

# Independent Tribune

## *The Nutcracker*

*Piedmont Dance Theatre presents holiday classic in Kannapolis*

By: Andi Petrini

When you meet Rebecca Massey, there's an energy pitch unlike any other. Keeping up with a steady stream of speech and always on the go, Massey looks like a ballerina – lithe and light on her feet.

The Winston-Salem native opened a dance studio in Kannapolis a few years ago and is now the woman responsible for bringing “The Nutcracker” to Cabarrus County. Massey, the director of the non-profit Piedmont Dance Theatre, has been working with a mass of volunteers for 10 months to present the classic holiday ballet Dec. 10 – 12 in the auditorium of A.L. Brown High School in Kannapolis.

The ballet features a cast of almost 100, including 89 dancers ranging in age from 3 to 19. “The Nutcracker” tells the age-old tale of the Nutcracker doll given to Clara who dreams her doll turns into a prince and fights the Mouse King before taking her to the Land of Snow and Sweets.



There, Clara is greeted by the Sugar Plum Fairy, who hosts a stream of dancers from different countries.

Ballets are told in a series of music and movements, not with words.

Massey, who directed the show last year, has increased the number of performers and changed locations from the Glenn Center to Brown's auditorium.

She partnered with Brown to help teach students in the theater arts, industrial arts and marketing classes to construct sets, print tickets

and posters and for stage management.

Two weeks before the production, the sets for “The Nutcracker” were coming together, well on their way to creating a Land of Snow and Sweets.

A Grassroots Grant from the Cabarrus Arts Council helped pay for the three backdrops, Massey said.

Students from the industrial arts class built a life size gingerbread house that looks professionally done, while students from the theater arts class painted the heavy backdrop scenes.

“They really got involved,” Massey said of the students, who have been working for more than two months. “I buy everything and they do everything.”

And by buy everything, Massey means pouring \$15,000 into the local economy for this production.

There's building materials, paint and supplies for sets, yards of fabric for 140 costumes and numerous bottles of hairspray – both from the sets and the dancers.

Massey said that the dance theater show is supported by donations, the Cabarrus Arts Council, help from students, parents and Brown's staff and her own dance studio. To help off-set the cost, dancers are charged \$35 - \$55 as a participation fee, which includes all lessons, rehearsals and costumes for "The Nutcracker".

This is the second year for the dance theater's performance of "The Nutcracker" and this year it features a larger cast and three new scenes to accommodate all the cast.

There were open auditions Sept. 11, and all 89 dancers were cast from Cabarrus, Mecklenburg, Iredell, and Rowan counties. Massey said new roles were created and there are three different casts – one cast for each day of the performance.

About half the cast is from Massey's Kannapolis – based studio. Other dancers are from studios in Charlotte, Salisbury, and Cabarrus County.

"It's a melting pot of dance studios," she said. "The studios have been really great... really supportive."

Massey's studio is used as a rehearsal hall, costume workshop, and storage shed. "If I didn't have the school, I couldn't do this," Massey said of her studio.

She said that having the extra roles created challenges during rehearsals, but she wanted to give dancers an opportunity to do something they may never get to do again.

"I want them to look back at (the experience) and know they did their best," Massey said. "A lot of kids request (extra) rehearsals."

In preparing for "The Nutcracker," in addition to running Piedmont Dance Conservatory, Massey's day is never dull, she said.

She lives in the loft space at her studio, and when her day starts at 7 a.m. there are sometimes parents at the studio working on costumes. She spends most of her day at Brown, working in the classroom or on the sets with the students. At 4 or 5 p.m. it's time to teach dance lessons or old rehearsals for the December ballet.

"I wear all hats," Massey said.

Massey also has a role in the ballet and is understudy for all the roles. Last year she filled in as the Sugar Plum Fairy.

Working with the students at Brown, while time consuming, was with the effort, she said.

To create the backdrop for the house scene of "The Nutcracker", the theatre arts students researched homes from the 1850's, when the story takes place, to make sure the home's style accurately reflected the period.

The class had discussions with Massey about the frame, color and whether the chimney should be stone or brick – they went with stone, as appropriate for that time. Massey said the class even discussed and decided on what the weather should reflect – snow – and what other features outside of the house should have – if you look closely, there's a mouse in one of the windows.

Massey is no stranger to the theater. The Winston-Salem native spent eight years with the American Ballet Theatre in New York City before family events brought her back to the South.

She opened a lingerie store and started teaching dance classes to pay the bills.

“I found I had a knack for teaching teenagers,” Massey said. “I love my kids. “She said she has a diverse group of students and enjoys watching them interact. “They are a compassionate group of kids,” she said, smiling.

When she decided to bring “The Nutcracker” to the stage last year, she said she wanted to give the community something to hold onto.

“I saw “The Nutcracker” when I was 5 years old,” Massey said. “I knew then I wanted to be a ballerina... I do it because you never know what 5 year old will come in and say, ‘I want to be a ballerina’ or ‘I want to be a set designer’ or whatever... I’ve learned not to underestimate a young person. The hardest part of my hob is getting them (young dancers) to live up to their potential.”

Having a role in the “The Nutcracker” gives the cast a performance venue, something else Massey said she wanted to provide the youngsters.

As a free gift to Brown, in addition to the free lessons, Massey in having a rig installed from which to hang her hand-painted backdrops.

“People have been food to me here,” Massey said. “It’s a small town and this is why this works.”

With out having the community support, Massey said it would be impossible to put together the show. “I wouldn’t have the manpower to get it going,” she said.