

Lois Smith's "Burnaby's Best Baby" Trophy

Former National Ballet of Canada principal dancer Lois Smith was born in Burnaby, British Columbia, on October 8, 1929. At the age of eleven months, Smith was entered into a contest sponsored by *The Burnaby Broadcast* newspaper and organized by the Victorian Order of Nurses. Her mother described her as a "roly poly" baby. Along with seventy-four other baby contestants under a year old, Smith was examined by doctors. In her memoir, she writes, "Most of the babies were crying – all were naked; I evidently did not cry." Parents and babies gathered in a local movie house where the prize, the silver trophy that is our artifact of the month, would be presented. Smith was one of five finalists and when she was announced as the winner, her father rose and took a sedate bow. After feeding her daughter breast milk exclusively, perhaps it is Lois' mother who should have taken the bow.

I'm Amy Bowring, Director of Collections and Research at Dance Collection Danse. Welcome to our second installment of Artifact of the Month. This silver cup is adhered to a wooden pedestal and stands 17cm high. At some point, the cup must have been crushed and has lost some of its height at the base of the silver portion. It has been engraved at the topmost section with the words "The Broadcast". Below the first decorative ridge, the engraving reads, "Burnaby's Best Baby Contest 1930 Awarded to Lois Smith". Smith's first moment in the spotlight was hardly her last. By the mid-1950s, thanks to nation-wide tours with The National Ballet of Canada and television spots on CBC, Smith and her husband, dancer David Adams, were household names.

Though Lois danced at playtime with some of her childhood friends who were taking dance classes, the Smith family could not afford lessons for her. Instead, her father taught her some gymnastics, how to stretch her legs and point her feet. At age ten, Smith was accepted into the BC School of Dancing run by Dorothy Wilson. Teachers at the school were astonished that she had no previous training. She recalls doing her first recital at the Strand Theatre on Georgia Street and, after the performance, she refused to take off her make-up and costume until she had walked to her grandmother's house to show her. Classes were paid for by her brother Bill who worked at a shoe factory; however, before the next season of classes began, Bill Smith lost his job and there was no extra money for Lois's dance lessons.

Five years passed before the Smiths were able to afford lessons again. In the meantime, Lois Smith picked up useful skills such as cutting hair and sewing. Because money was tight during her years as a professional dancer, Smith usually made her own cocktail dresses and gowns for opening night receptions – there was no way she could afford to buy such items and yet she was expected to dress up for such occasions.

Smith's next bout of training was under the tutelage of Rosemary Deveson, a Vancouverite who had danced with Col. de Basil's Ballets Russes in the late 1930s. Deveson was astonished that Smith had only ever had one year of training and told Smith's mother that her daughter had the makings of a professional dancer. At age fifteen, Smith quit school and trained in ballet full time. She would leave home at 8:30 in the morning and return about thirteen hours later, sometimes popping out for a quick dinner at her grandmother's house. Like many ballet dancers in training, the students were not allowed chocolates, donuts or other fattening foods. Smith writes in her memoir about their sneaky tactics for smuggling such foods into the studio: "... as we got off the elevator, we would hide anything we shouldn't have, especially chocolates, in a drawer in a piece of furniture across from the elevator." They no doubt gathered their loot at the end of the day.

As her training progressed, she began to do performances such as revues at the Hotel Vancouver and divertissements between movies at the Orpheum Theatre. Dancing in musicals at Theatre Under the Stars in the Malkin Bowl at Stanley Park soon followed. She and her dancing friends also continued to train and to see as many of the touring companies as they could such as Alicia Markova and Anton Dolin, Ballet Theatre, the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, Carmen Amaya and Katherine Dunham. And they snuck in whenever they could; Smith writes, "We went in the back way whenever it was possible. If you look like a dancer and have a dance bag to carry, you could look like a member of the company."

Smith continued to perform with Theatre Under the Stars for a number of seasons and was also engaged by the Los Angeles Civic Light Opera. Her first gig there was in the touring company of *Song of Norway* choreographed by George Balanchine of New York City Ballet fame. The ballet master for the tour was a young man named Matt Mattox who would go on to become a seminal figure in the development of jazz dance. Also mixed in with these jobs were shows at the annual Pacific National Exhibition and an American tour of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*. In the summer of 1949, during one of her summers back in Vancouver, Smith met a handsome twenty-year-old dancer named David Adams. She records the moment as love at first sight. That summer, they partnered in the production of *Song of Norway* at Theatre Under the Stars. On May 13, 1950, while working for the Los Angeles Civic Light Opera, the two married and a daughter was born in the spring of 1951. When The National Ballet of Canada formed in the fall of 1951, Adams and Smith were charter members and soon became known across the country as Canada's premier ballet couple. Smith danced with the National Ballet until 1969. She then opened her own school and later helped to found the dance program at George Brown College in 1975. When she left the college in 1988, she returned to her home province of British Columbia where she taught and adjudicated dance festivals while also becoming skilled as a stained-glass artist. Lois Smith made an indelible mark on many Canadians through her performances and she inspired numerous young dancers over a period of several decades. A generous teacher and a consummate artist, she will be remembered by many.

When Lois Smith passed away in 2011, she left a bequest to Dance Collection Danse, which now forms the seed of a fund that will eventually help us to move and expand our headquarters and open an exhibition space. She also left her extensive archival collection of papers, programs, photographs and some of her hand-made gowns and cocktail dresses.

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