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All the rink's a stage

ICE THEATER FOUNDER STRIVES TO LIFT SKATING TO ART FORM FROM COMPETITION, EXHIBITION

By Nerissa Pacio

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Jodi Porter is hoping she can reinvent ice theater to mean much more than Disney on Ice. The 32-year-old founder of San Jose's American Ice Theater is striving to open up a different world to ice skaters by combining classical and modern dance on ice -- a departure from the costumed kiddie entertainment often associated with the genre.

"The opportunities for skaters after they are done competing are slim," says Porter, a modern dance teacher and associate director at Ballet San Jose. "They can either join a kiddie show, become a coach or just stop skating. I wanted to build something where skaters can actually challenge themselves by learning something new in a professional arena other than joining Disney on Ice."

Porter's group, which formed seven months ago, will make its San Jose debut tonight at the opening ceremony for the Downtown Association's Holiday Ice Rink.

Three skaters will perform a tribute to the ballet's upcoming staging of the "Nutcracker." Porter will then join them in a contemporary piece she choreographed titled "Illumination."

This isn't the ice dancing of Torvill and Dean, whose programs were based on ballroom dances, or even one of the exhibitions by medal-winning skaters such as Brian Boitano. Tonight's first dance highlights one of the ways Porter breaks the mold of tradition. She's putting a trio of skaters on the ice. Skaters normally perform solo, as a pair or in a large ensemble.

Porter recently moved to San Jose from Salt Lake City and has skated and danced since childhood. After earning a degree in modern dance from the University of Utah and doing choreography for the opening ceremonies of the XIX Winter Olympic Games in her hometown, Porter had a vision to consciously merge the skating and dancing worlds. (*Correction: World-renowned choreographer [Sarah Kawahara](#) choreographed the opening ceremonies of the XIX Winter Olympic Games. Ms. Porter choreographed the opening for the Exhibition of Champions*)

"Even if skaters take dance classes, and many of them don't, they rarely make that connection to what they do on the ice," Porter says. "It's difficult if you don't have people who are trained to teach them how to translate what they've learned in the studio onto the ice."

Last April, Porter found a prime opportunity to test her idea when she learned of an amateur ice-theater competition in Los Angeles. She quickly assembled a team of experienced local skaters, choreographed a piece in the studio and brought it to life on ice. To her surprise, no other teams performed pieces infused with a modern style.

"They were all either entertainment-type kids shows or the traditional ballet-type figure skating," Porter says. "That's when I realized we were doing something very new and very different."

Porter's goal is to create an in-residence professional ice-theater company by 2006, with a permanent studio, ongoing classes and paid performers, similar to the way a professional dance company works. She plans to begin auditions in January.

So far, she has been working project to project, with a new set of volunteer skaters recruited for each event. When they can, they use Ballet San Jose's studio space for practices.

Only one other professional ice-theater company, Ice Theater of New York, has been established in the United States, she says. But unlike her vision, the East Coast company focuses solely on modern choreography and does not have an ongoing training program, Porter says.

Her current skaters are eager to join in Porter's nascent venture.

Allison Best, a 17-year-old student at Mountain View High School, said ice theater gives her a chance to stay in touch with skating after her decision to stop training and competing. It also lets her focus more on the artistic qualities of skating, rather than its athleticism.

"This is more about the artistry and not just about the jumps and counting the number of revolutions per jump," Best said.

Kristina Feliciano, a 26-year-old who works in biotech, said ice theater inspired her to get back onto the ice after a five-year break.

"When people think of ice skating, they think of little girls in ballerina costumes skating to classical music," Feliciano said. "This is much more freestyle, more interpretive. At first I didn't really understand what it was, but it's ended up being so far beyond what I ever expected."

American Ice Theater

Where: Downtown Holiday Ice Rink, Market Street and Viola Avenue, San Jose

When: 6 tonight

Tickets: Free show and free public skate after the opening ceremony

Area ice rinks

Downtown Ice 2003: Market Street and Viola Avenue, San Jose; (408) 287-6423

Logitech Ice at San Jose: 1500 S. 10th St., San Jose; (408) 279-6000

Eastridge Ice Arena: 2190-A Tully Road, San Jose; (408) 238-0440

Ice Center Cupertino: 10123 N. Wolfe Road; (408) 446-2906

Winter Lodge: 3009 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto; (650) 493-4566

Ice Oasis Skating Rink: 3140 Bay Road, Redwood City; (650) 364-8090

Iceoplex: 44388 Old Warm Springs Blvd., Fremont; (510) 490-6621.

Dublin Iceland: 7212 San Ramon Road; (925) 829-4445.