

The dance of life

AT AGE 44, STEPHANIE HUTCHISON'S CAREER WITH THE NATIONAL BALLET OF CANADA IS NOT OVER

BY SANDRA BOLAN
sbolan@yrmg.com

Athletes north of 30, and in particular 35, are often described as old, ancient, over the hill, semi-retired and in the sunset of their career.

To be 44 and still dancing, in pointe shoes, is almost unheard of. For Stephanie Hutchison, being a professional dancer in her 40s is a combination of good genes and training.

The National Ballet of Canada recently promoted the former Stouffville resident to principal character artist. She spent 12 years as the dance company's first soloist.

"The position allows me to slowly give up the really hard physical aspects of dancing," Hutchison said.

"I play everybody's mother" and roles with silent acting skills, along with ones that require "a certain maturity," she said.

Like most little girls, Hutchison put on her first tutu and pink ballet slippers at age five for Saturday class.

Candy Turner of Richmond Hill's Candy Turner School of Dance recognized her natural talent and she started taking classes twice a week.

Then Turner suggested she go pro.

For many female athletes, having a baby can often mean the end of a career or one where the body just doesn't do what it once did. Not so for Hutchison.

Hutchison's father, Bill, investigated what was involved with becoming a professional ballet dancer and at nine, she auditioned for the National Ballet of Canada School in Toronto and was accepted.

"Others had ballet moms, I had a ballet dad," Hutchison said, adding her late father, a championship hockey coach in Stouffville, was her "biggest fan".

She also has a twin brother — Steve, who is a high school teacher — and sister Lindsey works in fundraising. Their mother, Linda, lives in Stouffville.

The long hours spent in the studio, as well as in the classroom were hard, but only for a brief time in high school did Hutchison question whether she wanted to keep pursuing ballet or give it up.

"Probably like most teenagers, you go through a lot of changes," she said. "You never really know you're going to make it until you get a job."

Her first professional role was in 1991 as the Paper Ballerina in the Tin Solider. It was filmed for CBC.

If things didn't work out, Hutchison was likely headed to law school.

But she did get a professional gig. However, it was not at the National Ballet of Canada as she hoped, which Hutchison admitted was disappointing.

Instead, the now-defunct Ottawa Ballet hired her. She lived on six- and eight-month-long contracts

while also picking up side jobs as a lifeguard and receptionist, which she said is pretty normal for contract dancers.

After four years, Hutchison joined Ballet BC, which had a "more interesting repertoire" and longer season.

Hutchison made her way to the National Ballet of Canada's corp de ballet in 1997. She was promoted to first soloist in 2003.

During the past 26 years, there have been a lot of ballets, so many, Hutchison can't pick just one favourite. But there are a few that stand out.

Among her favourites is the Queen of Wilis in Giselle; the Queen of Hearts in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, along with her roles in Rubies and The Man in Black.

Hutchison has never played Juliet, instead Lady Capulet. She said she's made peace with not getting the big roles.

"My longevity made up for roles I did not get," she said.

Seven years ago, Hutchison added a new role to her resume — mom.

For many female athletes, having a baby can often mean the end of a career or one where the body just doesn't do what it once did. Not so for Hutchison. She said she bounced back quite quickly after having Charlotte and ended up actually recovering better from the stresses of daily training, post-baby.

Charlotte has performed in two Nutcrackers with her mom. She played a little lamb.

"That's really fun; we can share an experience like that on stage," she said.

As for following in her mother's pointe shoes, that has yet to be determined.

Right now, Charlotte loves being active and does everything and anything.

"She'll let me know what interests her going forward," Hutchison said.

Hutchison and the rest of the ballet company are back at work in rehearsals for The Winter's Tale, which is brand new to the company.

They then stage Romeo and Juliet and The Nutcracker.

The National Ballet of Canada performs in Toronto's Four Seasons for Performing Arts.

NOT YOUR 9 TO 5 BUT ...

Believe it or not, being a ballet dancer is somewhat of a 9 to 5 job, while in rehearsals.

In prepping for a show, Hutchison spends six to eight weeks rehearsing 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Every day starts with a ballet class, with the rest of the day spent learning and rehearsing the choreography.

The company does 90 shows a year. When in show mode they work five-and-a-half days a week 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. with a dinner break. They get six weeks off every year.

The biggest misconception? They don't eat. Some dancers do diet excessively, but not Hutchison. Like most of us of a certain age, she needs to keep her junk food and high fat food intake in check in order to maintain her dancer's physique.



ALEKSANDER ANTONJEVIC



Stouffville native Stephanie Hutchison with daughter Charlotte in the National Ballet's Nutcracker.