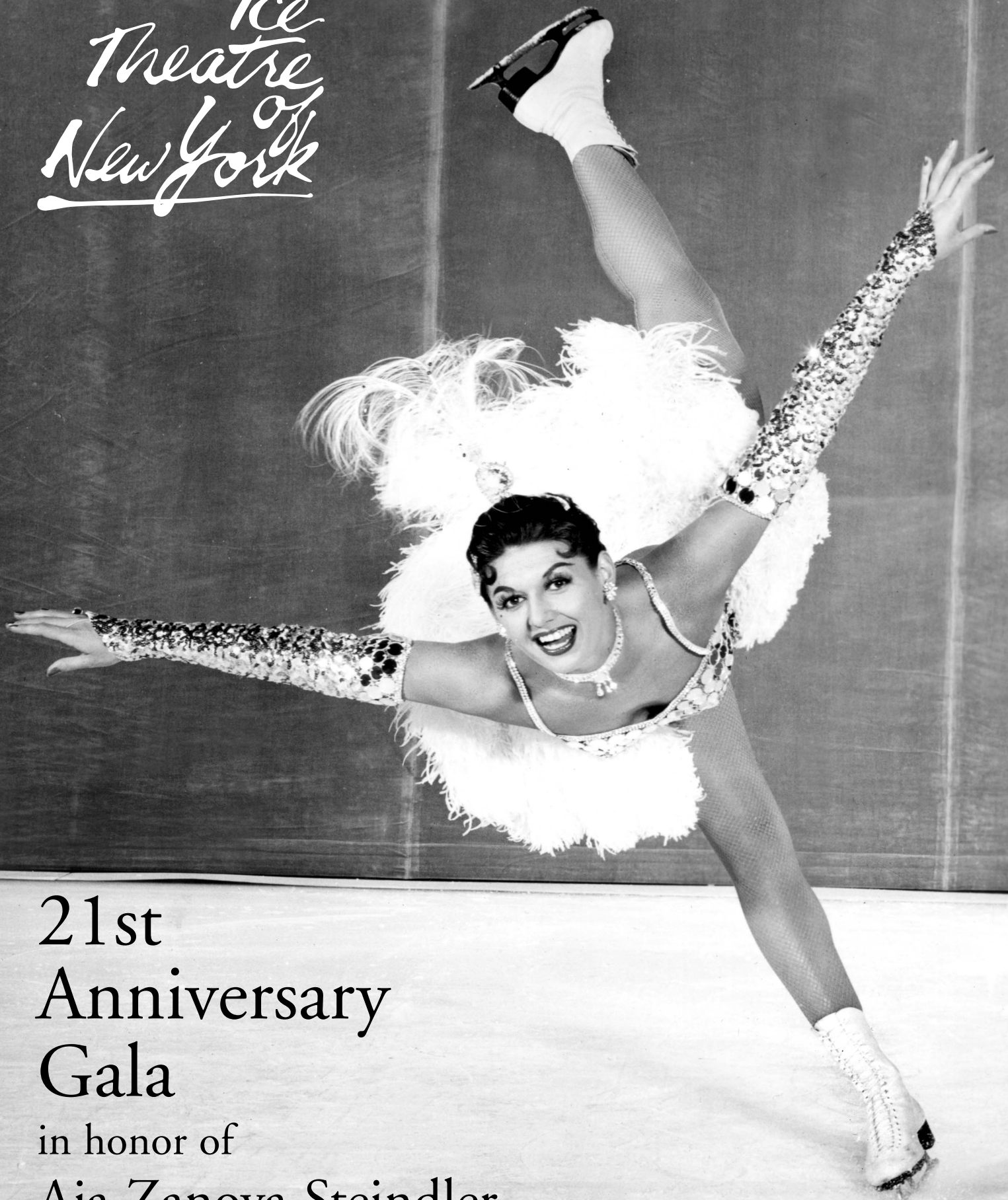


*Ice
Theatre
of
New York*



21st
Anniversary
Gala

in honor of

Aja Zanova Steindler

**We Are Proud To Support
Ice Theatre of New York**

**And Acknowledge This Year's Honoree
Aja Zanova**



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THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
NEW YORK, N. Y. 10007

October 17, 2005

Dear Friends:

It is a great pleasure to welcome everyone to the Ice Theatre of New York's 21st Benefit Gala honoring Aja Zanova Steindler.

New Yorkers, who appreciate beauty in all of its many guises, were quick to embrace the Ice Theatre of New York after its founding in 1984. Ice Theatre, the nation's premier non-profit ice dance company, has consistently amazed audiences with its unique fusion of athleticism and artistry. Equally impressive are Ice Theatre's classes and programs for inner-city youths, which ensure the future success of this captivating form of dance.

No one has played a larger role in Ice Theatre's success than Aja Zanova. A two-time World Champion who spent many years as a star of the Ice Follies and Ice Capades, Aja Zanova has enjoyed equal success as a leading supporter of Ice Theatre. Her grace and power on the ice inspired thousands, and her work with Ice Theatre is a fitting continuation of this rich legacy.

Please accept my best wishes for an enjoyable evening.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael R. Bloomberg". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the last name being particularly prominent.

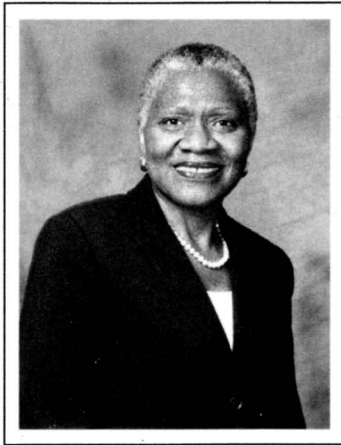
Michael R. Bloomberg
Mayor

Forbes salutes The Ice Theatre of New York

Congratulations on your organization's achievement
and for continuing to "Never Settle" in the community

Never settle.™

Forbes the good life **fyi**



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN

October 17, 2005

Dear Friends:

I am pleased to welcome everyone to the *Ice Theatre of New York's 21st Benefit Gala*.

Since its founding by Moira North, Ice Theatre has remained dedicated to developing figure skating as a performing art through performances and educational programs. The commitment of your organization to promoting figure skating, dance and visual arts is outstanding. Moreover, you provide skaters, dancers and other artists an excellent opportunity to exchange ideas and perform in public. Your participation in special events such as the Montreal Fashions on Ice and the annual Christmas Tree Lighting events at Riverbank State Park and Rockefeller Center has made them uniquely special.

I extend my congratulations to this year's Benefit Gala honoree, Aja Zanova Steindler.

My best wishes to your members, supporters and friends for continued success in furthering interest in and support for figure skating.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "C. Virginia Fields". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial "C" and a long horizontal stroke extending to the left.

