

Famous Swiss abroad : a dance step for Stéphane Prince

Autor(en): **Grobéty, Anne-Lise**

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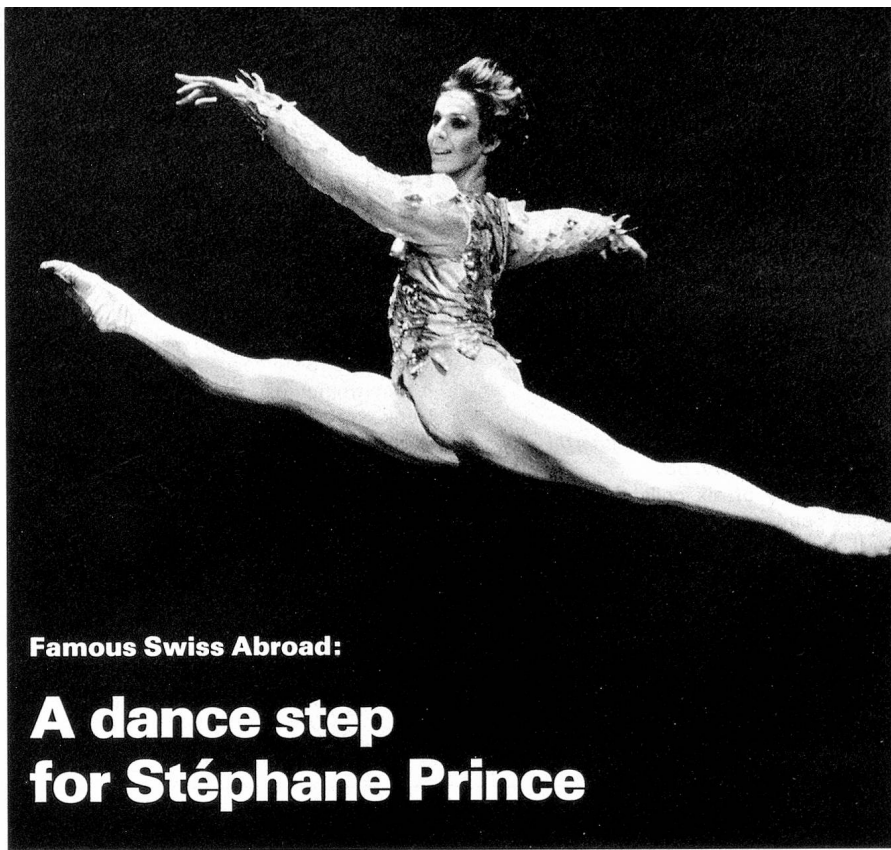
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Famous Swiss Abroad:

A dance step for Stéphane Prince

For Stéphane Prince a cavalcade has wound its way between his birthplace and Paris – albeit a very logical kind of pilgrim's progress. La Chaux-de-Fonds, winter country... «When I was four, my parents took me to see a skating exhibition and I loved it. At home it was normal either to go skiing, or to play icehockey or skate – all the more so since the town had a rather fine icerink, for that time. So I chose the skates.»

And with a very special kind of tenacity, let it be said, for he was to don skates for more than ten years, taking part in very many competitions, and some Swiss championships. Logic enters again: to skate well you have to be able to dance. And, here, it was a happy encounter with a teacher of real ability, Achille Markov, which led him and several other pupils to the threshold of a life as a professional dancer. But health problems, an injured knee, made him seek the sun.

Once again, the point of landing was not due entirely to chance: Cannes, because just there was to be found Rosella Hightower's

Centre International de Danse. And matters did not exactly drag: within two years he was ready to face the thenceforth famous *Concours International pour Jeunes Danseurs* of Lausanne. No problem for Stéphane Prince, who won the Prix de Lausanne and obtained a grant for a year's training at the school of dancing of the Opéra de Paris.

Hardly arrived, at the age of sixteen, the young Neuchâtelois saw that the *corps de ballet* of the Opéra was looking for trainees. He passed the audition (*pourquoi pas?*) and was taken on. He went on quickly to climb the rungs of the *corps de ballet* ladder by successfully passing the examinations for *quadrille*, *coryphée* and *sujet* grades of the hierarchical order of the Opéra's *corps de ballet*. Because they are rare, positions as principal dancer are still very avidly sought after, but Stéphane Prince sailed round this headland at the beginning of 1982.

Thus, for four years he has been leading the very strict life of a principal dancer. «In fact, I work

all the time. In the morning there are the courses at the *Ecole de Danse* and, in the afternoon, rehearsals for the shows – on a basis of four hours only if there is a performance in the evening or, if not, for six hours at a time. Six days out of seven – indeed, even seven out of seven when we are on tour outside Paris».

Yet this discipline linked to the practice of the dance is hardly a burden to him. «At 25, one can go on progressing technically. It is enough not to lose one's motivation. But one mustn't forget that time presses: at 30, 32, many things are definitely played out. At my age, though, there is still something to be won...»

The title of star dancer? Of course, it is the last stage everyone aims at. Over and above the financial advantages, the star gets more permissions to dance outside the house. «What changes, above all, is the organization of his life. When the star has no important role to dance no one troubles him, but we dance all the year round – important role or not.»

But Stéphane Prince knows that this last rung will be difficult to climb. Here, it is no longer competition that counts. Should there be a place free, nomination is made by the management on the proposals of the director of dancing. And the fact of his being Swiss no doubt handicaps Stéphane Prince in a company of ballet-dancers where the regulations prohibit the employment of more than one-third of foreigners. «Star..., that depends on such a lot of things – it is not always so easy to know on just what...».

Does it matter all that much? What counts – for the hour in life – is to dance and to dance well. «Yes, when all is said and done, dancing is my life for the moment, and it's been my life for a very long time...».

●
Anne-Lise Grobéty