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Kaeja d'Dance celebrates its chai anniversary

By BARBARA SILVERSTEIN, Special to The CJN

Thursday, 20 November 2008

The Kaeja d'Dance, a contemporary dance company known internationally for its innovative physically demanding choreography and acclaimed dance films, is now in its 18th year.

Allen and Karen Kaeja demonstrate a Kaeja toss.

Co-founders and co-artistic director Allen and Karen Kaeja, who have performed on stages across North America and Europe and in Asia, are inviting people to celebrate their chai anniversary at this year's Kaeja Lounge, their annual fundraiser.

The festivities take place on Nov. 26, 7:30 to 9:30 p.m. at the Edward Day Gallery at 952 Queen St. W., Suite 200.

The Kaejas, who have two daughters Aniya, 15, and Mika, 10, established Kaeja d'Dance in 1990, to showcase their particular style of dance and choreography.

The company's mandate has since grown, to include films about dance and education. Karen Kaeja says that the films are funded by organizations such as Bravo and their educational work is done in partnership with the Toronto District School Board and Harbourfront Centre.

The couple describe the lounge event as a party that will include footage from their Dead Sea performance, live presentations by 18 dancers and some hands-on exposure to the innovative modern dance elements that Kaeja dance company is known for.

The footage from the Dead Sea stems from the couple's work in Israel two years ago, when they gave presentations of dance on film at the Tel Aviv Film Festival and at Yad Vashem. "We developed a dance film series on the Holocaust. We started in 1997, and over a decade we created seven films," says Allen Kaeja.

"We were told that we were the first choreographers creating the first dance films loosely based on the Holocaust."

He says the films, which include depictions of ghetto life and resistance fighters, are inspired by the experiences of his late father, Morten Norris, who was interned at Auschwitz.

The live performances at the lounge will include an excerpt from Wedding Threads, created by Karen for the 2008 Dusk Dances.

Guests can opt to be filmed at a video dance booth, where they will be guided to express themselves, Karen says. "They'll be given ideas to move to. It will be part of a video that will be screened at the end of the evening."



She says there will also be a Kaeja elevation booth, where people can experience the dance lifts the couple have developed. "We're known for these lifts. We teach them all over the world.

"Allen or I will be taking guests into a modified lift."

And yes, petite, fine-boned Karen can do heavy lifting. She points to a picture of herself lifting her husband, a tall, muscular man who started out as a wrestler.

Indeed his foray into dance was pure happenstance. A native of Kitchener-Waterloo, Allen was training for the varsity wrestling team at Waterloo University. He took his first dance class at the age of 20 to improve his balance. "Once I started dance class, I realized that was it."

He says he was wowed by the possibilities of choreography, adding that his energetic and physical style is sometimes compared to the athletic style of the late Hollywood dance legend Gene Kelly.

Allen says he was quite smitten with his wife when they first met as performers in the same dance troupe, but it took several years until they finally got together.

"He chased me for four years," Karen says, laughing. "When I met him, I fell in love with partnering and the potential of what we could ignite through partnering."

A late bloomer, the Toronto-born Karen Resnick took her first dance lesson the summer before she auditioned for the dance program at York University. She also studied psychology and initially was a reluctant performer.

She was much more interested in dance therapy. In fact, she started the dance therapy program at Baycrest in 1981, when she was an undergraduate student.

Her teachers recognized her talent and steered her toward the stage, she recalls. "My professors kept giving me scholarships for performance study."

As for the name Kaeja, it was fashioned from the initials of both their given names, says Allen, explaining that he had no attachment to the name Norris, the surname his father assumed in Canada. "The name Norris [is] empty because it was a made-up name. It was randomly chosen."

For more information about the Kaeja Lounge, call 416-516-6030 or e-mail kaeja@kaeja.org.

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