

Veronica Tennant – Dancer

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The National Ballet of Canada

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 to-

wards 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 its 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 performance 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 input from the dancers; indeed, he says he is 'hoping for accidents'—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 choreographer 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 Veronica 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 University of Toronto. Veronica's celebrity—now of international proportions—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 vibrant 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 enjoyed and agonized over the writing process, but the warm response from young readers—mostly by fan letter—has delighted 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 with children here and abroad to see how they manage. Recently Jessica, an entrancing sixteen month-old, plus baby sitter, accompanied 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. Perhaps 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, burnished, refined after many firings, who can never really tell you where she has been.



Rita Blumsky
From *On Stage, Please*, a story by Veronica Tennant (M&S, 1977)