

DANCE

One Ice, With Trumpets and Twyla Tharp

By GIA KOURLAS

MASTERING movement has never been a problem for Keith Roberts, a dancer who sets Twyla Tharp works for companies worldwide. But when Mr. Roberts received a new assignment — coaching the figure skater David Liu in “After All,” an ice dance by Ms. Tharp — he was severely rattled.

“As far as I ice-skate, it’s with dear friends of mine at their house in New Jersey when their lake freezes over, and we put on skates, crush a beer can, grab some sticks and play hockey,” he said. “Twyla told me: ‘All you have to know is inside edge or outside edge. And then just make it look good.’”

Ms. Tharp, with characteristic bluntness, nailed it. “After All,” choreographed for the impeccable British skater John Curry in 1976, is a luminous study of edge work, in which a skater’s shifting weight emphasizes inner and outer edges. In the work the blade carves snaky patterns across the ice with such fluidity that the effect is like a stream of water rushing along.

This week, as part of Ice Theater of New York’s season at Sky Rink at Chelsea Piers, Mr. Liu, a three-time Olympic contender for his native Taiwan, will perform the solo, the first skater to do so since Curry, who died in 1994.

Elegant, with a slight build and balletic line, Mr. Liu was recently named co-artistic director of Ice Theater, formed in 1984 by Moira North. (Curry became a member in 1988.)

In the end Mr. Roberts’s limited experience on the ice didn’t matter much. Mr. Liu, since moving to New York at the age of 6, has shifted between the worlds of skating and dance; as a teenager he studied at the School of American Ballet. His training there with teachers like Stanley



ROBERT CAPLIN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Williams — who, Mr. Liu said, taught him to “open his inner ear” — turned out to be indispensable.

“I knew instinctively what Keith was saying,” Mr. Liu, 40, recalled. “He would tell me, ‘When you land in arabesque, make sure you hold your back and allow that flow to ease into the next step.’ In skating technique it’s very boom, boom, boom. But in ‘After All’ there’s a continuous flow in the music. You have to find the nuance within it.”

Set to Albinoni’s Concerto for Trumpet in B flat, “After All” is a ravishing and, at

seven and a half minutes, strenuous work that follows the arc of a figure-skating practice session. (An excellent video of Curry performing it can be viewed at youtube.com/watch?v=SXJqsoFwUic.)

In creating the dance, commissioned by Curry and the United States Olympic Committee for a benefit program, Ms. Tharp watched Curry skate for three hours, beginning with compulsory or school figures, in which figure eights and serpentine shapes are embellished with delicate loops and brackets. Such figures, eliminated from international competition in 1990, are

now a lost art. In “After All” Ms. Tharp, with salient simplicity, gives them theatrical life. The exuberance of freestyle skating follows: basic spins and jumps increase in difficulty until Ms. Tharp wraps up the dance with a witty cool-down.

“After All” is playful yet intricate, full of thorny changes of weight and direction that, Mr. Liu observed, change in intensity like a blinking light bulb. “There is such precision in the tiny, little steps,” he said. “And it’s musical. I think that even good skaters — unless they’re sensitive — will think, ‘Oh, it’s just a bunch of three turns and brackets.’ Until they do it, they don’t know.”

Mr. Liu is fortunate to have studied privately with Curry when JoJo Starbuck, who was then his coach, arranged for a two-week session. “He taught me how to point my feet within the skate, how to wing my feet in certain moments,” Mr. Liu said. “I remember that especially in camel spins,” in which the body is held in an arabesque position. “He stressed precision, arms and how you bring your leg through, whether it’s through *passé* or *coupé*.”

The Ice Theater program, which includes works by Peter diFalco and Douglas Webster, also features Mr. Liu’s “pull,” a new ice dance to music by Thomas Newman, with costumes by the fashion designer Jussara Lee.

Like Curry, Mr. Liu hopes to elevate skating to an art form. At his request company members, off the ice, study ballet as well as Gaga, a dance technique created by the Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin.

“When I watch skating, I want to feel something,” Mr. Liu said. “I want to be alive, and I want to change preconceived ideas of what people think skating is. I’m not sure if I can completely achieve it this year. But my hope is to build something really wonderful.”

The figure skater David Liu in “After All,” an ice dance by Twyla Tharp, for Ice Theater of New York at Sky Rink.