

Ottawa dancer puts best foot forward for Dutch Royals

By Jacob Siskind
Citizen staff writer

To most people, a career in the arts is a vocation, the realization of a childhood dream. For Nathalie Caris of Ottawa, coming to dance was largely an accident.

"The organizers of a dance program wanted to put a poster in my parents' interior decorator shop window, and quite by accident asked if their child might be interested in dance lessons," she explained in an interview this week.

"So I went off for classes with Joyce Schietze and three years later found myself at the National Ballet School."

For the young second soloist of the Dutch National Ballet, it was just another part of her education.

Caris is in Ottawa for a command performance this evening in the National Arts Centre Theatre for members of the Dutch Royal family. Admission is by invitation only.

Caris spent eight years at the National Ballet School, from the age of 10, and graduated in 1980. She took a year off and with the help of a Canada Council grant went to Europe to look at the ballet scene there.

"I had met one of the dancers of the Dutch National company who was teaching at the National Ballet School in Toronto, so I knew a bit about that company and what its standards were like. I thought it would be a place where I would like to work."

She stopped in Holland on her trip and met up with Rudi van Dantzig, the artistic director of the company who had been to Canada and seen her dance.

"He remembered me from classes he had given and I thought that was a good omen, so when I was offered an opportunity to join the ensemble, I accepted."

She hasn't looked back and today is a second soloist with the ensemble. Since the highest rank in the troupe is a first soloist, she hasn't done too badly.

The work is fascinating — a careful blend of standard classics and pieces by new, young choreographers. Meeting all those up-and-coming creative people is one

of the attractions of working with the company.

"The programming is stimulating and the repertoire is versatile; you never get bored by doing the same thing over and over again."

But the frequent changes also pose other problems.

"It is possible that in one program you are dancing in all three pieces every night for a month, and a month later there is a different program, in which you may appear only very occasionally."

"The company is large, there are over 90 dancers in the ensemble, so they have to give everyone a chance, but very often it is a case of feast or famine, too much or too little."

"That's part of the fun and challenge of being with an ensemble like this."

Caris finds the flip-flops taxing emotionally. There are times, when she is not busy, when she is depressed and wonders if she should perhaps go elsewhere, and then a period of frenzied activity follows and she finds her batteries renewed.

As the official dance company of Holland, the Dutch National tours The Netherlands extensively and frequently, but it does not tour outside the country the way the Nederlands Dans Company does.

The ensemble now works out of a new home in Amsterdam, a building off the main cultural drag, but which gives it more room than it had.

"When we opened in the new theatre a couple of seasons ago a lot of people came to see us out of curiosity. They wanted to see the building and see how we looked in it."

"A lot of people have come again because they were pleased with what they saw and we are developing a new and wider audience than the one we had, which can be exciting."

Exciting as it may be to be dancing for royalty, Caris is just as happy that this command performance has brought her to her native Ottawa, where she can at least talk to her parents and other members of her family without running up a long distance bill.