C. Virginia Fields
Manhattan Borough President



Ice Theatre of New York



Ice Theatre of New York is an extraordinary organization, which has, for more than 20 years, changed the face of figure skating by integrating the sensibilities of the contemporary dance, music and art worlds into performance skating.

Founded in 1984 by Moira North, Ice Theatre of New York is the nation's first not-for-profit ice dancing ensemble to be awarded grants as a dance company by the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.

In addition to pioneering skating as a performing art, Ice Theatre has also initiated diverse performance programs to develop ensemble skaters, as well as educational outreach programs to teach the basics of skating and cultivate new audiences for dancing on ice.

Outreach programs include the Lunchtime Concert Series at Rockefeller Plaza and the New Works and Young Artists Series at Riverbank State Park, dedicated to presenting new works to school age children from the area, and to providing skating clinics for public school students from Harlem and Washington Heights.

And the critics have taken notice...

**Ice Theatre is onto something
and it deserves greater support!**

— Anna Kisselgoff, *The New York Times*

**One looks forward to seeing more of the
programs of Ice Theatre of New York.
They are truly challenging audiences and
choreographers to experience new vistas
coupled to traditions of excellence!**

— Bernardine Jennings, Editor-in-Chief, *Dancer's Magazine*

**Ice Theatre takes all the tricks that make the
sport so engaging and transforms them into art.**

— Patti Hartigan, *The Boston Globe*



October 17, 2005

Dear Friends:

Greetings to each of you gathered here tonight at the Ice Theatre of New York's 21st Benefit Gala.

From the beat of a drum to the stroke of a brush to the forging of thought into words, artistic expression continues to have a profound effect on the world, and we are fortunate in this city to have a wide array of programs, groups, and institutions bringing the arts and culture further into our lives.

One such entity is the Ice Theatre of New York. Since its founding by Moira North 21 years ago, the Ice Theatre of New York has grown into this country's premier ice dance company. It is in fact the nation's first not-for-profit dance-on-ice ensemble to be awarded grants as a dance company by the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, and its work here is truly commendable. In addition to developing and promoting figure skating as a performance art, the Ice Theatre of New York also provides educational programs and classes to inner city youth, helping countless youngsters recognize their dreams and reach their fullest potential both on and off the ice.

It is with great pleasure that I join the Ice Theatre of New York in celebrating the accomplishments and support of two-time World Champion **Aja Zanova Steindler**.

And last but not least, to Ms. North and the entire Ice Theatre family: I thank each of you as well for all that you have accomplished over the years. Your presence in this city has truly made a difference, and for that we are all extremely grateful.

My best wishes to everyone for a joyous evening.

Sincerely,

GIFFORD MILLER
Speaker



*Rolex is proud
to support the Ice Theatre
of New York*



ROLEX



AJA: *Always a Champion*

by EDWARD Z. EPSTEIN

No matter how many people are in a room, one's eye is immediately drawn to this striking woman: statuesque, chic, beautiful. She might be deep in discussion with Dick Button, Katarina Witt, Tom Collins, Ivana Trump — or receiving a great honor from the President of her native Czech Republic. She's former two-time World Champion Aja Zanova, a lady equally comfortable off-the-ice navigating the corridors of big business, politics and power.

Behind the glowing skin, the fine jewels, the charm, resides a complex individual: intelligent, discerning. Vulnerable, strong. A loyal friend. A formidable adversary. A force for causes and people she believes in. A survivor.

Her life might have been drawn from the pages of a novel, complete with adventures of the kind one usually encounters only on a motion picture screen: a life-threatening escape from an oppressive Communist regime; reinventing herself completely, in a foreign country and culture, into a sophisticated, glamorous skating star, beginning a lifelong love affair with the USA. (The only other female to maintain a top pro career

that lasted as long as Aja's was Sonja Henie, and Henie didn't tour eleven months a year for eighteen years straight.)

Zanova proceeded to reinvent herself yet again, proving there *was* life after skating, achieving spectacular results as an entrepreneur on the New York restaurant scene, her husband Paul by her side.

Her journey has not been the standard skates-to-success tale — her childhood fantasies didn't include figure skates. "I wanted to be a skier!" she recalls. The Czechoslovakia of her youth was a land of rugged, snow-capped mountains, rounded hills, and rolling plains. It was a landlocked country, in the center of Europe. In the period between the world wars, it was a freedom-loving, independent republic, birthplace of famous composers and authors, Smetana and Kafka among them.

Aja (nee Alena) Vrzanova was an only child. Her mother, Anna, was an opera singer. Her father, Miroslav, was an expert on finance and a cellist. "They were artists," states Aja, "but ours was hardly what you'd call a 'show business' family."

World War II was a distant threat during

Aja's early years. It was a sad day when her country became a "protectorate" of the German government; the population faced a bleak and uncertain future. The desire to live as "normal" a life as possible, during the occupation, permeated the daily lives of the citizens.

The Vrzanova family unit remained intact. For young Aja and her mother, concentration on the sport of skating was a godsend. Practice was strictly on outdoor ice, all skaters at the mercy of the elements. "We were the opposite of 'spoiled,'" states Aja. "We even prepared our own ice. We learned how to be resourceful, let me tell you."

Aja skated only in the winter. In the summers, she lived with her grandparents at their home in the southern part of the country. "I can't complain about my youth, despite the air-raids. We'd go down to the cellar for half an hour, then the all-clear would sound. One got used to it. I had a little bit of everything — I had my family, fun, no real worries, and skating was something I loved doing."

Her Mom was her coach. "She did *every-*



From Prague to America,
you are a great friend and family member!
You have been a wonderful inspiration.
Much love always! "Pac a Pusu"

Carole and Len
Natalie and Isi
Caroline
Pani Jarmila Pachlova

thing for me,” recalls Aja. “Through the years it was she who woke me at 5AM and froze her feet off watching me practice. She dedicated her life to *me*.” From the beginning, “I wasn’t afraid to try new things. I learned a spin and a waltz jump, and worked hard at making the spin faster and the jump higher. Mom encouraged me, always. It was fun, and gave me a feeling of accomplishment. If I got a swelled head, Mom quickly brought me down to earth. It was discipline out of love.”

At the age of seven-and-a-half, her parents entered her in a local competition. The skating club recognized the child’s potential, and Aja happily absorbed all the attention. “Let’s face it, I was a ham,” she says. “I loved it when my mother dressed me up.”

Details of that first long-ago competition remain vivid in her memory: “It was a one minute freestyle, and my costume consisted of knitted panty hose and a pink taffeta skirt.” She was proud when she defeated a 12-year-old competitor.

