

Behind the scenes of *Stars on Ice*

The making of the world's premier ice show

BY AMY E. TUCKER

Stars on Ice "Double Exposure: The Many Lives of Figure Skaters" takes the ice at the Times Union Center (formerly the Pepsi Arena) Thursday, March 8 at 7pm. Last year's theme featured a "show about the show" to celebrate their 20th year. This year, the audience gets "up close and personal" with vignettes into the private, off-ice lives of the cast.

The brain-child of figure skating icon, and the show's producer, Scott Hamilton, "Stars" runs like a well-oiled machine under the guidance of seasoned veteran's Christopher Dean, choreographer and former co-producer, and Jef Billings, costume designer and director. The show comes together each November in Lake Placid, N.Y., in a record two-week's time.

"I get a week of lighting [time] before we rehearse," said Canadian lighting designer Errol Reinhart, whose company, Hungry at Dawn, has been handling the lighting for the last three tours. "My friends who work on Broadway are 'gob-smacked' [shocked]! A normal Broadway production takes six weeks."

It works because the off-ice precision is as choreographed as that of the skaters on the ice. It has to, because everyone involved is busy handling multiple projects.

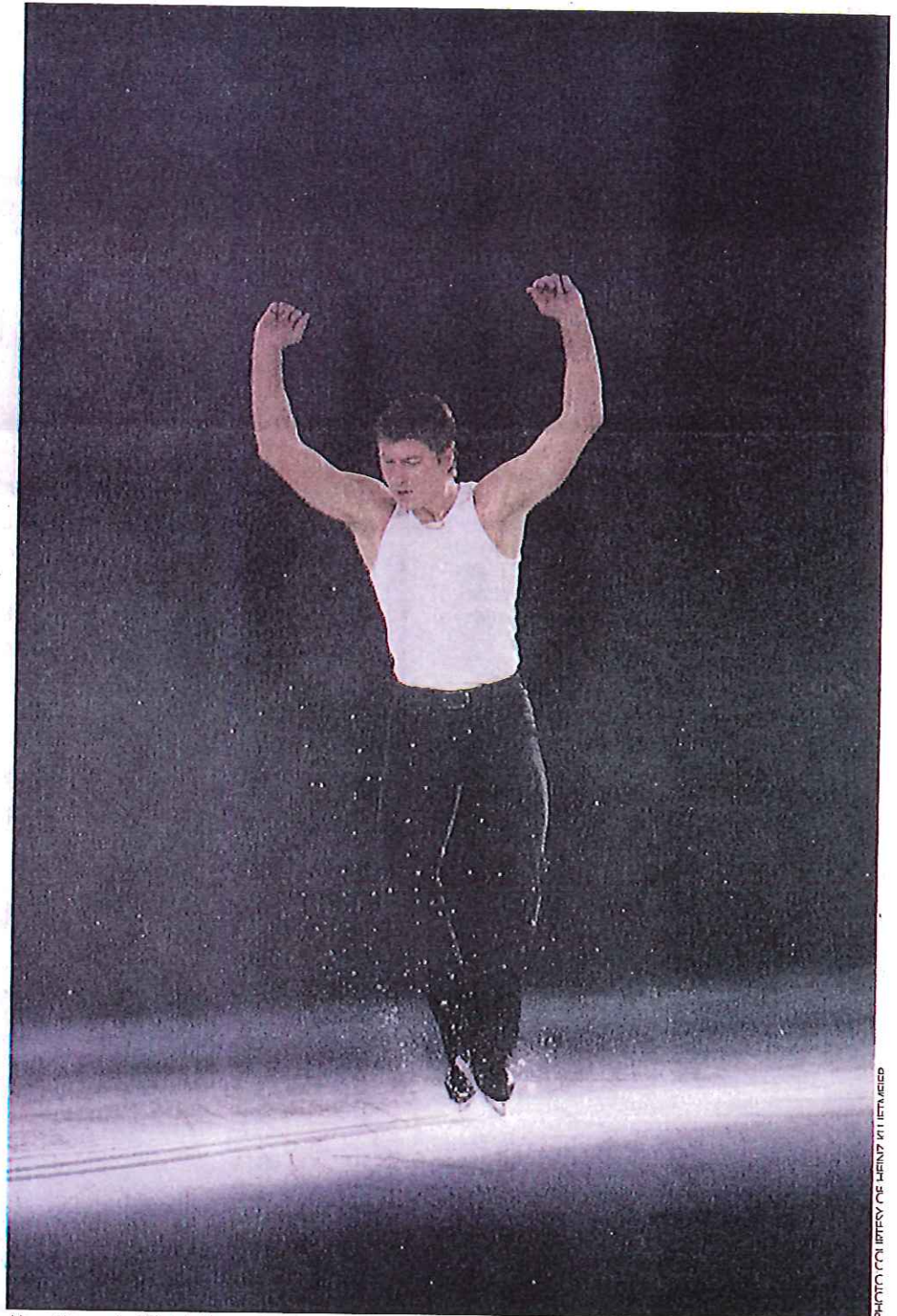
British ice dancer Christopher Dean has been involved with "Stars" for more than a decade. Having passed the director's hat to Billings, Dean focuses primarily on choreographing the group numbers with co-choreographer Cindy Stuart—a process that takes about 10 days.

