

BOURNE FOR THIS

Canadian figure skating icon and renowned choreographer Shae-Lynn Bourne carves a new path in South Carolina

By Zoe Bell

Shae-Lynn Bourne is no stranger to reinvention. After winning the World Championships in 2003, her former partner, Victor Kraatz, retired. Bourne faced a dilemma—how could she continue to build her career without a partner? She transitioned from one-half of a dancing duo to a solo performer—a rare feat for an ice dancer. Today, the ten-time Canadian champion has channelled her experience as both a competitor and performer into her current role as choreographer for many of skating's highest achievers.

A perpetual traveller, Bourne (along with her husband and young son), recently relocated from Toronto, Ontario to an unlikely locale for someone in her line of work: Charleston, South Carolina. Bourne now calls this historic Southern city home, and the Carolina Ice Palace her new choreography base.

“This is, for us, a period of testing, and trying new things,” says Bourne. “There’s a calm, peaceful feeling [in Charleston]; a different pace of life. We really enjoy being here, and decided to try it as a home base.”

With this transition, Bourne’s impressive roster of skaters from across the globe now visit Charleston for their off-season choreography sessions. Figure skating is not on the radar in Charleston. Higher profile sports like football and baseball dominate this American city—in fact, her new rink, the Carolina Ice Palace, is the only public ice-skating rink on the peninsula. But, with Bourne’s arrival, skating may have its chance to shine.

American figure skating stars such as Nathan Chen, Vincent Zhou, and Ashley Wagner spent time in the Holy City this year, seeking Bourne’s creative input. Competitors from across the world—including Rika Hongo of Japan, Cha Jun-hwan of Korea, and Stephen Gogolev of Canada—have all descended on Charleston recently for their chance to work with the renowned choreographer, giving local skaters at the Carolina Ice Palace the chance to watch their idols in action. Both Bourne and Carolina Ice Palace figure skating director Stacey Mons hope that this unique opportunity will increase the young skaters’ motivation.

“I hope more people will come to the rink and even see these incredible skaters,” says Bourne. “It’s such an opportunity, knowing that you can have an Olympic champion in your city—it’s thrilling.”

“I can’t think of a better place to cool off, get exercise, and learn something new,” says Bourne.

According to Stacey Mons, it is difficult to maintain a high level of commitment among her skaters. Yet, watching high-profile competitors spend time at the Ice Palace gives her athletes a chance to see the hard work needed to excel at the sport. “As a coach you say it over and over again, but then when you see one of these elite skaters and you ask them, “How did you get here?” and they tell you how much work it took,” it shows her skaters, Mons explains, “if you want to be good, you really have to put in the time. It really motivates them because they see the amazing talent.”

At the Ice Palace, each skater spends a week with Bourne developing a short or long program. Her creative process depends on the relationship she has established with each skater. “I try to have the skater involved because it’s them, in the end, that has to get out on the ice and perform,” says Bourne. “I want them to really love what they skate to, and believe in it, so they can be most present when they compete.”

“Once I know the direction, the story, that’s what brings the movement,” says Bourne. “You need that in order to really connect to the audience.”

Once Bourne (with the skater’s input) settles on music and the creative direction, then, according to Bourne, the program is a “blank canvas.” “You don’t know going into it what the [end] result will be,” she explains. Bourne’s husband, Bodhan Turok, a filmmaker and storyteller in his own right, often edits Bourne’s music choices for her skaters. “I’m lucky that my husband is such a creative soul. I have him to bounce ideas off of,” Bourne says.

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Although Bourne’s choreography career was born from uncertainty—the dancer never expected to take the ice solo—her partner’s initial resignation spurred Bourne to create a name for herself in the figure skating world on her own terms. “It was a shock that ultimately brought more fulfillment, creative wealth, and a career I could not have imagined,” says Bourne.

“In all openness, at first I was nervous to take on the responsibility for another skater,” Bourne says. “It’s a very different process to create for somebody else, than for yourself.”

Over the years, Bourne has crafted championship-winning programs for figure skating’s resident rockstars, Yuzuru Hanyu and Nathan Chen. She choreographed Hanyu’s “Seimei” long program in 2018—a piece that helped Hanyu earn his second Olympic title in Pyeongchang. Chen visited the Ice Palace this spring to work on his new short program for the upcoming competitive season, after enjoying great success (including two World titles) with Bourne’s choreography in previous seasons.

“It’s a pleasure to work with both Yuzu and Nathan,” says Bourne. “It’s like I’m beaming inside, because when I work with skaters with such skill and body awareness it opens up the possibility of what you can do and try. I feel like you can really push the envelope and do something new.”

For Bourne, creating the right program allows the skater to share a part of his or herself with the audience. “I think that’s what I love most about what I do: helping skaters be open and honest,” says Bourne. “When we’re young, like my son’s age—he’s just open. There’s no worries of what this looks like or what people might think. I think when I get to be with skaters and help them to really share their voice, or discover their voice, then beautiful things happen—magic happens. To be able to express and tell their story, then the audience can participate, and it opens them up.”

“That’s the kind of skating I like,” says Bourne, “when you leave and [feel] affected, and question things. Or something opens up like it hasn’t before... That’s what makes people stand up, cry, or talk—and what keeps skating alive. And it’s what makes people want to come back.”

As one of the sport’s most sought after choreographers, Bourne is constantly in motion—and this summer is no exception. She will be travelling to Los Angeles to work with Rafael Arutunian’s students. Then, she and her family will visit Japan to work with Shoma Uno on a show program before tackling Shizuka Arikawa’s annual Friends on Ice performance. Bourne loves to perform herself and cherishes the connection formed with the audience. “It’s a beautiful thing, and a sad thing, because it’s over so fast,” she explains.

Last year, Bourne performed a tribute to her friend Denis Ten, who passed away in 2018. “I’ve never had an experience like that,” says Bourne. “It was wonderful to share a very dear friend, and share that with people who adored him and loved him... I’m lucky I had the opportunity to skate for him.”

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With her new base, Bourne turns her attention to Charleston, where, she says, inspiration abounds. “Everything inspires—nature, going to galleries, listening to music, watching wonderful movies, theatre, life, our travels. The more you take in, it comes out,” Bourne explains.

She encourages her visiting skaters to experience as much of the city as they can. “When skaters do choreography, it gives them a new experience. It’s that new experience that enriches life,” says Bourne. “It gets them out of their routine and gives them something new to be excited about, and that affects how you skate. You have something more to say.”

For Bourne and her family, this transition to Charleston is just that—something new. Experiencing other cultures, Bourne argues, opens one up to different ways of living. “I try to take in all that’s around me” says Bourne. While she and her husband have settled in Charleston, for now, the pair travel extensively, and Bourne hopes to continue to explore the world with her young family.

“Nothing’s ever permanent with us,” Bourne says. “We’re just seeing where life takes us.”