The young skater went through the ranks. “From then on, Mom entered me in everything. Father loved taking bows when

I won. He selected all my music.” Aja’s attitude was important as her talent: “I was always what is called today a ‘positive thinker.’” It seemed logical enough — skate well, do well. “I was fortunate, of course, because skating for an audience wasn’t a problem. I was rarely nervous. When you’re nervous, you ‘lose your legs.’ It happened, but not often.”

She was also observant. “I had a good eye for ‘copying,’” she explains. “If a skater exhibited good technique, I copied it!” (Actor Michael Caine, if he saw an actor do some “effective bit of business, I filed it away in my brain and simply copied it. We all do it, only few of us admit it.”)

Aja’s signature free skating style emerged in time. She was tall, unusual for a figure skater, and had great presence and personality on the ice. Under her Mom’s tutelage, she built a formidable repertoire of “big” jumps and fast spins. “But free skating was worth only forty percent of the final score in those days. School figures counted for sixty percent. There were skaters who could barely jump and spin, but they could skate great figures, and sometimes were so far ahead in points that they’d win. There was



First lesson with Mom.

so much to practice!”

Where had her mother acquired her knowledge of skating? “She learned from reading skating books,” states Aja. “Hard to believe, but true.”

At the end of the war, the Czechs faced another terrifying prospect: Communist domination and rule, the country to

GUGGENHEIM

Aja Zanova was born a star and will remain so for the rest of her life. Throughout a career of highs and lows, she has never lost her infectious optimism.

My precious friend for 55 years.
— Narena (Boots) Beyer

To ITNY —
Congratulations on
twenty-one years of
artistic excellence.

May it never end!



become a police state, patterned after Russia. Aja didn't realize it at the time, but she was on a collision course with the new forces controlling her country.

"I had won the Czech national title, but my parents and I realized that we needed help if I was to make any impact on the international skating scene. The Worlds and Olympics would resume, now that the war had ended. I needed a coach who knew the technical level I'd have to reach to compete." That coach would also have to be wise in the byzantine ways of the skating world, a universe unto itself. "Finding such a person was going to be a challenge, if not impossible," states Aja. "At the time, I didn't even speak English!"

A family friend, Jarmilla Pachlova, saved the day. "She changed my life," notes Aja. "She was responsible for finding Arnold Gerschwiler for me. (Jarmilla is still with us today, thank God — 103 years old!) Without her, no Gerschwiler. I had to go to London, to meet him, myself. They wouldn't give mother a passport. Green as I was, I must have impressed him. After watching me train, he said, 'Aja, if you work like this,

you can be world champion.' That was what I needed to hear. It gave me confidence." And fortified her resolve.

Trips to foreign territories were tightly bound by restrictions from her homeland government. "We couldn't take much money with us," she recalls, "and were always under close surveillance. I would be permitted no personal freedom away from the rink. But what choice did any of us have? One didn't argue. It was their way or no way."

Aja would live with the Gerschwilers for two years. "His wife, Vi, was like a second mother — and Arnold was a second father. I felt I had a secure home base, as they say. They taught me about the western way of life. 'Yes, please,' and 'No, thank you,' quickly entered my swiftly growing English vocabulary. The Gerschwilers taught me the wisdom of always writing thank-you notes, a practice I've continued to the present day."

Was there at least a gratifying personal life, so far from home? "There was *no* personal life, none at all," she states. "Arnold felt that once I fell in love, I'd be out of control. 'If I could avoid that', he said, 'I could

be world champion'. Since that's what I wanted to be, I followed his advice — except on one occasion. In London, I got a crush on a professional roller skater, and I'd met him because he was a friend of the Gerschwiler family. So it was Arnold's fault!

"I was perhaps sixteen-and-a-half, seventeen years old. We went out on a date, to a restaurant, and suddenly I didn't feel well. I was fearless on the ice, but on this 'first date,' I was a bundle of nerves. I had to visit the ladies room. But I was too embarrassed to walk the few feet — for some crazy reason, I felt he'd think I was behaving like a child. So what did I do? I ran all the way home, to use the facilities there.

"I can laugh about it now. Do you suppose my poor prince charming is still waiting for me to return? Arnold must have been thankful he didn't have to worry about little Aja falling in love — at least not until after she became world champion."

The post-war years brought two spectacular skaters from the West onto the international scene: America's Dick Button and Canada's Barbara Ann Scott. They introduced not only a daring new style and difficult new elements into their free skat-



Congratulations,
best wishes and
a big thank you to

Aja Zanova
Steindler

For her support of the
Ice Theatre of New York

Palmer Baker

ing (Button invented the “Button [flying] Camel,” and jumped the first double-axel and triple jumps); both were also brilliant at figures. The Europeans were suddenly face to face with the future.

In the meantime, Aja had some unique moves to distinguish her from her rivals: she was the first woman to jump the double-Lutz, “and Arnold and I stole Dick’s open axel and flying sit-spin.”

Aja’s skating caught the eye of a woman unique in the ice world: Sonja Henie. It was 1947, Aja was a teenager and Sonja was thirty-five, technically still reigning Olympic champion (the next year, 1948, 19-year-old Barbara Ann Scott won the title).

“Everyone knew Sonja, she was more than a skater, she was a legend, the only skater to become an American movie star. She wanted me to turn pro right away, and join her ice show. ‘Don’t worry, my mother will take care of you,’ she said. I was greatly flattered, of course, and fascinated by her. But I told her I wanted to be world champion, and said ‘no’ to her proposition.”

Henie’s reputation, of keeping life’s spotlight trained strictly on herself, was also legendary. Aja’s intuition may have picked up those signals, too, but she retained Henie’s admiration and, to a degree, friendship. “I told you I’d come to watch you skate,” Sonja said, showing up on future occasions. “I suspect, however, that if we had ever worked together, the honeymoon would have been over rather quickly,” laughs Aja.

St. Moritz was the site of the ‘48 Winter Games. The world championships, the following month, would be held in Davos. Gerschwiler had located a family for Aja to stay with, “in Twickingham, near Richmond,” she recalls, for the duration of her Olympic training in England.

She realized she “wasn’t quite ready” to medal, but placed a respectable fifth in the Games and made important contacts. Competing in Davos the following month proved to be “great training for me, the high altitude built up my stamina.” Even at major competitions, outdoor skating conditions were unpredictable. “One simply assumed the elements were against you. In Davos, there were snow banks around the outdoor ice surface. I learned to line up my figures against those snow banks.”

The following year, 1949, she *was* ready to medal. Aja’s training regimen intensified. One morning, at the rink, “it was around 6 AM,” recalls Aja, “there was nobody on the



Aja with coach Arnold Gerschwiler.

ice, nobody in the building. I’d been working on the loop-change-loop, repeating the figure six times. I thought it was enough.”

“Do it again,” said Arnold.

“I’ve done so many tracings, so close to each other—”

“One more.”

