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Living With Passion

One of Canada's most celebrated dancers, Veronica Tennant is today a busy filmmaker who's staying "open to the surprise in life."

By Peter Feniak

Disciplined and thoughtful, Veronica Tennant is also spontaneous and loves a challenge. And so, not long ago, she flew off to Havana.

"I went just like *that*," says the award-winning filmmaker and celebrated prima ballerina. "I heard about this incredible dance company called *Danza Cuba*. I got really fired up. Within two weeks I was down in Havana with my cameraman. *Danza Cuba* are extraordinary. I'm going back soon."

Relaxing in the lounge at Blue Highway, the Toronto film-editing suite where Tennant has polished many of her admired documentaries, she's as graceful and poised as you expect a ballerina to be.

One of this country's great dancers, Tennant gave her last performance with The National Ballet of Canada in 1989, but she's hardly missed a beat since. "I think of myself as a filmmaker first," she says today.

Her post-dance resumé also includes television host, special Canadian ambassador for UNICEF, dance instructor, wife, and mother. What goals are left?

"I *would* like to make a feature film," she smiles, "but only if it's impassioned. Maybe it's this Cuban project. Maybe a

contextual documentary about Cuba then and now and tomorrow through the eyes of an artist. Maybe. That's the fun thing—to be open to the surprise in life. I never said I wanted to be the leading prima ballerina. I never said, 'Oh, I want to win an Emmy.'"

But Tennant did, in fact, win a prestigious International Emmy Award in 1999 for her emotional film portrait of a close friend: *Karen Kain: Dancing in the Moment*. Most recently she wrote and directed *Celia Franca: Tour de Force*, a 2006 documentary television special about the imperious founding artistic director of The National Ballet who died in February. Tennant's films often focus on the passionate artists who star in the world of dance—a world she knows intimately thanks to her extraordinary career.

That career was launched with her startling debut as a principal dancer at age 18. Through the 25-year career that followed, she became a world-celebrated prima ballerina, dancing the great classical roles as well as in innovative contemporary productions.

The applause has continued long after she took her last bow (some say prematurely). She is a winner of some of Canada's most coveted honours for performers, including The Governor General's Performing Arts Award for Lifetime



Veronica Tennant takes a final bow February 12, 1989, at the end of her 25-year career with the National Ballet of Canada. In her last performance, she reprised the role that started it all when she was 18—Juliet in "Romeo and Juliet."

Photo: Canadian Press/Naris Deyk



In 1999 author and producer Veronica Tennant received an International Emmy Award for "Karen Kain: Dancing in the Moment," a film portrait of her close friend.

Achievement (2004). She was the first dancer appointed to the Order of Canada (1975) and was elevated to the Order's highest rank, Companion, in 2004. She holds five honorary doctorates from Canadian universities.

Tennant's long list of accomplishments and honours makes it easy to overlook the fact that her career almost ended in pain and disappointment before it began. That she prevailed tells you something about the determination within.

Sparkling Talent

Born in London, England, in 1946, Veronica Tennant first saw Canada as a girl of nine. Having begun lessons when she

was four, she was already an ardent ballet student. Arriving in Toronto with her parents, Harry and Doris Tennant, and her sister, Jillian, Veronica's first concern wasn't where the family would live or where she would go to school. Instead, she smiles today, "I wanted to know where I was going to take my ballet lessons."

A sparkling talent, she was accepted at Canada's new, elite dance academy, the National Ballet School of Canada, then run by two storied, authoritarian instructors, Betty Oliphant and Celia Franca.

"I turned out to be not your perfect ballet student," she muses, "but what Celia Franca saw in me were the seeds of a dramatic dancer. And by giving me my first role, she really set my course."

That first role is still talked about. At 18, she was chosen to dance as Juliet in a new version of Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*. The event caused such a stir that CBC rushed a newly minted star to capture the young sensation: the brilliant teenager became Adrienne Clarkson's first in-depth interview, and in 1965 her performance was broadcast nation-wide.

Tennant's debut is even more remarkable when she adds some painful context.

"In my last year of National Ballet School, I had my first of four back injuries. I spent my last year flat on my back. It was a herniated lumbar disc. It takes a long time to heal and can be horrifyingly painful. A prominent doctor told me, 'Well, if you can't dance young lady, don't dance!'"

