing surpasses it.

After Veronica had been dancing professionally for four years,
she married John Wright, a gastroenterologist in Toronto. He
was beginning his hospital residency at the time, and so their
work made huge demands on each of them. Veronica talked of
the challenge of their marriage-then and now—as ‘something
to be constantly worked out;’ but right from the beginning
she credits the respect each had for the other’s work as a key­
stone.

During the National Ballet tours John would fly to visit Ver­
onica whenever he was free, and she would fly home for a day
or two when she could. The most difficult time for them both,
Veronica recalls, was in 1972 when John went to Harvard for a
year of graduate work and she went on a long tour of Nureyev’s
The Sleeping Beauty. It was survival of the fittest, and
they survived. Now John is an established doctor on the staff
of the Western Hospital and on the teaching staff of the Uni­
versity of Toronto. Veronica’s celebrity—now of international
portions—does not create a problem. As she says, ‘We are
both stars in our own right.’

Veronica was recently forced out of dancing for fourteen
months by a knee injury. ('My injuries have always been vi­
brant reminders of how much I want to dance,' she says.) She
used the time to complete a children’s novel On Stage, Please,
which is admittedly partly autobiographical. She has both en­
joyed and agonized over the writing process, but the warm
response from young readers—mostly by fan letter—has de­
lighted her. The book has gone into its third printing within a
year and will soon be published in the United States. Quite
a coup for a moonlighting dancer!

Shortly before her book appeared, Veronica gave birth to a
daughter, Jessica. Both John and Veronica are deeply involved
in her care, and they try to give her total attention and input
when they are with her. ‘Part of the day is hers always. It takes
real organization and the two of us working at it,’ Veronica
admitted, and she finds herself looking to other dancers here and abroad to see how they manage. Recently
Jessica, an entrancing sixteen month-old, plus baby sitter, ac­
companied Veronica on tour for the first time. Jessica on
tour? ‘Well,’ mused Veronica, ‘I was up at 7.30 a.m. with her
instead of sleeping in like the other dancers. I couldn’t spend
the whole day worrying about myself and my performance,
yet my performances were probably better than before. Per­
haps constantly revolving around yourself isn’t the best thing—
at least once your dancing is formulated . . .’

The myth of the ‘dancer as nun’ has been transformed. Here
is the artist who continues to grow. Yet here too is a woman
who cares as deeply about her husband and child as she does
about her career. Here is a dancer whom the ‘real world’ has
made a director of the Ontario Arts Council and an Officer
of the Order of Canada. And yet . . . there lingers on the
subtle sense of a creature apart; a creature finely honed, bur­
nished, refined after many firings, who can never really tell
you where she has been.