“No.” I skated off the ice, put on my skate guards, went to the dressing room, sat on a bench and was unlacing my boots. Arnold came in.

“Get up,” he said, and he swatted me across the face. Today, a skater would sue! ‘Put your skates on, and do the figure again,’ he ordered.

“I did as he said, and never disobeyed him again.” There was no room for temperament in Gerschwiler’s strategy for victory.

A new obstacle faced World competitors that year. “We were informed that for our

free-skating programs, the music would be played ‘live’ by the London Symphony! All of us were in shock — never mind the inspiration of skating to a live orchestra. What about the *tempo* of the music? We had all prepared our programs to recorded music, of course, which never varied in tempo. What if the ‘live’ orchestra played too fast, or too slow? It could have been a disaster. But happily, things worked out. I won.”

And she defeated top-drawer competitors, including America’s Yvonne Sherman, who won Silver, and Britain’s Jeannette Altwegg, who won Bronze.

Aja’s countrymen were ecstatic — it was the first time a Czech female skater had won the World title (it’s a distinction Aja retains to the present day). Along with the accomplishment, she now had a prestige that made it all the more difficult to restrict



Aja with co-chair and long-time friend Ivana Trump.

her presence abroad.

The 1950 Worlds were scheduled for London, but the Communist-ruled Czech government didn't want her to defend the title. "They wanted to send me to Moscow, to teach! It was up to my mother to convince the officials otherwise, and somehow that incredible woman managed to do it."

Aja's agenda consisted of more than defending her title. "First of all, I wanted to prove the first win wasn't any fluke," she states. And Aja and her family were poised to activate a life-altering, potentially life-threatening decision.

Aja traveled back home to defend her Czech national title. She remained home for Christmas. One day, she and her father took a leisurely stroll across a local bridge. "No one will be able to overhear us," he told his daughter. "There's a lot on your plate. But we will take one thing at a time. You have a great deal to do between now and March, but whatever happens after the World championships, you will remain in London and not return home."

She skated exhibitions in January, 1950. In February, she left home for what would be the last time. Her father cautioned her:

"Do not think about defecting." The code name for the plan to defect: "We're going to the mountains." "We will try to get Mom out as soon as possible," he told her.

Once again, she went to Davos to train. "I'd be very strong from training in Davos at that high altitude, then coming down to London and competing at sea level."

Aja won her second World title, once again defeating frontrunners Jeannette Altwegg, a Silver medalist this time, and Yvonne Sherman. A gala reception for Zanova was scheduled to take place in the Czech embassy. Arnold Gerschwiler warned her: "You cannot go to the embassy." Instead, they were "going to the mountains."

The president of the Wilson Blades company, at his London home, was waiting for Aja and Gerschwiler with a car. They were driven to meet Dick Button and others from the American team, ostensibly to begin a tour, which would be launched in Paris. Gerschwiler sent a telegram to the Czech embassy, explaining that Aja must represent her country on the tour.

The government sprang into action. Others on the world team were sent back to Prague, while special agents were dis-

A (strictly legal) toast

to Ice Theatre of New York

(now 21 and old enough to drink)!

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patched to Paris to meet Aja at the plane — *she must return home.*

“No,” replied Gerschwiler at the Paris airport. “She is world champion. Aja must fulfill her obligations to us. How will it look for you if she doesn’t?”

It was essential that the press not learn what was about to happen. “Otherwise, my attempt to defect would be *kaput*,” states Aja.

On April 1, Aja, anxious and tense, received a letter from her mother. It bore a West German stamp. Mme. Vrzanova had escaped, and was in a camp in West Germany, where she was being interrogated. Mother and daughter were reunited, and by then Aja had signed a document guaranteeing the skater and her family a rosy future, or so it seemed: a contract with the Ice Follies.

But for weeks following the defection, Aja received threatening phone calls. The mysterious automobile that had been passing by her London residence for so long had, thankfully, vanished. “It’s over, I think it’s okay,” she told herself.

It was several weeks after the defection, but Arnold Gerschwiler told Aja, “Don’t leave the house you’re staying in under

any circumstances.”

Aja ventured out — why shouldn’t she? “After all, I’m free now!” she thought. A moment after she stepped outside — the house was surrounded by a fence — an automobile suddenly appeared and screeched to a halt. Several men emerged and brazenly attempted to enter the grounds.

“But the fence wouldn’t open, thank God,” recalls Aja, who started screaming as the men tried to reach her and pulled at her.

Help arrived, but Aja was shaken. She broke down and sobbed “for an entire day,” she recalls. The kidnap attempt had failed, but the tension and stress of the last few months struck with full force. “I realized that all that had happened was *for real*, the terror of it hit me like a ton of bricks.”

She felt a cold hand around her heart on hearing that her father had been imprisoned back home. The cellist’s talents were utilized as lunchtime entertainment for men who worked in the coal mines. Aja retained passionate feelings about her home country, and it took thirteen years to effect her Dad’s freedom. “But,” she comments sadly, “he was a broken man.”

The Vrzanovas had paid a heavy price.

“And my name was stricken from all official records and documents. It was as if I hadn’t existed,” states Aja. The young woman braced herself to carve out a new life in a foreign world. “I will always be grateful to America for embracing me, welcoming me without any reservations.” It made dealing with “culture shock” bearable.

The transition to the world of “professional skating” was studded with pitfalls. Producers insisted that the world champion recreate her gold medal-winning performance, sometimes three performances a day, six days a week.

