

# A retired *prima* *ballerina*

At age 40, Rachel Rufer no longer dances. A hip injury has forced her to recognize her body's limits. Her spirit, on the other hand, knows no limits. Principal dancer for Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal for nearly a decade, she has reluctantly hung up her ballet slippers. Portrait of an inspiring woman who has shifted from one dream to the next.

By Annie Boutet

Passions are often born in childhood. This is certainly true for Swiss-born Rachel Rufer, whose mother—a lover of dance—sowed the first seeds by enrolling her at a young age in early movement classes and then ballet classes. “My mother exposed me to the dance community and, slowly, the dance community captured my heart,” she says.

## A principal dancer's first steps

An international dance competition in Lausanne provided the spark. Listening to the music and seeing the young girls under

the little ballerina felt right at home. Her path seemed marked out in advance. “It's easy to believe in yourself when doors just keep on opening,” she says.

After studying dance in Geneva, she was selected at age 15 by the Opéra de Paris, where she worked for eight years. The company's strict hierarchy, however, interfered with her aspirations. So she flew to the United States to join the San Francisco Ballet. But the American culture, reflected in the choice of repertoire, failed to inspire her. “I had classical training but at the same time an affinity for modern dance. I was looking for a company that could offer me both. I also wanted a director who would believe in me and help me flourish,” she stresses.

— Rachel Rufer

the stage lights, Rachel already imagined herself up there; and before long her dream came true. The first time on stage,

American mentality of “everything is possible.” A balanced environment for living and developing artistically. Rachel Rufer

arrived with two suitcases and a contract in hand. It was a decision that enabled her to continue developing her talent, and she was promoted to principal dancer as of her second season in 2002. “And of course I fell in love with Montréal,” she admits.

## Backstage

Rachel's career sounds like a fairytale for aspiring dancers. However, daily life for most ballerinas is not always easy. At least that is the stereotype about classical ballet, especially about the rivalry among dancers for a position as soloist.

After seeing several ballet companies from the inside, Rachel says that each company is different and depends on the mentality of the director. At Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, with its 35 dancers, the concept of family has real meaning. “It is important to Gradimir that the dancers get along with each other. He has really tried to bring out the talent in each of us,” explains Rachel. “Do we really need to compete with each other in order to stay motivated, or can we not take inspiration from the talent of others? I loved working in that tension-free kind of atmosphere. Personally, I don't think rivalry is healthy.”

Photo: eventus7





Rachel Rufer  
Principal dancer for  
Les Grands Ballets Canadiens  
de Montréal for nearly  
a decade

From the first time she danced on point at age 10 till her spectacular leaps as prima ballerina, the work was relentlessly demanding on her body. You have to fit the mould because ballet requires certain physical characteristics. “The parts

**“Through dance I have come to believe that it is possible to realize one’s dreams.”**

— Rachel Rufer

of ballet that give the illusion of flight require long legs and a slender silhouette. Everything is codified because we follow a strict tradition,” the ballerina observes. However, beauty and grace have their privileges, as Rachel Rufer has modelled for—and inspired—fashion designer Antonio Ortega and acted as an ambassador for Delance watches.

Mastering her art and her body took tremendous effort. Dancers generally reach

this point at around age 30. Ballet then becomes a powerful vehicle for expressing emotions. Rachel Rufer believes that experiencing emotions allows you to liberate them and thus feel free yourself. However, self expression comes with maturity.

“We are constantly striving to master our technique, but we also have a life apart from our work. Our life experience enriches our art. I think great artists have the capacity to draw on the outside world to create something original of their own.”

#### **Dancing to another beat**

Rachel’s injury hastened her decision to leave Les Grands Ballets. This was a decision that required her to let go in order to find peace of mind. “We are high level athletes. An entire lifestyle goes with this profession,” Rachel explains. “Since I was very little, I have generated hormones in my body every day through physical exercise. After my injury I have had to adapt physically because I still have a tremendous need to be active. There is also a type of spiritual grieving, because dance is a form of spirituality for me.”

Of course such a transition makes you reflect deeply about your life. Looking back you realize everything you have sacrificed for dance, to the point of narrowing your horizons. “As long as you are fulfilled by dance, you are not aware of everything you are giving up. When you lose the balance in your life, you ask yourself if it’s still worth it. Everyone has to answer that question for themselves. I answered no,” says Rachel.

Today Rachel has the freedom to revive her early passions for painting, drawing, travelling, skiing, rock climbing, and more. A lot of drive and talent had been shelved so she could achieve her dream. Life has now taken on a broader dimension.

She wants to shape the rest of her career based on what she learnt from dance. “When I was a child, I wanted to be on stage, and I did everything I could to succeed. At the same time I was wise enough to adapt my dream as I went along. I wanted to be prima ballerina at the Opéra de Paris, but when I saw that that was not going to happen, I was able to adapt my dream to my reality. Through dance I have come to believe that it is possible to realize one’s dreams.”

Over the years she has accepted with open arms everything life has offered. That’s why she is happy about this change in her life. “My injury has allowed me to take another path. Something is surely awaiting me further down the line, something that will be important for me to do.” Rachel believes that following her inner dance remains the greatest gift she can offer herself. ■