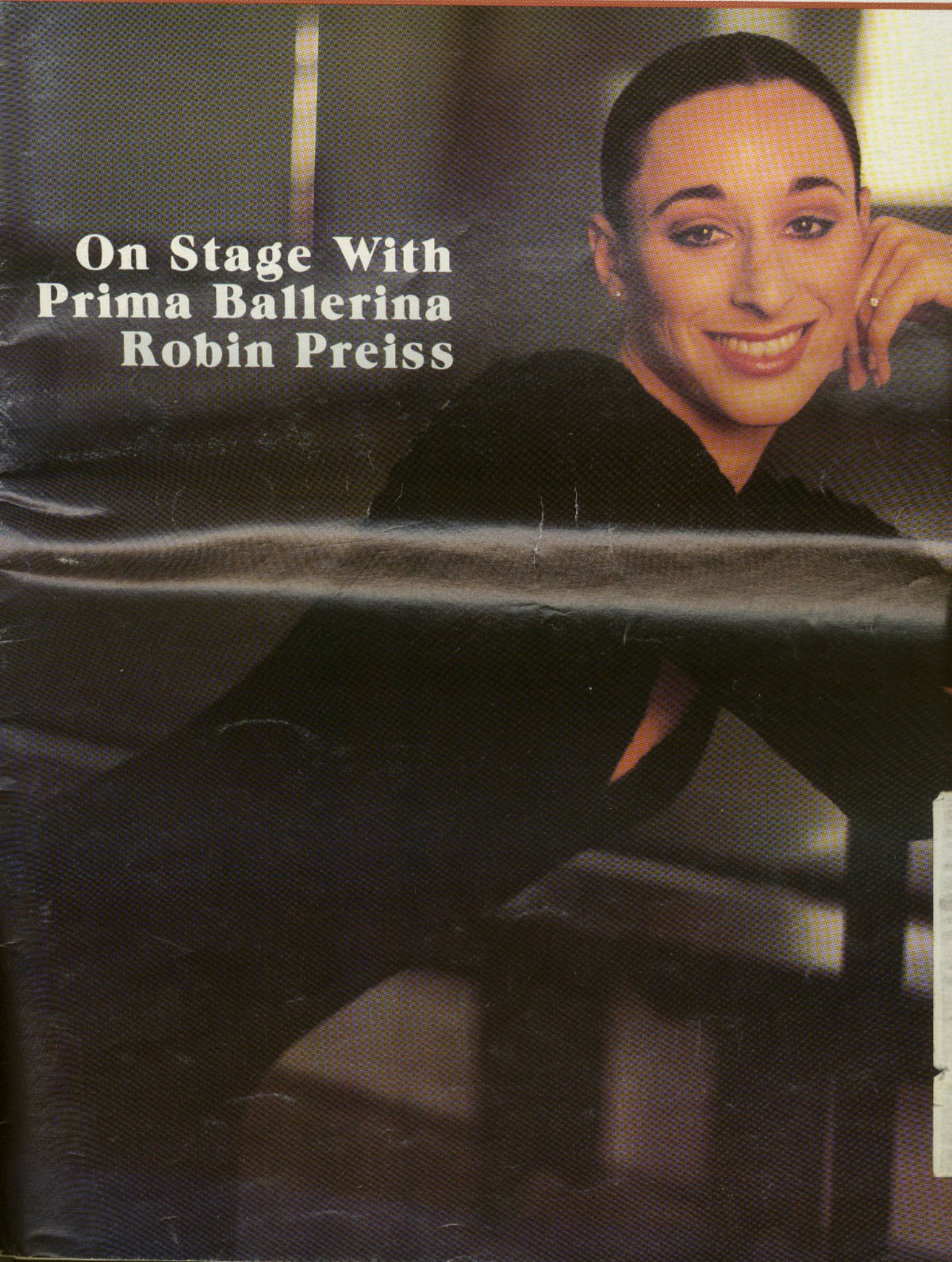


MARCH 1983 TWO DOLLARS

Rendezvous

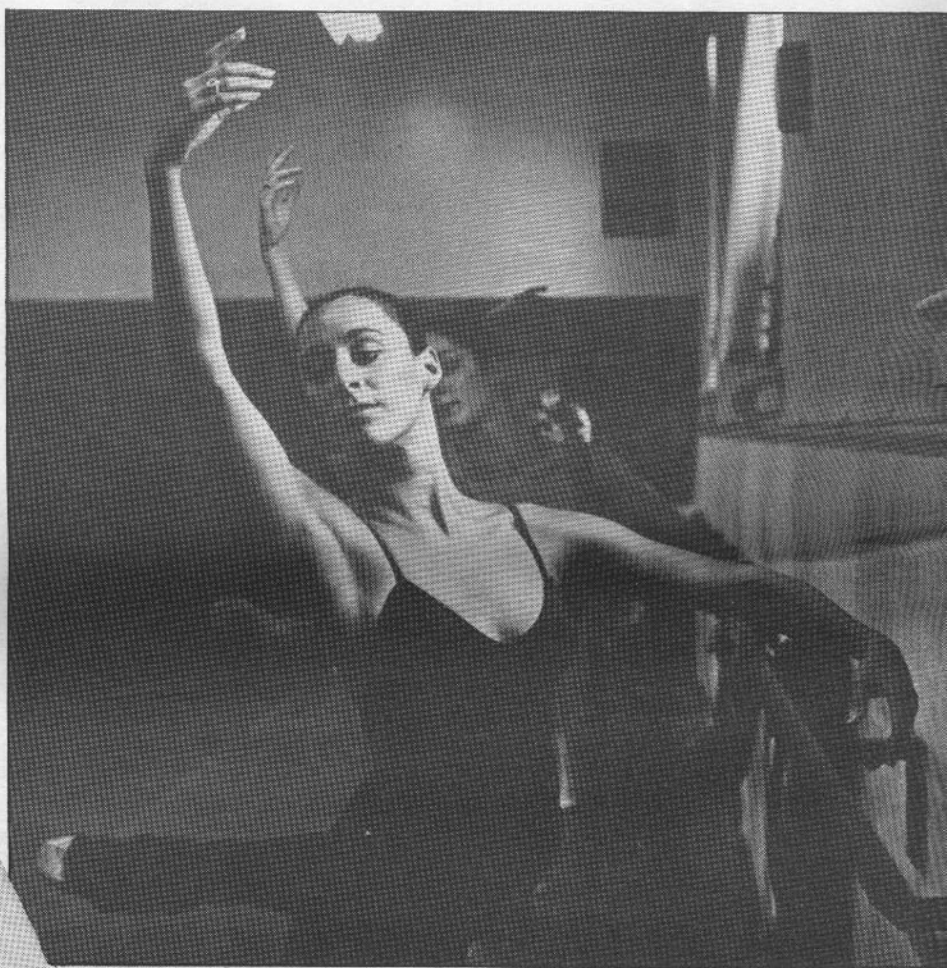
THE MAGAZINE FOR SOUTH BAY PEOPLE

**On Stage With
Prima Ballerina
Robin Preiss**



Robin Preiss:

ffects an art form
dances her way
op



Photos: David Crow

by Carol Child

“After a performance, you immediately tear everything off, jump in the shower, put on your jeans and sweatshirt, and go out and have a beer and eat a lot.”

That's how Robin Preiss, 26, principal dancer with the Pennsylvania Ballet, unwinds after performing a major role such as the white girl in *Carmina Burana*, a spellbinding, dramatic, hour-long ballet choreographed by John Butler to the music of Carol Orff. But all too soon, the post-performance party is over and the hard work begins again.

“We're in class at nine the next morn-

ing, doing all the *plies*. That's the part that always gets me,” she says. “That's really what dancing is all about — it's the work, the rehearsals, the classes and every day trying to do things a little better.”

Vivaldi's music for lute and mandolin plays gently on the stereo. The sound of waves dancing on the shore is lifted on the breeze through an open window. Art work, rugs and furnishings make great splashes of orange, yellow, red and black, creating drama and warmth in the airy Redondo Beach residence Preiss shares with her husband, actor Kai Wulff. Wulff is successful in his own right, performing in the Broadway production of *Equus*, the Clint Eastwood movie *Firefox* and many television productions.

Even as a child, Preiss' discipline and exceptional abilities were evident and encouraged by her parents. "My parents were always very supportive," she recalls. "My mother has a deep love for anything cultural. My three sisters and I took lessons in ballet, piano, flute, guitar, drawing, you name it. We went to museums and to the opera, and we had all the musicals on record at home." She achieved high grades in school, won scholarships in art and dance, and was chosen for the leads in all the performances. At age 15, with the help of her teachers, Madame Seda and Tom Adair (Adair is a former soloist with the American Ballet Theater), she left her hometown of Poughkeepsie, N.Y. and joined the 12-member scholarship class of the American Ballet Theater School. At the same time, she danced with the Eglevsky Ballet and attended the Professional Children's School. She also took life drawing classes and immersed herself in the art student scene.