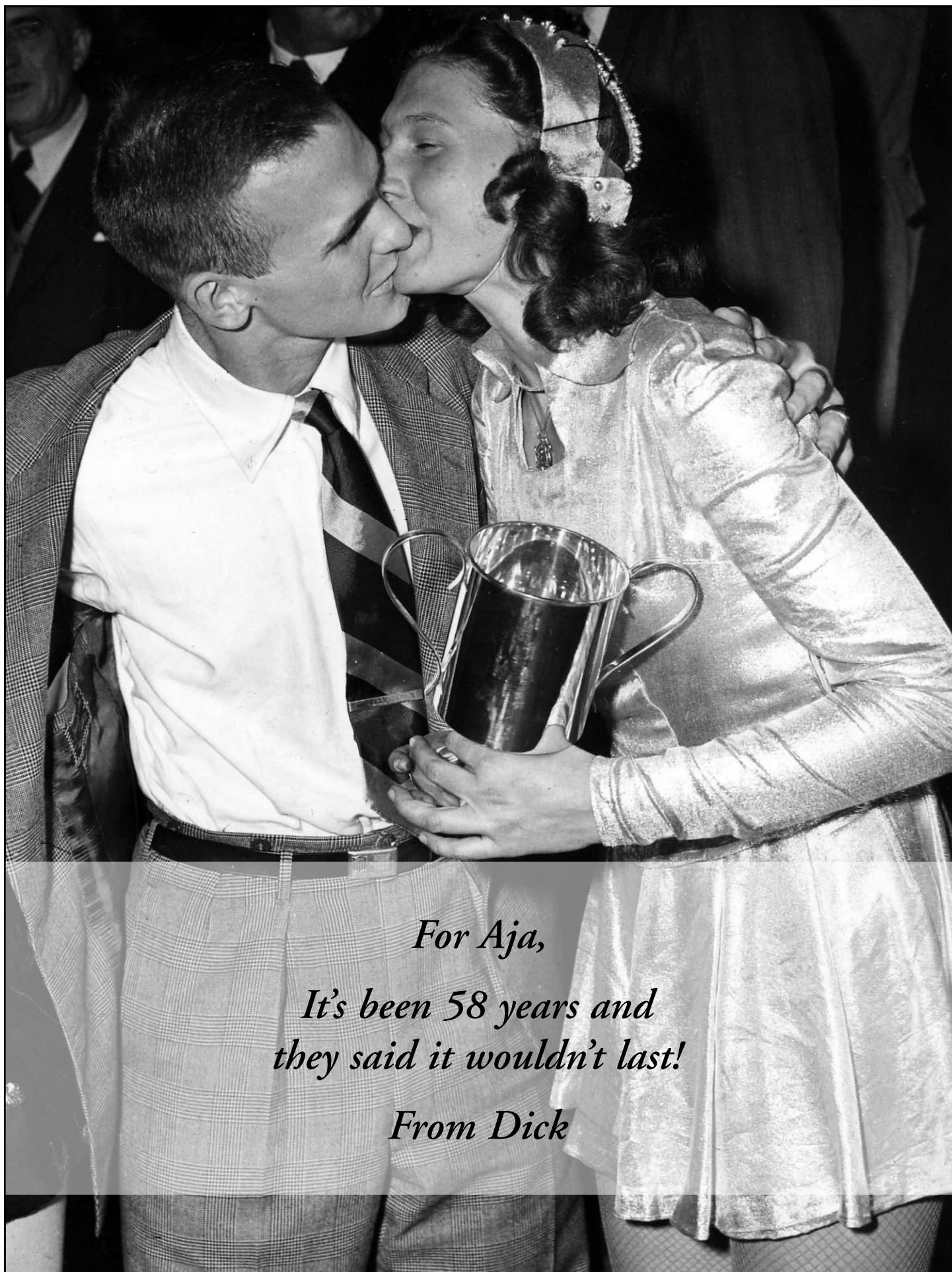
“That was fine with me — but, to my horror, I discovered that the audiences didn’t get it at all! Doubles, singles, flying-spins or two-foot spins — it all looked the same to them! Coming out of a big, difficult jump, I’d glance at the audience and they were busy eating their popcorn and candy, laughing and talking. What was I doing wrong? I saw that when one of the veteran ‘pros’ did a number, the audience watched every move, even though the moves were often not difficult. A simple toe-run or spread eagle would bring more applause than my complicated foot-



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*For Aja,
It's been 58 years and
they said it wouldn't last!
From Dick*

work patterns. But the pros had a way of *presenting* themselves that seemed to make all the difference. I was going to have to learn how to do that.”

Aja was no longer skating to please a panel of judges, who evaluated every move by an ironclad rulebook, and who were oblivious to audience reaction. “This new career my family and I had sacrificed so much for was a whole different game,” she noted.

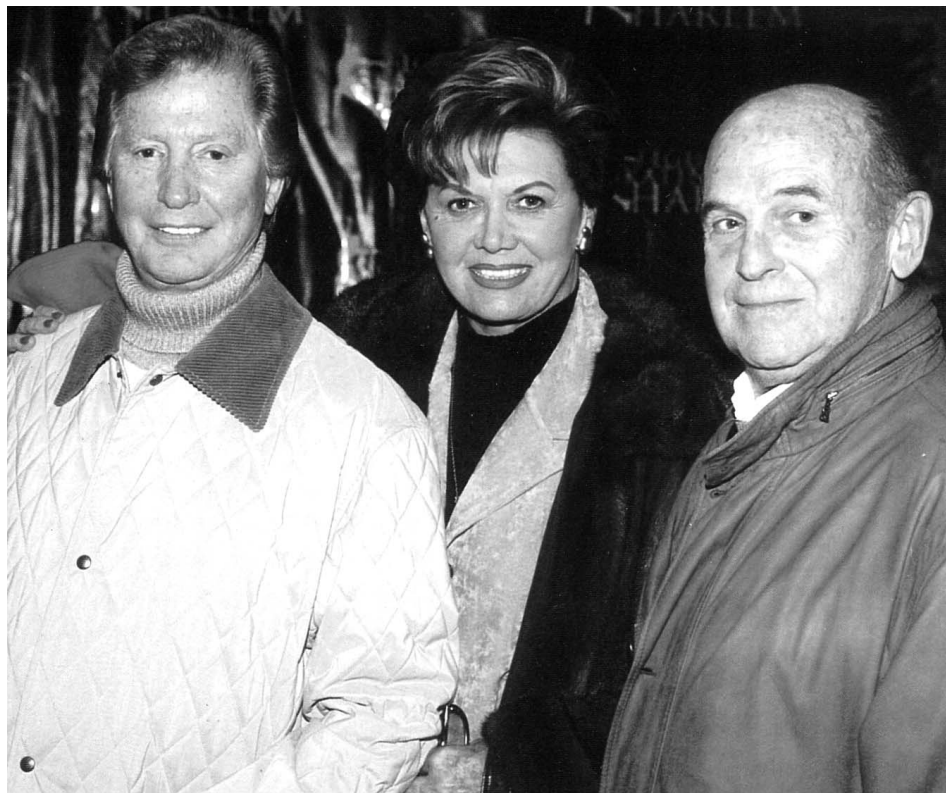
Aja wasted no time. Nick Castle was one of the most famous and respected choreographers in town. “I enrolled in Nick’s studio in L.A., and took lessons in *everything* — tap, ballet, pantomime, the works. I streamlined my appearance, taking off twenty-five pounds. I was living with my mother, we’d settled into a little house. I was able to focus on turning myself into the best ‘pro’ skater I could be.”

Gerschwiler was his usual blunt self. “He told me, ‘Give it three years, and if it isn’t working, get married and have children.’” That advice propelled her to work harder than she’d ever worked. “Arnold certainly knew how to ‘push my buttons,’” she laughs.