But, his pet project for the last two years has been producing "Dancing on Ice", a live-action competition fashioned after "Skating with Celebrities", which airs in the UK and Australia. The first season in January 2005 drew a large viewing audience in the UK and spawned what Dean describes as a resurgence of the sport in the UK.

"Network TV is obviously not buying into professional competitions as a staple diet," Dean explained. "So, [skating] may stay alive through reality and web-based viewing vs. network viewing. We have all of these seasonal rinks that open up during Christmas time that, because of the popularity of the show, stayed busy all winter."

Technology has also enhanced the show's on-ice and behind the scenes production. Last year, "Stars" incorporated video-screened narration and clips from the last two decades of the show—a trend they've stepped up a notch for this year's tour.

"It's a great tool for connecting the skating and assisting with storytelling," Dean continued, "but, you



Alexei Yagudin, World Champion

**Smucker's Stars on Ice
Times Union Center
Thursday, March 8, 7pm**

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have to balance it so that it's not repetition all the time bouncing between the screens and the show."

Billings, who has been involved with the show since its inception, designing costumes for individual skaters like Dorothy Hamill and Kristi Yamaguchi, is in his 12th year of designing costumes for "Stars" and his fourth year involved with directing and producing the show. But, though technology pervades how the show is produced, when it comes to designing, he still creates freehand.

"To design on the computer, you need to know what you're doing beforehand," he said. "I tend to sketch, starting with the neckline, then I might add straps. I've been known to put a design on a piece of scrap paper or a napkin."

When he's designing for a male skater who is wearing basic trousers, he'll often only sketch the shirt. When designing for private or new clients, however, he typically produces detailed, color sketches resembling the finished design. Similarly, if a costume is going to be worked on by different people, he'll make a detailed sketch so the pattern maker, dyer and beader all know what they're doing.

In recent years, instead of televising the entire debut in Lake Placid, "Stars" has focused on highlighting a few performances and "teasing" the show's theme with vignettes of the skaters and behind the scene footage. For Billings, this has removed a lot of stress from opening night.

"Lake Placid is always our first performance, so there's enough pressure," Billings said. "I approach it from a live standpoint, even though we're not airing the entire production. Most of the rules that apply to TV, apply to basic, good design principles. For example, I wouldn't use brown on TV, or in a live show, because it's difficult to light."

The lighting industry has also been vastly changed by technology. Five years ago, more than 200 instruments projected and controlled the patterns on the ice. Now, the entire process uses only 32 lights.

"The big challenge with lighting 'Stars' is that we're lighting a blank canvass of 15,000 square feet," said Reinhart. "Moving lights aren't new, but the technology that's available is exciting. We call them 'intelligent lights' and it's quite something to see what they can do."

Reinhart's crew works at night, using videotaped performances. Typically, he'll start with the music, but he likes trying different things like using blues and lavenders for a quick Latin number instead of the typical reds, oranges and yellows. Sometimes he'll even roll a rack of costumes onto the ice to see the finished product.

"You need to make sure there's enough light when the skaters are jumping, regardless of the music," Reinhart explained. "If there's a big drop in the music, you can't darken the ice like you would at a rock concert."



Kurt Browning Four-Time World Champion

PHOTO COURTESY OF ANDREA CHEWINSKI

Many numbers are lit specifically to work with the fabric being worn. "Ladies in Lavender" features the solo women in the show and the costumes actually change color depending on the light shone on them.

"Jef does some beautiful things with material that is specifically designed to take light," Reinhart commented. "In one of Todd Eldredge's numbers, he's wearing a costume with little flecks of color and Jef asked me to light it to draw attention to that at the end of his program."

"Working with Scott, Chris and Jef is amazing because they'll come in and say a few words, and take you down a whole different path creatively than when you first listened to the music," he said.

Joining the cast for the Albany show are special guest stars Angela Nikodinov and Kurt Browning. Musical selections include everything from Trace Adkins, the Goo Goo Dolls and Lonestar to Joni Mitchell,

Yolanda Adams and the Superman Soundtrack.

"It's a great mix of music," said Billings. "It was particularly fun pulling it together because it's about the kids. They've really embraced the show and taken ownership of it because it's about them."


The skaters are also really breaking out of their comfort zones this season. Husband and wife pairs' skaters Yuka Sato and Jason Dundjen will perform an ice dance number; and Steven Cousins and Todd Eldredge are switching styles with Cousins skating to an emotional ballad and Eldredge performing to contemporary rock.

"At the end of the day we want people to feel they've really watched Olympic and World champion skaters really skate," said Billings.

Amy E. Tucker has been contributing to local and national publications for more than a decade. She resides in Clifton Park, NY.

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