

of approximately 80 dancers from around the Lower Columbia area, a 55-piece orchestra conducted by Cory Pederson, and a 12-voice choir — receives a slightly different interpretation each year primarily because of new input from veteran and incoming choreographers alike.

“We get new people coming in, so it’s great to have their fresh take on it,” said Emily Madsen, who has choreographed since 2005 but also performed in the ballet several times in her youth. “We’re surprised or caught off guard, in a good way, by someone else’s take on it. It’s refreshing.”

Sarah Cohen, who recently moved to the area, is involved for the first time, though she has been dancing since she was 3 and once owned a ballet school. She helped choreograph the snow flurries, dream fairies and Chinese dance portion in the Land of the Sweets.

From one company to another, she said, staging “The Nutcracker” ballet is both “different and the same.” Consistently, however, the ballet is a valuable tradition.

“My Christmas season doesn’t start unless ‘The Nutcracker’ is in it,” said Cohen, adding that she starts listening to the score by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky in mid-August.

Choreographer Caroline Wright, another fairly recent newcomer, has a musical theater and competition dance background. She never danced in a production of “The Nutcracker” herself but is now enjoying being part of the creative process.

“With my musical theater background, I’m able to really home in on telling the story, and what that means, not just in the scenes but the dances as well,” she said.

### Begins with a party

The famous two-act ballet was derived from Alexandre Dumas’ “The Story of the Nutcracker,” an adaption of E.T.A. Hoffman’s story, “The Nutcracker and the Mouse King.”

Act I begins with a party at the Stahlbaum family home, where relatives and friends have gathered. Clara Stahlbaum’s mysterious godfather Dr. Drosselmeyer brings gifts for the guests, including a special nutcracker for Clara. From there, “We creep inside of Clara’s dream,” Wright said, adding, “It’s just a huge spectacle from start to finish.”

Through Clara’s perspective, the audience watches the nutcracker lead gingerbread soldiers against the King Mouse and his army of mice. Next, Clara and the nutcracker travel to the Kingdom of Snow and then to the Land of the Sweets, ruled by the Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier. They call for a celebration featuring sweets from other countries, including Spain, Arabia,



Ballet dancers strike a pose during a scene from ‘The Nutcracker.’

COLIN MURPHEY PHOTOS



**LEFT:** Cast members share a laugh backstage before a scene. **RIGHT:** Performers make last-minute adjustments to their costumes before a scene from ‘The Nutcracker.’



China and Russia.

“You get to sit back and enjoy a show and be taken to all sorts of places around the world,” Wright said. “Adults and children alike are able to respond to what

they’re watching.”

Madsen works closely each production with the dancer portraying Clara, who this year is 18-year-old Andrea Harris. The process is particularly special since she herself

played Clara before.

“There is a part of you, once you’re Clara, you always watch (the part) and get those mushy feelings of remembering when you were dancing it,” she said.

Madsen changes Clara’s choreography a bit each year, according to the personality of the individual dancer taking on the role. Her goal, she said, is “pulling the Clara out of each girl.”

“Finding in them that little girl who the story is about, making them become that, is really fun,” she added.

The production has evolved in other ways, as well. In the beginning, the music for the show was played on vinyl, then other genres: reel-to-reel, cassette and CD.

Having live accompaniment from an orchestra for the past 15 years or so, Peterson said, “really made us come full circle.” 