“I’m grateful my first show was ‘Ice Follies.’ There I learned what professionalism was all about. It was a pure family show, I wasn’t overwhelmed by the prospect of turning into a glamour sensation off the bat. I spent three years learning how to skate ‘professionally.’ I never fooled myself, I knew I was a rank amateur beginning in the world of ‘show business.’ I remember one number I did, ‘Salute to Freedom’ — in a costume that made me look like a car hop!”

When Aja joined Ice Capades, the Rolls Royce of ice shows, “I was *ready*. Show time! Ron Fletcher, a genius in the world of choreography, took me under his wing. It was Ron who made a ‘glamour star’ out of me.” Gerschwiler gave his star pupil this advice: “Put your money in the bank,” he told her.

With Aja as its star (she dropped the “Vr” from Vrzanova and became Aja Zanova), Ice Capades became the number one show in the country. She built a large, faithful following over the years, her flair for showmanship providing the jolt of excitement audiences craved. In skating circles, Zanova’s reputation as a trouper, and a diva, took on legendary proportions. Raging snowstorms couldn’t keep her from opening nights: “Once, it was the men who drove the news trucks that got me through,” she recalls. “I arrived at the sta-



Aja with co-chairs Tom Collins and Dick Button.

dium just as the overture was going on.” It was like a scene from the film “All About Eve.” “My stand-in was ready to step onto the ice,” smiles Aja, who informed the skater: “Sorry, dear.”

On another occasion, it was decided that one of Aja’s big numbers “would present me as a Japanese princess. I was much too tall, but so many seemed enthusiastic that I said, ‘Okay, let’s do it.’” Opening night was to take place in Hollywood, and there would be a celebrity-packed audience. “The afternoon of the show I went to Max Factor’s to have myself authentically made up. When I got back to the rink, my friend Fran Claudet Johnson took one look at me as Asian royalty and said, ‘Take off that makeup.’” The makeup came off, and Aja laughs today at her error-in-judgment.

In the nineteen-sixties, on one of her Ice Capades tours, a TV producer approached her with an offer. He was filming a commercial for “Bic” ballpoint pens, and Zanova’s performance sparked an idea: why not shoot her doing a “blur” spin with a “Bic” attached to her boot, its point at ice-level. After the spin, it would be demonstrated that even after such punishment the pen could still write.

As a result of the widely seen, and highly lucrative commercial, Aja became a household image. She was in demand by other accounts, including Monsanto (stockings

and panty hose) and, in this more innocent time, cigarettes. “The man from the Camel Company did nothing else but light your cigarette; you took exactly two puffs to produce a ‘square’ ash — it had to be a ‘square’ ash. The cigarette always stuck to the lips, and I couldn’t breathe for days afterwards.”

A grueling tour schedule, year after year, made unsparing demands on the skating star. A satisfying personal life remained an elusive goal.

One night, in the late 1960s, Aja was in New York to appear on Johnny Carson’s “Tonight Show.” Two friends, a skater and her husband, invited Zanova to join them for dinner after the taping, which was scheduled for around 5 PM. “My husband and I will take you to a wonderful restaurant, ‘La Popothe,’ on 58th between Second and Third, near your apartment, and there’s a man we want to introduce you to.”

“Give me a break,” replied Aja, tired and looking forward simply to having a nice, quiet dinner with her friends. They persisted, and Zanova finally agreed to meet their chum, a bachelor from Czechoslovakia.

She wore the trendy outfit she’d sported on the Carson show — it was the era of mini-skirts, “hot pants” and high boots. When Zanova-and-party arrived at the restaurant, the bachelor wasn’t on hand. Aja and her pals proceeded to have dinner.

"As we were walking out, he was walking in," she recalls. "Paul Steindler was his name. He was all apologies, explaining he'd just arrived from Montreal. He was *so* charming, and we talked. I learned he was my fan because of his mother! Through her, he knew all about me. So skating had provided this opportunity, too! So there we were, two Czechs in New York. We went on to a bar for champagne. He took a business call and ignored me for half an hour! I got very angry!"

The next day, New York was snowed in. "He told me the next time I was in the city, I should call him."

Over the next few months, "There were roses waiting for me in every city I traveled to," she recalls, as Paul Steindler proceeded to sweep the lady off her feet. "Limousines to bring me to New York. Wonderful times together. It was all so romantic..."

Then he surprised her with an engagement ring, a beautiful, large round diamond, glittering in a glass of champagne.

Within four months, the couple was married. Aja's Dad gave her away at the wedding.

She made yet another life-altering decision. "I'd considered leaving my skating

career five times before. I wanted to leave voluntarily. I always discussed it with my mother, and her answer was always the same: 'You've got to make up your own mind.'

"It was 1968, and I'd been a skating star for eighteen years straight — longer, I believe, than any female skater. I felt the time had come. 'Aja, we've got to know,' said the producer of *Ice Capades*. I was in terrific shape, nothing was wrong physically, I could have continued for a couple of years more, for sure. Maybe longer. 'You can do it,' I told myself, 'you can go out at the top.' I told the producer, 'I'm sorry — I'm leaving.'"

Were there regrets? "I missed it, but never regretted it. I thought it would never end, but it ended. It's hard to leave, especially at the top. But thanks to Paul, I discovered there *was* life after skating!"

Aja entered another highly competitive arena — the restaurant business. With her husband, she created "The Duck Joint" and "The Czech Pavilion," both enormously successful.

"That's when I became friends with Ivana. Our Czech background was a powerful bond. We'd met earlier, in Montreal, but 'Duck

Joint' sealed the deal. I knew her before Donald, during Donald, after Donald. I was at the hospital within two hours after each of Ivana's children was born."

It was a profound shock for Aja when husband Paul died suddenly. Their love had brought strength to both of them. She bore the tragedy as she had others, including the loss of her father in 1978. Courage, and the determination to survive, were family characteristics.

She'd refused repeatedly, over the years, to return to Czechoslovakia for visits. After the Wall came down, she went home, in 1990, "after forty years in exile. Two generations didn't know I'd existed, or that a Czech had won the World title, twice."

It was the first of many visits, and Aja was relieved to observe that "the new generation is going to be okay. The previous generations didn't know how to cope with democracy. Many missed the old system where people were taken care of whether they worked or not."

She eventually wrote a memoir, which became a bestseller. In 2003, the President of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Klaus, con-

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tacted Aja, requesting that she meet with him. He told her how much he appreciated what an effective goodwill ambassador she was. "We are very proud of you," he said, and told her she was going to be presented with a very special award, on a special date: October 28, 2004, a national holiday celebrating the 86th birthday of the country.

The ceremony took place in the presidential palace in Prague. There were one thousand invitees, and three thousand at the gala afterwards. "It was an emotional occasion for me," recalls Aja, "very emotional." The Medal of Merit lauded her "Not just for what you've done in the world of skating, but how you've represented Czechoslovakia to the world and what you have done in life."