"New York is a rat race," says Preiss. "You feel like a commodity. Auditions are cattle calls. They look at your body and can tell how professional you are."

'That's what dance is all about — the work, the classes, and every day trying to do things a little better.'

"When the Stuttgart Company came to New York and held auditions at the Metropolitan Opera House, 700 dancers showed up. We all stood in line, and before we could do anything, they said, 'Thank you, thank you, thank you, stay...' until the 200 who remained got to do *barre*. When it was over, one girl and one boy were picked, both from my scholarship class."

At 18, Preiss visited Israel. There she joined the Israel Classical Ballet Company, at the same time as the Panovs, who defected from Russia. Benjamin Harkavy, then artistic director of the Pennsylvania Ballet, happened to be vacationing there and saw Preiss dance. He asked her to join his company. "It was a very fateful meeting," she says. "I felt like this was somebody I'd been waiting for all my life." That was in 1975, and Preiss has remained there ever since.

"I do mostly dramatic roles," she says. "That's what I like to do. I don't like the technical stuff, where you just do a bunch of steps strung together."

"The technique of dancing has evolved to where it's so acrobatic that dancers have to be able to do a lot of tricks. That's because Baryshnikov came over and could do them all and he's exciting. But I have a very strong expressive quality, and I've turned into that kind of dancer."

Preiss' life as a dancer in Philadelphia is a complete contrast to her life in Redondo. Here she relaxes and enjoys the anonymity of being a homemaker and wife. There she is well-known and is often stop-

ped by autograph seekers as she walks about the city. Her days are long — an hour-and-a-half of classes, then six hours of rehearsal.

"The performances are very few and very short and over quickly," says Preiss. "Being on stage is certainly not glamorous to us. It's work, with all that junk on our faces, the costumes that are too tight and uncomfortable, the feet with blisters, the holes in the tights, dancing with a boy who is so dripping with sweat that we very often slip off each other when we're doing a *pas de deux*."

"It's not what you'd call glamor: the smell on the stage, the lights so hot that you're dripping — besides dripping from the concentration on what you're doing out there — the embarrassment when at least four times during the performance you make a mistake. Even if nobody saw it, you feel horrified. The glamor is in the eye of the beholder, the people in the audience who find the whole thing so sparkling and exciting and different."

"When it's over, you mostly think about all the things you did wrong. When the curtain comes down, the dancers are cursing and sitting on the floor rubbing their sore feet, ankles, legs and torn ligaments. Or else they're stamping around in their dressing rooms, screaming and throwing things. Then there's the occasion when somebody might be sitting in a corner and smiling because they had a good time. That's the rare part, I suppose."

"People come backstage afterwards and there are three or four dancers on the stage still dancing, still working on what they messed up that night. That's the part I love. Gelsey Kirkland was notorious for spending the night in the theater after a performance that she didn't like, literally working herself for hours and then sleeping there on the floor or on the stage after it was over."

Because company layoffs are frequent, Preiss gets to spend a lot of time at her Redondo home. Most companies regularly lay off dancers to save money and stay within their budget. The Pennsylvania Ballet's annual shoe bill alone comes to \$25,000.

At home, Preiss loves to cook and entertain and is now completing the drawings for her delightful book, *The Do's and Don't's of Ballet for Children*. But she can never stray far from ballet. Every day a dancer doesn't practice, another day's work is required to get back into shape. So Preiss takes a daily ballet class at the Lauridsen Ballet Centre in Torrance. "It's important to have excellent training," she says. "One year of bad training can ruin your chances completely."

"Diane Lauridsen (a former professional dancer) has given me a lot. What she does with the young students in her classes is as close to a professional school as I've ever seen."

Preiss says she'll continue to dance as long as she finds it fulfilling and as long as her body holds out. She's injured almost every part, and when it rains she feels pain on all sides. But even if she should retire from ballet, she'll remain active. She has other books and some Christmas cards in the works and someday wants to open a restaurant, so Preiss will still have a number of spotlights in which to dance.