

KeizerCommunity

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Celtics' resident choreographer keeps actors on their toes

By MATT RAWLINGS
Of the Keizertimes

McNary High School's annual winter musical has become a staple of this community for a number of years now — the performing arts rendition of *Grease* opened last week.

The school's focus on performing arts is very apparent as students display talents in singing, dancing and acting at a level that is hard to match in the Salem-Keizer area.

It might be a struggle for many programs to keep things fresh and entertaining for their audience year after year. But with the help of choreographer Zoe-Lisa Banton — who is the director of City Dance Theatre in Salem — students are continually able to capture the attention of those who come to see the show.

Banton has been choreographing the McNary musical for the last 20 years and continues to challenge and push her

students to be the best that they can be.

"I have pushed these students to reach beyond their expectations with the choreography. Most of these students are not dancers and I give them choreography that I would give my studio dancers," Banton said. "Every show I choreograph at McNary I try to push the limit with the intensity of choreography."

"Keizer theatre has a name and reputation, so we have a lineage to live up to."

Banton, who grew up in England, brings an extensive dancing background to her multiple roles in the community.

She started dancing at the age of two and by the time she was 11 years old, Banton had earned a scholarship to The Royal Ballet School.

From there, Banton used her skills to perform and compete all over Great Britain. At age 16, she was a finalist in both The All



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England Dance Finals as well as Miss Dance of Great Britain.

After spending time performing and traveling through Europe, Banton was hired as a dancer with Princess Cruises — where she wound up meeting her husband, Brad, who was a musical director on the ship.

Banton spent more than five years on the cruise ships before marrying Brad and moving to Branson, Missouri.

But by the age 24, Banton's body began to feel the results of dancing for basically her whole life, which is why she decided to get into teaching.

With a love for sharing her knowledge, as well as teaching qualifications from the Britain Ballet Organization, it was a



Director of City Dance Theater Zoe-Lisa Banton guides some of McNary's *Grease* actors through a dance number.

seamless transition for Banton.

"I just started to realize that this is really what I wanted to do," Banton said.

After spending a year in Missouri, Banton and her husband moved to Keizer to be closer to his family, who are from Salem.

Within three months of living in Keizer, Banton began teaching dance in Keizer Christian Church. In 1996, she opened up City Dance Theatre (CDT).

When she first opened up CDT, Banton used to rent out the auditorium at McNary High School to allow her students to put on recitals, which is how she first got connected with Linda Baker — who was the performing arts teacher at McNary from 1996 to 2011 and is the founder of Keizer Homegrown Theatre.

After seeing Banton's students perform, Baker knew that she wanted to develop a partnership with her.

"Her creativity is phenomenal," Baker said about Banton. "She just really understands dance and theatre."

Baker agreed to let Banton use the auditorium for recitals and performances without a fee. In return, Banton was required to be the choreographer for the McNary winter musical every year — which ended up being the beginning of a beautiful partnership.

"(Banton) is the best collaborator I have ever worked with," Baker said. "She can deliver on it's the run and is just a great problem solver."

Oklahoma was the first play she choreographed in 1999. And every year since, Banton has played an influential role in the production of each McNary winter musical. Whether it's a show like *Romeo and Juliet* or *Legally Blonde*, it's easy to see Banton's fingerprints all over the performance.

Even though there has been some transition in the McNary theatre department over the years, the production value has stayed at a high level.

Tom Cavanaugh, who is in his second year as the theatre director at McNary High School said: "It was the happiest

surprise of my career to learn that we had a built in choreographer at the school. It's been great working with Zoe. It was such an easy transition and we just clicked right away."

"Sometimes you just have to get out of her way and let her get to work."

Even though it's been two decades, Banton hasn't lost an ounce of her passion for kids in this community.

"They are just a great cast and they are super supportive of each other," Banton said about the cast of *Grease*. "McNary theatre is an amazing environment for our Keizer young adults to thrive in. I feel very blessed to have been able to share my love of musical theatre with them for so long."

If you haven't yet seen it, there is still time to catch the McNary performing arts department's showing of *Grease*. There will be a 7 p.m. showing tonight and a 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. showing on Saturday at the school's auditorium.

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CREATORS NEWS SERVICE By Charles Preston

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