"I even spoke in the Senate," recalls Aja, "and explained why I escaped the Communists. I didn't gloss over details. I related how difficult it had all been, how I'd missed my parents and my home, and how thrilled I was when the Iron Curtain came down."

There was a poignant and bittersweet aspect to the occasion: her parents weren't there to savor it.

A kind of "Aja Fever" swept the nation, "and I couldn't believe the extent of it," she notes. "It was so touching, and so exhausting. I didn't expect it at all. At airports, people would say, 'It's good to know everything's okay.' I heard from seventy-year-old fans who'd kept my old newspaper clippings, which had turned yellow! And the young people suddenly knew who I was, I 'existed' again, despite the Communists' attempts to wipe me out. Now people approach me and ask, 'Can I write you?'"

"Sure," I tell them. I've learned there are clubs throughout the country, devoted to collecting autographs, and mine is a 'hot property,'" she laughs. A famous hockey player's autograph might be exchanged for one of "Mrs. Aja", as her new fans call her affectionately.

"I receive so many letters, containing pictures of me, with a note: 'Would you please sign this for my daughter?' I only wish my mother could see all this — she gave up so much."

Aja does not squander time. Today she maintains real estate interests in New York and Florida, and is a constant world traveler. She keeps in close touch with the

skating scene, here and abroad, and with old and new skating friends. International Figure Skating magazine recently named her one of the Twenty Most Influential People in the sport. Aja is often a judge at top professional events, and has been involved in TV production. She's been a devoted friend and fan of Ice Theatre of New York since its inception.

"I was there at the beginning, and now, twenty years later, Moira North's dream has become a reality benefiting all who love figure skating. An amazing accomplishment, Moira, and a tribute to the hard work of the many dedicated souls involved. I am so pleased to be a part of it. On my card, Ice Theatre rates a perfect score. I am so proud to have been chosen the 2005 honoree. It is a distinction I shall always treasure."

© 2005 Edward Z. Epstein

EDWARD Z. EPSTEIN is author of twenty books, including "BORN TO SKATE: The Michelle Kwan Story" (Ballantine). Paul Newman & Joanne Woodward, Mia Farrow, Lana Turner, Lucille Ball and Jennifer Jones are among his other subjects. A lifelong figure skating enthusiast, Epstein is a former Middle-Atlantic States Novice champion. His biographical essay on Sonja Henie was published by "Scandinavian Review," and he helped organize a festival of Henie's films for New York's Museum of Modern Art. He wrote the official Museum notes for the series. Epstein is a graduate of NYU.



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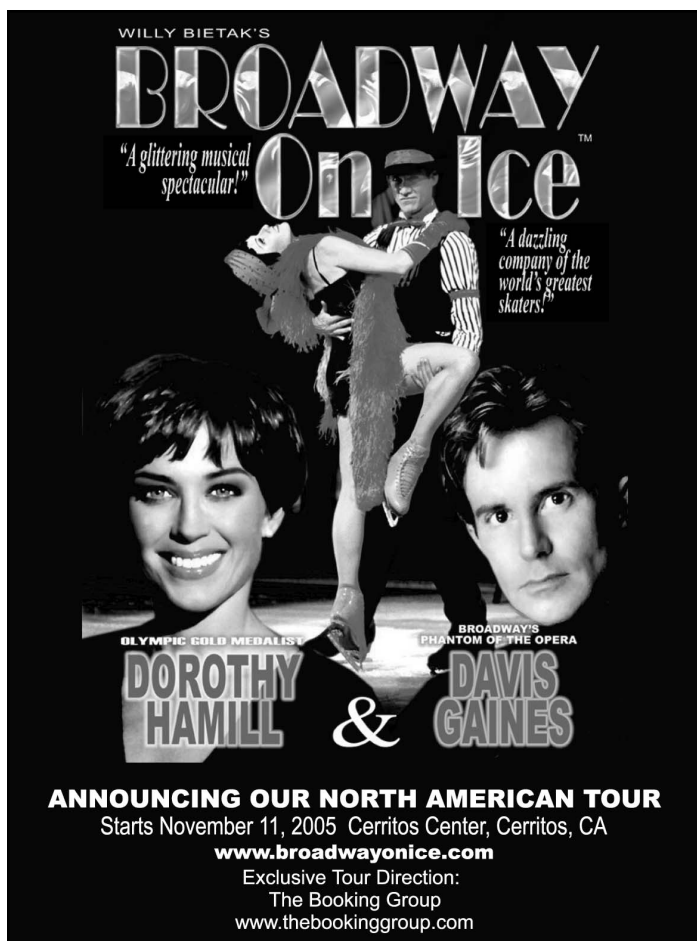
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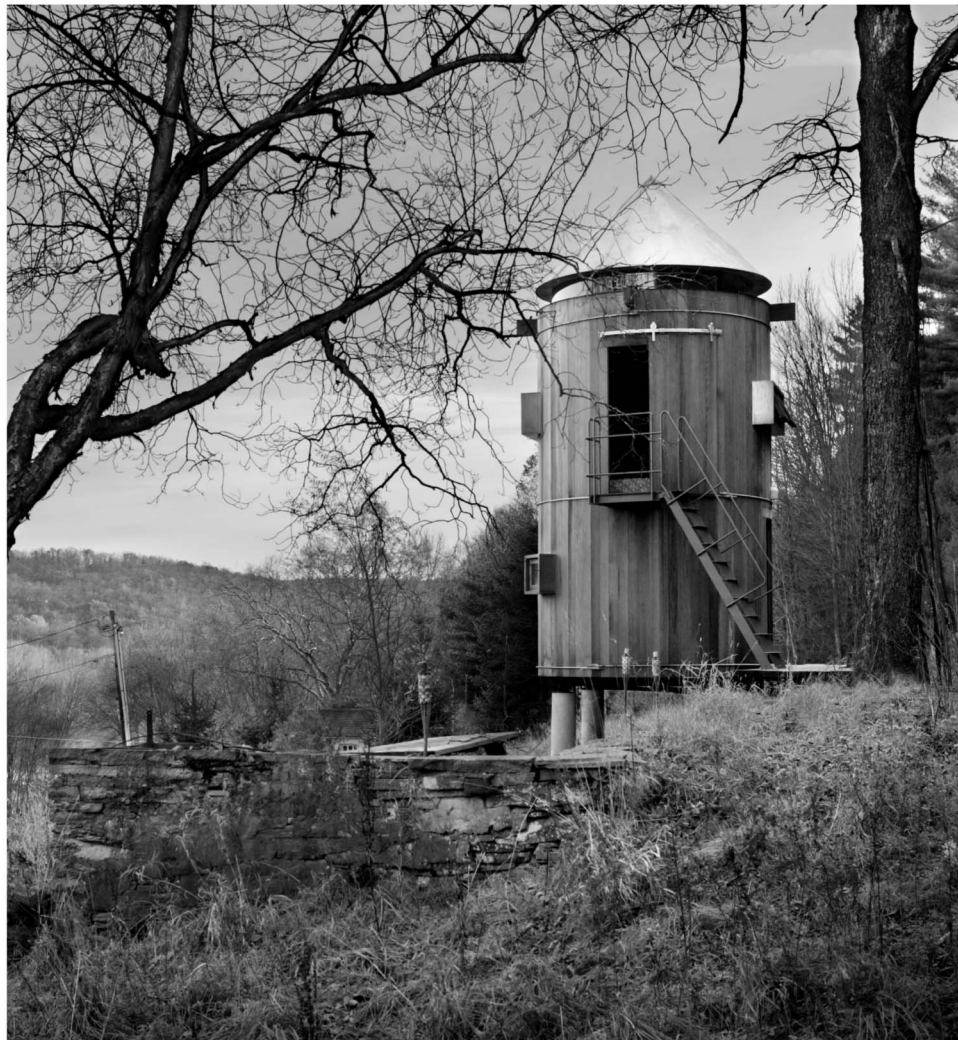