That wasn't an option for Tennant. She had to dance. The career that followed her debut shows both her passion for her art and the steely will beneath her charming demeanour.

Health Advocate

For all of the magic of ballet, dancers' bodies take a pounding. Tennant's back woes were eventually compounded by a serious knee injury.

"I had it mid-career—a torn anterior cruciate ligament. The headlines said, 'Veronica Tennant finished. Career ends.' And I swore

I'd come back. I had a pioneer operation and I made it back. Not only made it back into dancing, I danced better in the second half of my career than in the first."

The pioneering operation that saved her career is now well-known; hockey fans wish it had been around to help the great Bobby Orr—a torn ACL ended his playing days at the age of 30.

Tennant took a full year to recover. Typically, she was busy in that time off, writing a novel for young people—*On Stage, Please*—and becoming a mother.

Given her experience, it's not surprising that she's become an advocate of health awareness.

"In Canada, we have a tremendous medical quality of care, and we have a good sense of what our lives should be. We can be proactive. My father died when he was 42. I was 16—so he never saw me dance professionally. He smoked four packs of cigarettes a day. High blood pressure, high cholesterol. So that's a lesson I learned very, very young—that your health is key."

Two Doctors

Then there's the influence of her husband and daughter. Dr. John Wright, her husband, is a gastroenterologist and vice president of Medical Affairs for Toronto's University Health Network, comprising downtown Toronto's three major hospitals. Their daughter, Jessica, could be to science what her mother was to dance; she recently earned her PhD in molecular biology at Stanford University and currently pursues post-doctoral studies there... "the second Dr. J.R. Wright in the family," Tennant smiles proudly.

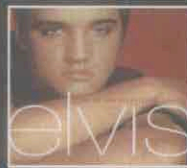
"Dance is vitality; it's life."

And yes, she says, Jessica did study ballet—"very briefly, when she was eight, for about eight weeks. She came home one day and said 'You know, mom, it's funny that I don't have your talent. And I don't want to

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Did Veronica Tennant know she was destined for greatness? "I don't think anyone could have predicted I'd go anywhere because I had a back injury at 17," she says. "But I had an inherent drive and the luck of someone like Celia Franca seeing that I had a 'dance/actress' quality."

take my lessons any more because everybody's looking at me.' She didn't suffer over it. She just said 'no, it's not for me.'"

Neither Dr. John nor Jessica Wright could help Veronica Tennant much when she began to, as she puts it, "go downhill quickly about four or five years ago." Eventually, she had total hip replacement surgery—yet another consequence of the rigours of dance. It was a challenging time.

"I put on a lot of weight before, during, and after the hip operation. I was in so much pain. It's all very well to say, 'You can just exercise.' I couldn't move. The total of that time was two and half to three years because there's that build-up to having the operation. Then at least nine weeks to get

walking again. It took me about nine to ten months to get my mobility back. Now, three years later, I'm racing all over town."

Recently her focus on health has led her to another role—that of spokesperson for the multivitamin *Centrum Advantage*.

"It had to pass the test of John and Jessica in terms of the research," she says. "What they're doing is targeting key chronic diseases that affect all of our lives, especially as we age. Who of us hasn't been touched by cancer or cardiovascular disease? It's key how you maintain your health, what your diet is, and what your vitamin and mineral daily intake is."

Feeding the Soul

A passionate commitment to the arts and especially to the world of dance remains a constant in her life.

"I think there's still this thing about ballet being esoteric, all about Imperial Russia and tutus and point shoes. Contemporary ballet is about all kinds of today's issues—war, love, conflict. It's extremely immediate. Dance is vitality, it's life. There's the music, the vibrant feel of physical artistry, the lighting...it's entertainment that feeds the soul."

As her career as a filmmaker flourishes, Veronica Tennant is grateful for what her life as a ballerina taught her.

"I was able to transfer my abilities and skills in one career into another. It's not like I turned my back on the world I came from. In fact I used every possible skill from my life in the ballet to move into directing and producing. The collaboration, the working daily, the discipline, the concentration you need to be at the top rung...you take all of those tools and transfer them into an equally satisfying, if not more fulfilling life. I just love what I do now."

Today, despite all she has achieved, Tennant has the energy and commitment to do more. And she remains inspired.

"I can't say everything's perfect in my life because that's not true. It's real life. Life is tough. But," Tennant says, "if you have good emotional health, physical health, and mental health, you can embrace it all." ■