

Irene Apinée's 1950s Make-up Case

Falsies, lipstick, a squeezeable tube of mascara. These items and more can be found in Irene Apinée's make-up case from the 1950s, this month's Artifact of the Month. I'm Amy Bowring, Director of Collections and Research at Dance Collection Danse.

Apinée's zip-top, leather case held everything a ballet dancer could need to prepare for the rigours of performance and the harsh lights of the stage. Hair pins in a cleverly constructed wooden box; foundation, eye liner, eye shadow, rouge and lipstick; a tube of Maybelline mascara and its toothbrush-like applicator; an eyelash curler and false eyelashes; cold cream and Johnson's baby oil for removing make-up; a toy kitten good-luck charm for the dressing table. It's as if Apinée closed up the case one day and all its treasures lay hidden until it came to Dance Collection Danse.

Apinée was part of the burgeoning professional dance scene in Canada in the 1950s and '60s. She arrived on the Aquitania at Halifax's Pier 21 on October 5, 1947 with her husband, Jury Gotshalks, and their two-year-old son, Gunnar. After years of turmoil and displacement during and after World War II, the young family was ready for a new start. Born in Riga, Latvia, in 1924, Apinée and Gotshalks both trained at the Latvian National Ballet School. They were students when Latvia was bullied into annexation by the Soviet Union in 1940 based on the secret protocols of the 1939 Hitler-Stalin Pact. By the time Apinée and Gotshalks joined the National Opera Ballet Company in 1943, and had started dating, their country had shifted into the hands of the Nazis when the Germans broke their pact with the Soviets. Initially, the Nazis were viewed as liberators until they illegally conscripted Latvians into their army and began executing Jews, Roma and anyone who assisted the Soviets. When the Soviet Union began to re-occupy Latvia in 1944, the newly married Gotshalks fled to Germany. Apinée writes in her memoir of the time, "Chaos took over our country and in the fall of 1944 I found myself in Germany, where we existed under lots of hardships and bombings and very little food. During this time I was often separated from my parents and Jury." She was near Dresden with her parents after the bombings of 1945 and as the Russians advanced into that part of Germany, Apinée and her family made their way west toward the Allied Forces. She writes in her memoir, "After many days of danger and fear we succeeded, and in our first camp there was a surprise because Jury was already there." They lived in a barracks with fifteen other people and sometimes only had a pail of soup per day to share among everyone. Their son was born while in the Displaced Persons camp.

Soon after the war's end, Latvian dancers and singers began to organize. Throughout the turmoil and hardship, people needed entertainment. Apinée and Gotshalks became part of the Latvian Exile Ballet and toured refugee camps trading their ability to entertain for goods. Apinée writes, "Our compensation was mostly in goods or special things like extra food, parachute silk for costumes, extra diapers for my son which we dyed and made into costumes, gauze which we made into tu-tu's, starching the gauze with starch we made from our potatoes.... Over the two years, I danced wearing one pair of pointe shoes, the shoemaker changing the soles and strengthening the pointes with leather. We danced in barracks, on floors, on tables and only sometimes on small stages in some villages which had escaped general destruction. All this time we were isolated from the ballet world, not having proper classes and training, but it was dancing and we enjoyed it."

Without a home, without a country, these artists still danced fulfilling the need of the people around them to be entertained, to be distracted from the chaos.

Once they arrived in Halifax in 1947, they set up a school and company despite not knowing the language or the city. Their Gotshalks Halifax Ballet performed in and around Halifax and at a few of the Canadian Ballet Festivals beginning with the Montreal festival in 1950. It was here that a visionary woman named Celia Franca saw them perform and when she returned to Canada in 1951 to direct the newly formed National Ballet of Canada, Apinée and Gotshalks were invited to become founding members of the company. Though their bravado style clashed somewhat with Franca's more reserved English ballet background, they were well received by audiences and, with another married couple – David Adams and Lois Smith, were early stars of the company. For the first two seasons of the National Ballet, Apinée and Gotshalks managed to juggle their performance and rehearsal commitments in Toronto with their school and company in Halifax but by 1953, the schedule was too much to handle and they focussed on the National Ballet performances. When CBC television came onto the scene in 1952, they appeared frequently on variety television shows. In 1955, they moved to Montreal to perform and choreograph for television; they also appeared with Les Ballets Chiriaeff, which began with television performances and then became the stage company Les Grands Ballets Canadiens in 1958. Their next move was to New York in 1960 where they danced at Radio City Music Hall, and Apinée performed with American Ballet Theatre and the New York City Opera. Apinée returned to Montreal in 1965 to dance with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens from which she retired in 1967. She enjoyed a successful second career as a real estate agent and recreationally became a competitive swimmer and diver winning several championships in her age group. The couple had split by the late 1960s and Jury Gotshalks continued to teach in the United States until his death in 1976.

In times of war, political upheaval and social unrest, dance sometimes provides a mechanism for survival and, by its very presence, can be viewed as a symbol of protest against oppression. I have always found the story of Irene Apinée and Jury Gotshalks to be inspirational. Their camaraderie with fellow exiled artists and their dancing gave them purpose in extraordinarily troubled circumstances; it helped them to survive and carried them through to a new life in Canada.

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