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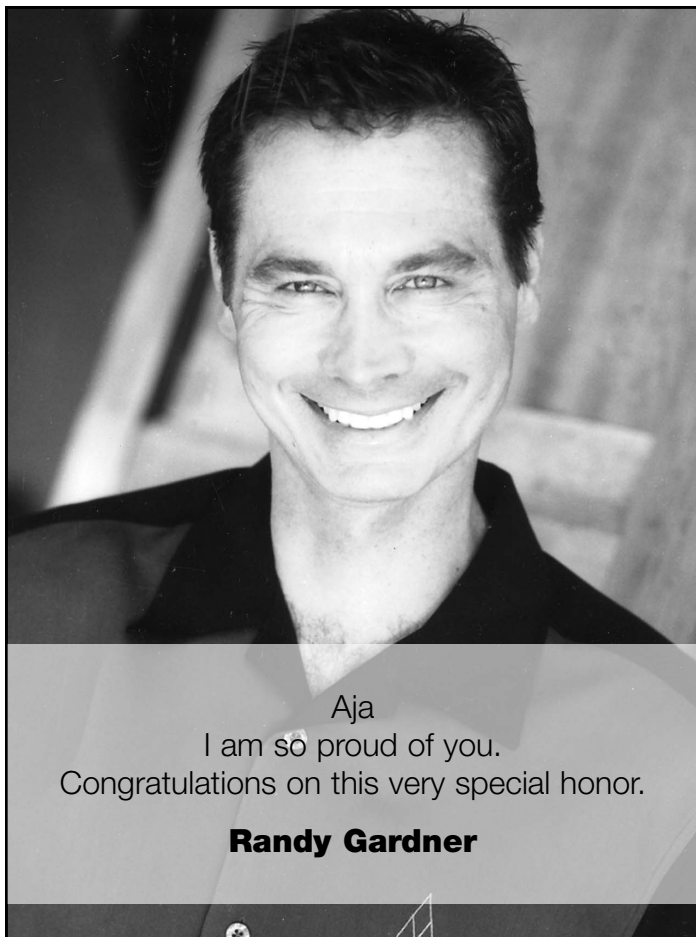
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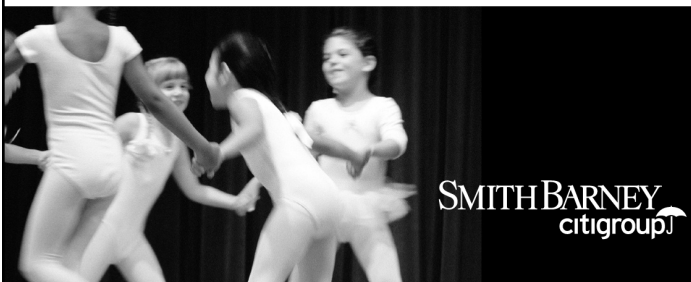
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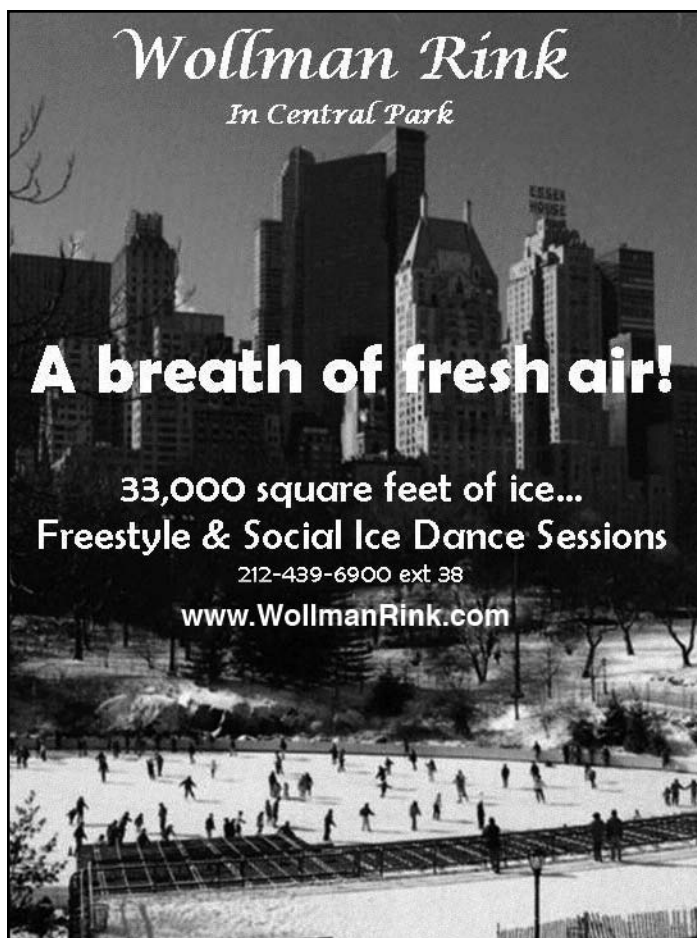
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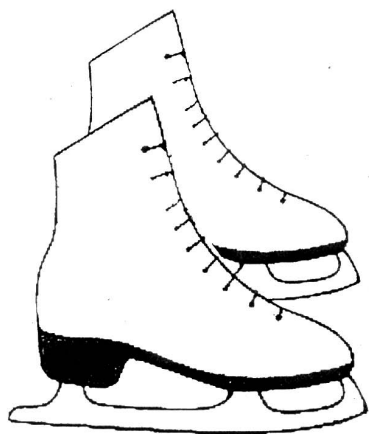
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