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**Kinetically charged:
Allen and Karen Kaeja**

by Suzanne Wintrob

Growing up, neither Allen Joseph Norris nor Karen Lisa Resnick had any aspirations of becoming professional dancers. Rather, Allen was fixated on wrestling and judo while Karen had never danced a day in her life until she enrolled at university. However, from the moment they each took that first dance class and subsequently found each other, both Allen and Karen knew their lives would never be the same.

“When I set foot in that first ballet class, I said, ‘This is my life. This is it,’” recalls Allen, who had been training for Canada’s Olympic and Maccabi wrestling teams at the time. “Dance had a creative element that wrestling didn’t have. My wrestling coach was very upset when I dropped combatics and none of my friends or family understood what I was doing, but how do you stem the flow of passion?”

Today, Allen and Karen Kaeja (they pooled their initials into a new surname when they married in 1989) head up the thriving dance company **Kaeja d’Dance** and the **Kd’D2** dance troupe of young professionals. Allen, the troupe’s principal choreographer, co-founded Toronto’s popular annual fringe Festival of Independent Dance Artists (fFIDA) back in 1991 while Karen, the troupe’s lead dancer, helps run the city’s annual Festival of Interactive Physics specializing in Improvisation and Contact Dance.

The Kaejas have performed and taught in Canada, the United States, South America, Europe and Asia and are on the faculty of the National Ballet School, Ryerson University’s dance school, and the School of Toronto Dance Theatre. They’ve developed a teaching system called Express Dance geared at high school teachers unfamiliar with teaching dance – that’s getting attention among some Canadian school boards. And they’re also award-winning filmmakers who have produced six major works based on the Holocaust that have appeared on television and at film festivals around the world.

Not bad for a butcher’s son from small town Ontario and a Toronto girl who started out in the early 1980s as a dance therapist at a Jewish home for the elderly.

“I had no little girl dreams of being a ballerina,” recalls Karen, 41. “Dance found me. I was interested in working with people and loved non-verbal communication. I did barely anything physical when I was younger except downhill skiing and high jumps. But I had natural movement, and when my university professors gave me dance scholarships I jumped at them.”

Upon graduating from York University's dance school in 1984, Karen bounced between Toronto, Montreal and New York studying dance and performing with various companies. She also built up quite a respectable nightshirt business called Dreamers to subsidize her dancing, touting her wares at local craft shows whenever she could.

About the same time, Allen was studying child psychology at Ontario's University of Waterloo by day and wrestling by night. Still, he wasn't quite sure what direction his life was taking and felt somewhat unsettled.

Then a friend suggested he join her at a ballet class. Allen was intrigued, and the experience changed the course of his life. He subsequently signed up at the School of Toronto Dance Theatre and immediately immersed himself in the world of dance and choreography, shocking his family and friends.

"My dad was a butcher from Poland, a Holocaust survivor, and we were a working class family with little exposure to the arts in our home," says Allen. "All my friends were wrestlers or into judo and my brothers were doctors and accountants, so nobody knew what to make of my decision to dance. But to me, it made absolute sense."

Soon after, Allen was asked to perform for a local choreographer – his first semi-professional engagement outside of the school. Karen had also been invited to dance there and, despite being involved with other people at the time, the two young dancers clicked instantly.

"There was something definitely kinetically charged between us," says Allen, who moonlighted as a nightshirt salesman soon after he met Karen. "We were both interested in a partner dance form called "Contact Dance", which breaks the boundaries of the big man lifting the little woman, so we started looking for opportunities as a couple to dance duets."

Four years later they were married, changing their surname to reflect their coming together both as a couple and as a dance troupe, explains Karen. Their daughters Aniya, 9, and Mika, 4, are "the first official Kaejas," she adds. Allen and Karen's first concert as **Kaeja d'Dance** was named, appropriately, *Kinetically Charged*.

In **Kaeja d'Dance**'s early years, Karen and Allen spent much of their time teaching ("It helped in developing our style and paying the rent," says Karen). That was the impetus for the development of the "Express Dance" teaching system that's geared at teachers who are new to teaching dance. As Allen explains, Express Dance encourages students to create their own personal movement language "as opposed to learning it from MTV." The teacher doesn't have to know dance techniques but acts purely as a facilitator.

