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### **Denied Ballet? No way**

Kannapolis- Rebecca Massey isn't working with just one cast for her homegrown production of "The Nutcracker." She has three sets of main characters – three Claras, three Snow Queens and so forth – with a cast of 89 dancers aged 3 to 19. "All the kids looked good, I couldn't cut them," she said. "How do you say 'no' to a 12-year-old who works very hard?"

In addition to directing, Massey has spent thousands of her own dollars on costumes and equipment, helped draw backdrops, guided parents in making costumes and worked with A.L. Brown High School students to build the set. The production opens Friday at the school.

Teaching children how to dance and directing Clara and the Sugar Plum Fairies in Kannapolis is far different than what this former New York City ballerina expected for her future. But she said it means a lot to her to offer this to the community, where thousands lost their jobs when Pillowtex closed last year.

Some people, she said, may assume it's "some rinky-dink show."

"Granted, we're not the N.C. Dance Theatre and we never will be," she said. "But when you come to see our show, the kids are so excited to be on stage."

During her first "Nutcracker" production last year, the boy playing Fritz stopped in the middle of the show to wave to his teacher out in the audience.

"Things like that make it so sweet and so tender and so real," Massey said.

Last year, a man walking by her studio saw the "Nutcracker" poster. He had been laid off from his job at Pillowtex and asked if indeed, the tickets were just \$5. (This year it's \$8).

After she told him yes, he said he might be able to pay that. "He was thrilled because he could afford to take his kids to the ballet", she said.



## **A Former Ballerina**

Massey wants everyone possible to see the show. In addition to four public performances this weekend, she's putting on a free show Friday morning at A.L. Brown for 1,200 are schoolchildren.

She received \$1,250 from the Cabarrus Arts Council and \$3,500 in dancer participation fees in hopes for \$6,000 in ticket sales. But that still leaves her \$4,250 short toward the \$15,000 production cost. One tutu costs \$200.

That's where her credit card comes in. Money isn't what she frets about, though. She seeks dancer's perfection. At rehearsals, she throws her 5-foot-6 inch, 115-pound frame headlong into the footwork. Massey gulps from a 64-ounce bottle of orange Gatorade ("I'm determined not to get sick") and wears overalls so she can pocket hair ties for the girls and clip on her walkie-talkie to talk constantly to her crew.

She knows a few moves. Massey, 30, a Winston-Salem native, attended the N.C. School of the Arts and danced for nearly eight years with the American Ballet Theatre in New York City. After moving back to North Carolina, she found affordable space in Kannapolis above the closed K&W Cafeteria.

Dancers in "Nutcracker" drive from Cabarrus, Iredell, Mecklenburg and Rowan counties to learn from her, and also many also attend class at her non-profit Piedmont Dance Theatre.

"Rebecca lives and breathes for our children," said Roseann Classic, whose 14-year-old daughter, Jennifer, dances as a snowflake and also in two other roles. From their home in south Charlotte, they drive up to an hour to get to class and rehearsal.

## **Dancing in threes**

Besides directing the flow of the dance, Massey teaches children how to do the technical stuff of theatre. While building the gingerbread house and painting backdrops, A.L. Brown students also learned about the magic of glitter.

"Our motto is, if it didn't look good, throw glitter on it," Massey said. She is totally committed to this production.

In "Nutcracker," she plays a mother in the party scene, to help control the sometimes frenzied action. During a Saturday rehearsal, her walkie-talkie dangled from the bodice of her blue dress.

"How many angels do we have?" she yelled into the walkie-talkie, before seven angels, some with wings slightly askew, crossed the stage.

Her Jack Russell terrier, Bandit, goes with her to rehearsals in his crate.

Teresa Puckett of Harrisburg, who has two children in the production, says the director often forgets to eat. And when the judges split on choosing the second Clara auditions, Massey couldn't sleep that night.

So she decided her "Nutcracker" would have three Claras. One dances opening night and the other two split the remaining performances. Other major roles have multiple dancers, too.

After Saturday rehearsal finished at 6:09 p.m., she told the cast, including all the Claras, "Great job today!"

But she wasn't done. She and her volunteers had to roll up the dance floor, pack up costumes and put away sets. Massey would exchange her satin dress for overalls again, and she and her bottle of Gatorade and Bandit would be there until 10:30.