



GRACEFUL: Judith Ker works with her ballet students Aniel Grun, left, and Danielle Walker.

Picture: JAMES KERR

Lifetime in dance

HER name was Judith Stout — not an evocative name for a ballerina, and such an elfin one at that. So she took her grandmother's maiden name for professional purposes and became Judith Ker.

This year marks Ker's 50th year as a ballet teacher in Tasmania.

She will also celebrate her 80th birthday in December, providing a living endorsement of ballet as a form of exercise in the process.

Ker is limber, athletic and graceful, still working through the full set of bar exercises with ease. She walks everywhere and is easily spotted by the poised angle of her head and her balletic toes-pointed-outward step.

She also still teaches four classes a week, though in recent years she has cut back to only teaching adults.

On a cold night in the drafty hall of St George's Church, Battery Point, where she holds her classes, Ker gets a heater out, plugs it in then, characteristically, turns it to face her interviewer.

"I don't need it," she says. "I function better when I'm cold."

It was in St George's Church Hall that this writer first began learning ballet as a five-year-old. Ker was a formidable character from a child's perspective. There was no flouncing around pretending to be fairies or flowers for her pupils — just the seemingly relentless "Plie, plie, [pronounced plee-ay], bottoms in, knees out!" and the pain of young tendons stretching to become permanently pliant.

On show

In-demand Russian pianist Kirill Gerstein has been busy playing all over the world this year, from America to Europe to Asia and back. The Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra is starting to shape up as the New York-based soloist's home away from home. In July he recorded Mendelssohn's *Piano Concerto No. 1* with the TSO and this week he will play two concerts at the Federation Concert Hall, Hobart. On **Wednesday** he will be the soloist for Mendelssohn's *Piano Concerto No. 2* and on **Saturday** for Mendelssohn's *Piano Concerto No. 1*. Both programs also include Mozart symphonies.



PAS DE DEUX: Ker and Mischa Slavensky in the 1960s. Picture: MARIE PISCIONERI



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Ker is equally demanding on her adult pupils, and says there is no difference in her approach to teaching different age groups.

"It's more about the similarities — the self-discipline, co-ordination and concentration that it gives to all pupils, whether they're children or adults," she says.

"I teach to get the best out of my pupils, to help each of them work to the best of their ability."

"If you're aiming to be a perfectionist, you want the person helping you to be a perfectionist."

"And all ballet is about perfection, just as orchestral music is about perfection and any opera singer is aiming for perfection."

"Having said that, you can have someone who is technically perfect who gives nothing to the audience at all. Technique is a means to an end."

Born in north Wales, Ker moved to Australia with her family in 1939 so her father could become professor of philosophy at Sydney University.

Ker, who began doing ballet at the age of eight, trained in Sydney alongside two of the best-known Australian ballerinas of their era, Elaine

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Fifield and Kathleen Gorham. The trio would later be reunited in the Borovansky company, which was a forerunner to the Australian Ballet.

"Elaine did marvellous pirouettes, Kathleen was a soubrette, good at bright acting roles, and my specialty was romantic adage — the slow romantic bits," Ker says.

Like Fifield, Ker won a scholarship to study at the Royal Ballet Academy in London, but it turned into a potentially crushing experience.

"They told me I was entirely unsuited to a stage career and I should think of something else to do with my life," she says.

"They liked tall slim dancers with oval faces and expected you behave like a ballerina at all times. I was small and not extrovert enough."

She left the Royal Academy and, happily defying the predictions, spent the next five years dancing professionally in Europe and another five in Australia with the Borovansky.

As well as being part of the corps de ballet, she danced solo roles. Unfortunately they were not the romantic parts she yearned for: "Because of being small I often got to be a little boy."

It was during her time at Borovansky that Ker met Yugoslav dancer Mischa Slavensky. In 1958, Slavensky was asked to come to Tasmania to take over a ballet studio. His English was not good, so he asked Ker to be his partner in the venture.

"I was not sure if I could do it as Mischa had a very Slavonic temperament, very different to my British one," Ker says.

"But you knew that if you leapt when you were dancing with him you'd be caught. He knew how to get the best out of people, he was a very good choreographer and he had a good sense of theatre."