The couple recently developed a teacher's resource book published by Dance Collection Danse and co-written by Carol Oriold, and their newly-created **Kd'D2** dance troupe takes Express Dance on the road to various communities across Ontario.

As their dance experience grew, so too did their creativity. Allen says that from the day he was kicked out of the School of Toronto Dance Theatre during his second year “for being too independent” both he and Karen have continued to push the limits of dance and choreography. Many of their pieces include the non-traditional lifts of Contact Dance, where petite Karen manages to lift and twirl her 5’10” husband in the air just as easily as he lifts her.

In 1993 their work took a bold turn with the creation of *In Blood*, a 15-minute Holocaust-based duet combining martial arts and Contact Dance that was inspired by the death of an uncle in Allen’s father’s arms in Auschwitz. It was followed a year later with an 11-minute solo performed by Karen about a woman’s premonition of losing her family during impending war. The dance, which was inspired by the story of Allen’s father’s first wife who perished in the gas chambers of Chelmo, was later turned into a film.

“It’s a way of sharing and passing on our artistic interpretation of what it is to be Jewish and to be affected by the Holocaust,” says Allen, who serves on Toronto’s Holocaust Education Committee and has performed with Karen during the city’s Holocaust Education Week. “It gives the audience a whole new way of looking at art and the Holocaust.”

By 2000, Allen had two Holocaust trilogies under his belt and several have been made into films. One example is “1939”, a five-minute film based on Allen’s full work, *Resistance*, that explores the power of the human spirit against oppression. The films are co-directed by Allen and former dancer Mark Adam.

“For dancers and choreographers in particular, you can’t dance forever on stage,” says Judy Gladstone, executive director of Toronto-based Bravo!FACT, a program to fund art films that was created by Canada’s Bravo! cable arts channel. “Allen has succeeded at film from the get-go, even though he takes bigger risks. He can take a dollar and stretch it in so many ways. Although Allen and Karen’s films are done on small budgets, it certainly doesn’t show when you’re sitting back and watching them. They have the time, the energy and the passion for these important films that will exist forever. It’s a wonderful legacy.”

Allen has taken a number of film courses over the years but Karen hopes he’ll eventually follow his newfound passion and head off to film school to hone his skills even further. In the meantime, they’re content to busy themselves with choreographing, performing, teaching and parenting. They recently returned from India where they performed duets, taught Contact Dance, created a new work for a group of Bharatnatyam dancers, and showed three of their films at a local festival. **Kd’D2** is now touring *Resistance* throughout Northern Ontario, opening up the Holocaust to discussion in small communities.

Kaeja d’Dance has had a busy spring, performing at various venues around Toronto including the Royal Ontario Museum and the Distillery Jazz Festival. Allen is currently in rehearsals for a commissioned piece that will be performed in June 2004 at the Canada

Dance Festival in Ottawa. In July, the troupe will premiere Karen's latest choreographic work called *Hour to Our* and excerpts from Allen's newest work in progress, *Asylum of Spoons*, at Toronto's Winchester Street Theatre.

Following a fundraising party on July 24 at Toronto's DeLeon White gallery where dance, film and art will take center stage, **Kaeja d'Dance** is off to Ottawa to shoot the half-hour CBC film *Old Country*, which describes the animosity that developed between Poles and Jews the day after the war started. It's **Kaeja d'Dance**'s sixth film and second half-hour film for television.

While Ms. Gladstone truly admires the Kaejas' talent and energy, what astounds her most is their togetherness. "They are married and they live together and they work out of the home – it's just all the time, it's a constant," she says. "They're able to cope with never-ending layers of work yet the final product is quite astounding."

But Karen and Allen wouldn't have it any other way. Togetherness is what makes them tick, and it's one of the reasons why they rarely travel without their two daughters in tow. At the end of August they're all off to Halifax, where Karen and Allen have been commissioned to create a work for a young company called Mocean that was founded by a former **Kd'D2** dancer.

"Karen is my muse," says Allen, who hopes one day to choreograph a musical. "She's a massive inspiration to me. She's a brilliant mover and a brilliant interpreter who can add a wealth of life to any intonation or movement. She has the ability to add fullness and richness to my choreographic language and sensibility. When you work with brilliance, you create work of similar caliber. She's my creative collaborator in so many ways."

Adds Karen: "Our whole life is devoted to dance. And I feel very lucky to be doing what I'm doing and to take my family with me."