

Tiny dancers

By Jackie Jadrnak / Journal North Reporter
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If you go

WHAT: "The Nutcracker"

WHO: Aspen Santa Fe Ballet

WHEN: 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Saturday; 1 p.m. and 5 p.m. Sunday

WHERE: Lensic Performing Arts Center, 211 W. San Francisco St.

HOW MUCH: \$25-\$72

Angela Lowenthal, front right, who plays the role of Clara in the Aspen Santa Fe Ballet production of "The Nutcracker," practices the party scene with other young dancers from the ballet's school in Santa Fe. (Marla Brose/Journal)

SANTA FE, N.M. — The journey to the Lensic stage for 145 Santa Fe-area children and youth in this year's Nutcracker ballet includes two months' worth of reminders to face the audience, maintain formation and "re-e-e-e-each!"

And, at a November rehearsal for the ballet's beginning party scene attended by the **Journal**, it included details such as school Director Gisela Genschow bending to tie a boy's shoes before he tripped over the laces and administrator Karen Brettschneider tracing an outline of another boy's feet so he could have new, properly fitting shoes in time for the performance.

What may look like chaos to some, though, has a careful organization gleaned from many years of staging the well-loved traditional Christmas-time ballet by Tchaikovsky. Part of what makes it work is the experienced guidance of some of the high school-level dancers who help put the littler ones through their paces, according to both women.

"The high school kids love to help," Brettschneider said. "They're learning teaching and responsibility. I think it brings the school together. The older kids love to take care of the little kids."

And the end product is the thrill of sharing the stage with professional dancers from Aspen Santa Fe Ballet in front of an audience that often fills the 800-plus-seat theater.

With rehearsals starting in October for the high school dancers and November for the younger ones – the 5-year-olds simply rehearse in their regular dance class – the whole production doesn't come together for the first time until, well, the performance itself, which occurs Saturday and Sunday at the Lensic Performing Arts Center.

A rehearsal of the entire performance, when many sections include primarily the professional adult dancers, isn't practical, Brettschneider said. "With kids, you don't want all that down time," she noted.

And since more kids are participating than there are cast members, some of them don't dance in all four performances, leaving room for everyone to take part.

One of the dancers, Angela Lowenthal in the lead role of Clara, will dance in all four. The 14-year-old student at the New Mexico School for the Arts is taking on the role for the second year in a row. "Last year, it was more learning the steps; this year, I will bring more acting into it," she said.

Angela said she has been dancing since she was 3 years old, with classes including styles such as modern, jazz and hip-hop in addition to ballet. "My parents got me into it. I enjoyed it so I kept doing it," she said.

"The Nutcracker," in which she has participated for seven years, grants valuable experience in performing before an audience, she said. "I'm usually really nervous before I get onstage," Angela said. "But every year I feel a little bit stronger." Noting that she hopes to be a professional dancer, she called it a "privilege" to be granted the role of Clara. "It makes me really happy that the teachers see something in my dancing."

Since not many boys gravitate toward ballet, "The Nutcracker" borrows students from the school's Folklorico ensemble, which is how El Camino Real Academy students Luis Lagunas, 11, and Sam O'Sullivan, 9, found their way to it.

Sam, now in his second year in "The Nutcracker" and third year in Folklorico, said he's going to ask his mom if he can take ballet lessons. The aspect of dance he likes the most, he said, is actually the acting. "I want to be an actor when I grow up. Also a marine biologist," he said.

Luis is one boy who did start ballet lessons after his Folklorico experience led him to "The Nutcracker." He characterizes dance as a fun way to get exercise. "It's half-hard and half-easy," he said of the dance steps. And as far as performing in front of an audience, he said, "Last year, I was nervous. This year, I have confidence."

Christian Sotelo, 13, of Ortiz Middle School, also went to "The Nutcracker" from Folklorico. "I just wanted to," he said with a shrug. "I like how it's like Christmas."

The story of "The Nutcracker" starts with a party scene around a Christmas tree, where boys and girls get their presents and watch a magic act. Clara is presented with a beautiful nutcracker that Fritz breaks, making her disconsolate. When she sneaks down to the parlor late at night to visit her gift again, the tree magically grows, along with the nutcracker and mice attaining human size. The magical story proceeds with a trip to the Land of Sweets, ruled over by the Sugar Plum Fairy, followed by music, gifts and dances by visitors from around the world.

Children's roles include dancing as bees, candy canes, mice, toy soldiers, party girls and boys, and more. They register to take part in "The Nutcracker," but don't audition, Brettschneider said, explaining that roles are assigned by the teachers, who are very familiar with the children and the level of their dance skills. So, unlike the professional world of dance, everyone who wants a role gets one, she added.

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