

The Register-Guard

[ARCHIVE](#)**DANCE**

Local lessons

‘Nutcracker’ offers kids a rare opportunity

BY JACKIE RENZETTI*For The Register-Guard*

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From a party child to this year’s titular role, Reed Souther has performed nearly every part in the Eugene Ballet Company’s “The Nutcracker.”

Now a company member for eight years, Souther traces the start of his career to dancing with the Eugene Ballet as a student dancer at its touring stop in his hometown of Corvallis — one of the few opportunities he had to work with professionals.

“I don’t think there were any other companies coming through using local kids,” he said.

Since it first began touring “The Nutcracker” about 25 years ago, the Eugene Ballet has continued to include local student dancers in each of the cities it performs in. This year’s six-week tour includes more than 30 performances in 14 cities across five states, including rural areas where audiences have few opportunities to see professional ballet companies, Artistic Director Toni Pimble said. The company’s most toured show provides learning opportunities for company dancers and students alike, Pimble said.

“For our dancers, working in all these different venues, which are all different sizes and all have different challenges, means they are very mentally aware,” said Pimble, who also choreographs the show each year. “They can handle just about anything, and it doesn’t throw them, because they’ve become real pros.”

In Sandpoint, Idaho, dancers pare down the production to fit a stage that feels like the size of a hotel room, Souther said. Parts that would have 10 dancers instead have five, and some

set pieces are eliminated.

"It's always kind of a struggle to put things together, but the audience there loves it. They just cheer and cheer and give standing ovations. And it's always so special to have that reaction," he said.

While other dance companies also sometimes work with local students, the Eugene Ballet does so on a larger scale, Pimble said.

"It's a huge amount of work," she said.

Early start

In September, a group of Eugene Ballet dancers visits each city to help audition the dancers with the local teachers. They leave the teachers with the music and a video recording of the show. The teachers rehearse the students until it's time to perform with the Eugene Ballet.

Once the company arrives, it often has just one dress rehearsal with the students, Pimble said.

"They're always just wide-eyed and so excited to be there and to see all of us. When we're out on the road for weeks on a time, seeing that and seeing their excitement ... gives me a little bit of extra energy to put into my performances," Souther said.

Working with the students gives the dancers experience in learning how to interact with communities, Pimble said.

"When the dancers are putting their pointe shoes on and they've got some little child standing two feet away with their eyes glued on those pointe shoes, they have to look up and smile and say, 'Yes, these are my pointe shoes,'" she said.

Megan Skinner, whose ballet students have performed with the Eugene Ballet in Corvallis for the past 12 years, says the show is the only one she knows of that routinely includes student dancers.

"It's great they've kept this tradition going," she said. "It can be very inspiring for the students in Corvallis and Albany."

She said her favorite part of the collaboration is watching the students rehearse and interact with the company members.

"The company dancers are always so kind and friendly to the student dancers," she said.

A hometown tradition

The Eugene Ballet first performed “The Nutcracker” in the early 1980s with the Eugene Symphony at South Eugene High School.

The production now has a home at the Hult Center for Performing Arts. And after years of dancing with a recording, the company has performed with Orchestra Next for the past five years. The local youth choir Cantabile Collective also joins “The Nutcracker” for its Eugene performances.

The formation of Orchestra Next came partly out of the desire to help the Eugene Ballet afford to play with live musicians, said music director and co-founder Brian McWhorter.

“When you perform with a live orchestra, they bring a whole different kind of energy to it,” Souther said.

McWhorter is a master at paying attention to both the orchestra and dancers to time the music to the movements, Souther said.

“He is phenomenal with that,” he said. “There was one show where ... he finished the music and he was so into it that his baton flew out of his hand and into the wing. That’s how much energy he brings to it.”

The orchestra consists of about 30 students and 16 professional musicians who serve as first chairs and mentor the young musicians.

“You have all this community, young people who are performing in ‘The Nutcracker,’ in this professional environment,” Pimble said. “It is a fabulous feeding ground for all of them into what it takes to be an artist.”

McWhorter said “The Nutcracker’s” light-hearted energy and familiarity gives students a chance to relax in the often stressful setting of classical music.

“We have a lot of fun,” McWhorter said.

Playing the same music year after year allows the students to master the material enough to perform with an element of playfulness, he said. He said he sees this same sense of joy in the crowded audiences.

“I go to the grocery store, and almost after every show, there’s someone coming up to one of us telling us how much they enjoyed the show and what it meant that they could go,” McWhorter said.

This year, the Eugene Ballet will be performing in its hometown much closer to Christmas than usual, Pimble said. Its Eugene run includes evening and matinee performances from Friday through Sunday.

When show directors realized that the Eugene Ballet and Orchestra Next had a chance to do a full dress rehearsal — which is rare in touring schedules for most years — they decided to open it up as a free performance to low-income families, Pimble said. The company worked with local social work groups to distribute the tickets.

"We always are trying to come up with ideas for how we can do things like that, because it's not easy to make big arts events like 'The Nutcracker' accessible to everybody," McWhorter said.

There also will be a free concert at noon Sunday, which will include performances from the Cantabile Collective and a brass quintet from Orchestra Next.

"It's sort of a Christmas present from all of us to the community," McWhorter said.

Jackie Renzetti is a freelance journalist in Eugene. She can be reached at jackie.renzetti@gmail.com.

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— Reed Souther, member of the Eugene Ballet Company

PERFORMANCE PREVIEW

Eugene Ballet Company's The Nutcracker

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

Where: Silva Concert Hall, Hult Center for the Performing Arts, Seventh Avenue and Willamette Street

Tickets: \$40 to \$60, \$25 to \$45 for students and youth (hultcenter.org)

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