

On Your Toes!

By Howard McEwen
For The Sunday Challenger
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Local Dancers Take Part In Nutcracker Tradition

Two girls from Campbell County have finished their training and are heading off to battle. It's not in some far-away country where they'll fight, but in the dreams of Clara, a little girl asleep under a Christmas tree with a nutcracker cradled in her arms.

Stacy Mentzer and Katelyn Daunt, students at Manyet Dance Studios, will be playing toy soldiers in this year's production of the Cincinnati Ballet's "The Nutcracker."

The ballet, composed by Peter Tchaikovsky and choreographed by Val Caniparoli, is about a little girl who dreams of a battle between her new toy nutcracker and the mice that scamper through her house. During Clara's dream, toys from Spain, China, France and Russia come alive and perform for her, as snowflakes waltz and sugar plum fairies dance.

Katelyn Daunt, a sixth grader at St. Therese School in Southgate, has been studying dance since she was 4 years old. Her mother Jeanette has taught dance for 15 years - the last seven at Manyet. Daunt normally attends classes at least three hours a week, but since passing her audition with the Cincinnati Ballet, that time has increased.

"We practice a lot. We started practice in October and we were going once a week. Now that 'The Nutcracker' is coming soon (the first performance was Friday evening), we are practicing three and four times a week. Practice usually lasts at least an hour, sometimes longer," said Daunt.

However, the stress of being part of one of the region's Christmas traditions also requires a commitment from the dancer's family.

"Getting her to rehearsal on time, fighting cross-town traffic, making sure homework is done, and grades are maintained - she has actually improved in her school work. It's hard work for the performers. All in all it can be hectic especially with the increased rehearsals. However, it will all pay off when we finally see her up on stage," said her father, Kevin Daunt.

Not all performers in The Nutcracker began practicing at an early age. Stacy Mentzer, a sophomore at Highlands High School in Fort Thomas, didn't initially lace up her ballet shoes until she was 11 years old. She began taking private lessons weekly during the summer, so she could take a combination tap, jazz and ballet class that fall. Now, through hard work and study, she has finally made it into Manyet's Elite Dance Troupe.

Stacy first saw "The Nutcracker" when she was 8 and has seen it four other times. But being in the ballet has given her a new perspective on dance. "I was not sure if I wanted to have a career in dancing, but after watching the Cincinnati Ballet Company dance their roles in 'The Nutcracker' not more than a foot in front of me, I changed my mind. It teaches you a lot of discipline with dancing and--for me--sets my goals higher, making me a better dancer," Mentzer said.

Youth Movement

To fill the roles for The Nutcracker, the Cincinnati Ballet held an open call for dance students from around the Greater Cincinnati area. Nearly 100 children were cast this year; 37 will appear in each performance.

"They auditioned me in a group of 12 other girls. I was very nervous and afraid I would make a big mistake or mess up," said Daunt.

After the audition, the dancers had to wait two weeks to find out if they had been accepted.

"We are proud of our students when they have the confidence to audition for outside events and it is an added plus when they are selected," said studio owner Amy Manyet-Geiman.

Manyet Dance started offering classes in Highland Heights in 1982. Now, it has two locations in Southgate and Highland Heights and 550 students ranging from Tiny Tunes class for 2 year olds to adult classes.



Rene Micheo / The Cincinnati Ballet

EN GARDE!: A battle scene from this year's production of "The Nutcracker."

"One of our adult (tap dance students) is 91 years old and still going strong," said Manyet-Geiman.

However, she stresses that dance is more than a choreographed exercise program.

"Learning dance teaches the students a lot more than dance steps and routines. It enhances memory skills and teaches self worth, responsibility and respect. I feel that the benefits of dance training will last a lifetime," said Manyet-Geiman.

Mentzer says her mother has seen a change in her.

"She says that I used to be very shy and did not talk much," said Mentzer. "But after I started dancing I became more outgoing."

Daunt's father, Kevin, also believes dancing has taught his daughter important life lessons.

"Dancing was a great educational start for Kate when she was young," he said. "It got her used to being in a structured learning environment before she started grade school. Kate has learned what can happen with a little hard work, dedication and practice."

Get 'Cracking

The Nutcracker runs through Dec. 26 at historic Music Hall in Cincinnati. Tickets are \$12 to \$52. Performances are Sunday, Dec. 18 at 2 and 7:30 p.m.; Tuesday, Dec. 20 at 2 p.m.; Wednesday, Dec. 21, at 2 p.m.; Thursday, Dec. 22 at 2 and 7:30 p.m.; Friday, Dec. 23 at 2 and 7:30 p.m. and Monday, Dec. 26 at 7:30 p.m.

For details and tickets call (513) 621-5282 or visit www.cincinnatiaballet.com.

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