

# Veronica Tennant: Ballerina as Authoress

HEATHER AKIN

*On Stage, Please*, Veronica Tennant. Illustrated by Rita Briansky, McClelland & Stewart, 1977. 176 pp. \$6.95 hardcover.

Veronica Tennant's first book, *On Stage, Please*, portrays a world with which she is intimately familiar—that of the professional ballerina. In this lively piece of fiction she provides a good look at the always demanding but sometimes magical vocation which so attracts her young heroine, Jennifer Allen. Children in the eight to twelve year range will be especially interested in ten-year-old Jennifer's story, and those who have become involved in the dance will dream along with her about success in a professional ballet company.

Tennant's narrative focuses on a young English girl, newly arrived in Sault Ste. Marie, whose burning ambition is to be a dancer someday. While she and her family become accustomed to Canadian life Jennifer makes initial contact with dance, through Gustavo Vincent, a ballet teacher. He turns out to be a charlatan whose methods are potentially crippling. Jennifer does not know where to turn until a neighbour tells her about the Professional School she attends in Toronto which provides the best training in Canada.

With Jennifer we move through the various stages one must pass in order to gain entrance into this most coveted dance school. At the audition Jennifer must pass muster with the head-mistress who assesses her ability to "keep up" academically. The school nurse tests and vouches for Jennifer's circulatory system and musculature. The most grueling examination, however, occurs when the little girl meets the dance teachers, including Madame Rose, the head instructor, and is examined for flexibility, rhythm and natural aptitude. Fortunately, she is one of the few chosen from several aspiring applicants and enters the Toronto school in the September term.

Miss Tennant does a thorough job providing us with an understanding of the daily routine which the young ballet student must follow. She emphasizes the rigour of everyday studies and the self-discipline needed on the part of the pupils. Jennifer's day begins with a Spartan breakfast, then moves quickly through academic Grade Five classes into the demanding hours of ballet training. The author clearly explains the various features of a ballet dancer's technique as these are revealed to Jennifer; thus the novel assumes an instructional aspect as well as an entertaining one.

The plot pattern is carefully structured to provide variety and reader interest. Tennant intersperses items of "high-intensity" involving the glamorous side of the ballet world with "low-intensity" events dealing with the reality of long practice sessions, injuries, disappointments and homesickness. Clearly, the author's goal is to make the reader aware that the ballet dancer

is continually moving through two levels of experience—that of the dramatic and fantastic and that of hard, sometimes painful dedication.

The most exciting moments in the novel occur when Jennifer visits Smith's Theatrical Supplies, is chosen for a part in the Christmas production of "Cinderella", and actually performs at the Grand Theatre in front of her parents. Readers will enjoy these "backstage views" of a world which the average child does not experience.

The characterization of Jennifer is well-rounded. She is no little prig but a real child who has problems over her "funny accent", who occasionally stuffs herself with a dozen doughnuts after a strenuous ballet class, and who reads with a flashlight under covers because her routine leaves her no other time.

Tennant carefully delineates Jennifer's growth in perception and sensitivity during her months in ballet training. In one instance a visiting professional dancer takes a class with her and "for the first time since coming to school, Jennifer began to comprehend why she was being forced to learn correct ballet technique." Another time Jennifer is injured in a fall and learns how much she has taken for granted her ability to run, skip and jump; when she recovers how much more she appreciates her physical abilities! A third occurrence demonstrates Jennifer's mature compassion toward friend Emily who misses out on a role in Cinderella.

The structure of *On Stage, Please* is a relatively simple one: one hundred and seventy-six pages divided into three parts. The initial segment covers Jennifer's winter arrival in Canada and ends with her Toronto audition in May. Part Two covers the time from September to November at the ballet school and the third section portrays the rehearsals for, and participation in, "Cinderella" at Christmas.

Tennant's style is appropriate for the young reader and is notable for detailed physical description. Occasionally, it seems short, however, in the provision of colour, depth and texture. Clearly, more could have been conveyed in the following example:

At Smith's Theatrical Supplies, Jennifer's dazzled eyes took in wigs, moustaches, masks, noses, top hats and batons. There were outfits for clowns, policemen, dwarfs and duchesses.

The book itself is a well-bound hardcover edition containing large easy-to-read print. Every dozen pages or so Rita Briansky, the illustrator, has created a lively pen and ink drawing of some important events in Jennifer's journey along her chosen path. The cover drawing, unfortunately, is fashioned in a rather odd mix of greys and blues and is surrounded by a border of overpowering mustard hue on which is superimposed a fire engine red title. The small, grey, gothic faces of the little girls at the barre project a sense of unhappiness rather than dedication.

Veronica Tennant's topic is not a new one, for the universal theme of a young dancer's dream of success has been explored by other authors. Three that come to mind are Alberta Armer, author of *The World of Molly O.*, Jill Krementz, whose *A Very Young Dancer*, is really a photographic essay, and Briton Noel Streat, whose popular *Ballet Shoes* was made into an equally popular movie.

Tennant's handling of the theme is effective. She consistently provides a realistic and entertaining account of the glamour and drudgery in the life of a fledgling ballerina. That her book succeeds is evident from the comment of an eleven-year-old of my acquaintance who not only reported that Jennifer's story was interesting, but also went back to read the book four more times!

*Heather Akin teaches Canadian literature and other subjects at GCVI in Guelph, Ontario.*

## Beware of the Wolf!

MARY FORD

*Wolves and Wilderness*, John B. Theberge. Illustrated by Mary Theberge, J.M. Dent and Sons, 1975. 159 pp. \$4.95 paper.

This book looks attractive and tempting. The cover is a bold green, and in large white type it declares: *Wolves and Wilderness*. Occupying more than half of the front cover is a marvelous color photograph by Dr. D. Pimlott (University of Toronto biologist) of an adult wolf and pup standing at the edge of a pond. The rear cover proclaims: "This is the true book of the wolf, the most controversial of North American wild animals." In a period when it is popular to be a wolf fancier, when five thousand people annually take part in the Algonquin Park "wolf howl-ins," when one risks physical abuse by wearing a wolf-lined hood, a book of such attractive proportions is certain to tempt. But beware.

The publishers have been less than honest in the expectations which are raised by the covers because this is not a book which is primarily concerned with wolves. It is rather more like that literary mystery—"gleanings from the notebook. . ." Unlike R.M. Lockley's *The Private Life of the Rabbit*, which skilfully weaves scientific detail into an exciting narrative story of the rabbit, Theberge's book lacks unity, and it is difficult to determine its audience. It is obviously not an adventure story; nor, in fact, is it a scientific book which would necessarily interest a child. The author's tired prose would probably put a child to sleep; he might never read again.