Slavensky eventually returned to Europe, where he died three years ago, but Ker stayed.

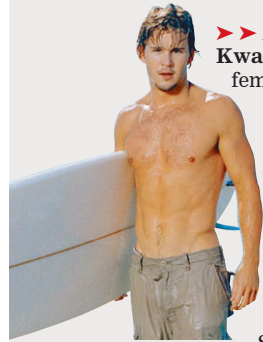
She can look back over the past 60 years and find contentment in having been able to make ballet her lifelong profession as well as passion.

On the way, she has helped many others discover the joys of dancing and keep in great shape.

● **Adult Education (6233 7237) is currently taking enrolments for Judith Ker's classes.**



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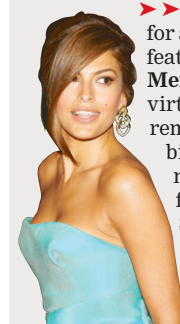
➤➤ Australia's **Ryan Kwanten** is setting female pulses racing with his role in America's hot new vampire TV series. The former *Home and Away* star is one of the leads in *True Blood*, a show HBO hopes will replace its retired hits *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under* and

Sex and the City. Kwanten, 31, plays a Louisiana hillbilly with an insatiable appetite for bedding women in *True Blood*, which also stars New Zealand actor **Anna Paquin**. The *Washington Post* describes him as "the randiest non-vampire in the area". "He does wear clothes, but he takes them off a lot," says *True Blood*'s creator, Alan Ball, who also created *Six Feet Under*.

➤➤ One fan of a new Paris Hilton documentary has a familiar name: **Paris Hilton**. As she left the cinema where *Paris, Not France* premiered last week at the Toronto Film Festival, Hilton gave a few claps of applause as director Adria Petty was announced for a session to discuss the documentary. "It's amazing that this woman is a human being and that people actually can be ruthless enough to forget that," Petty said. "That's the one thing about this movie and about that experience with her is I could have just been shooting fluff, but she gave me a lot more."



➤➤ Broadway has said goodbye to *Rent*, 12 years and 5124 performances after the musical first opened. The show, with book, music and lyrics by Jonathan Larson, was born off-Broadway in triumph and tragedy. Larson died of an aortic aneurism after its final dress rehearsal in January 1996. He was 35. Larson's tale of free-spirited artists and street people in New York's gritty drug and AIDS-plagued East Village of the early 1990s touched several generations. The show, inspired by Puccini's *La Boheme*, found a ready-made audience in young people. Its fanatical supporters were nicknamed "Rentheads".



➤➤ A steamy new ad campaign for a Calvin Klein perfume featuring Hollywood hottie **Eva Mendes** has been banned from virtually all media. It has been removed from TV and a huge billboard showing a blurry yet nude Mendes was removed from New York's Times Square only hours after it was installed. Mendes says: "I am so proud of [the ad]. I am proud of being an American and am proud of my

country, but I think we can be a little bit uptight about nudity sometimes."

➤➤ **Britney Spears** has enjoyed a triumphant return to the scene of one of her most humiliating public appearances, scooping three honours at the MTV Video Music Awards. The singer suffered a critical mauling at the same awards show last year, when she stumbled and mimed her way through a performance that came amid turmoil in her private and professional life. But a beaming Spears cut a different figure as she accepted prizes for best female video, best pop video and video of the year for *Piece of Me*.

➤➤ **Tommy Lee Jones** is suing the makers of *No Country for Old Men* for more than \$10 million he claims he is owed for starring in the 2007 Oscar-winning thriller. The suit against Paramount Pictures claims that Jones was promised "significant box-office bonuses" and other compensation depending on the success of the film, which took more than \$160 million at the box office.



➤➤ **Nicolas Cage** wants \$37 million for his nine-bedroom, nine-bathroom Bel Air Tudor house, which boasts an Olympic-size pool and a 35-seat home theatre. The *Los Angeles Times* says the house is part of Cage's sizeable collection of domiciles, which includes a mansion in Rhode Island, a house in New Orleans, and a castle in Scotland.