

Celebrating a decade of dancing “The Nutcracker”

By JENNIFER COLTON

As the Nutcracker comes to life under Clara’s Christmas tree and the Sugar Plum Fairy dances across the stage at the Bob Clapp Theater, this year marks the 10th anniversary of “The Nutcracker” ballet in Pendleton. Ticket sales were so brisk that all shows sold out before the first performance on Nov. 30.

For the audience, the show signals the start of the Christmas season; for the dancers of Pendleton Ballet Theatre (PBT), it’s an emotional culmination of months of rehearsals and a celebration of family.

“It’s full of magic,” says director Julie Sneden Carlson. “It’s a Christmas classic that’s so well loved it brings a little piece of that magic to the community.”

Sneden Carlson understands that magic inside and out. The former professional ballerina brought ballet to Pendleton when her family moved here. She says she intended to retire after 25 years of teaching, but saw a need to bring classical dance to the region. Soon she was putting on a “Nutcracker Tea Party,” a narrated performance focused on the party scene of “The Nutcracker.” Each year she’s added more – more pieces, more costumes, more dancers. After a decade, PBT stages almost the entire two-act ballet.

“We’ve never gone backward – every year we keep moving forward,” she says. “What ballet does for kids is so profound for so many kids that I just can’t stay away from it.” PBT teaches ballet techniques, but its mission is to teach students how to excel in life by excelling in dance.

“I have learned much in ballet,

but also in love, friendship and family,” says 12-year-old RyLee Demianew. “You don’t just come to rehearsal to dance. You laugh, learn, and sometimes you fall – but you do it as a family. I have learned that sometimes you need to fall and then get back up again.”

RyLee will reprise her role as Clara this year. She has danced with Sneden Carlson for nine years, almost since the first Nutcracker performance. Of the 35 dancers in “The Nutcracker” this year, many are also in their ninth year, and others are counting seven or eight. They gather to rehearse in the long, narrow studio on Main Street, where they talk and laugh and tease each other like affectionate siblings.

For Sammie Mahaffy, ballet has become a way to stay involved in dance. A former hip-hop dancer, she joined ballet because it was one of a limited dance opportunities for someone out of school.

“I never would have imagined when I moved here at 19 that I’d still be doing this at 27 – and that I’d feel like I’m better than I’ve ever been,” she reflects. She loves seeing everyone grow. “The first year, Katelyn (Demianew) was in my arms. Now here we are, and she’s dancing on her own. It’s really neat

watching them grow up in ballet.”

Another adult performer, Chris Demianew, does triple duty for Pendleton Ballet Theatre: he is on stage as Drosselmeyer, behind the scenes as stage manager and always in the role of parent. He says behind-the-scenes during “The Nut-

cracker” is when the family comes together.

“Pendleton is a small community, but every year we go to BMCC and the theater space is absolutely packed,” he says. “There’s something that is magic. They want to fill their hearts with that magic. It makes all the work worth it.”

Rehearsals for the show begin in June. In the

weeks leading up to performances, the dancers have class twice a week, plus additional rehearsals. Some of the dancers travel across town – others across county lines. And PBT crosses the years to include those who have a decade of experience and those just beginning.

“Not only has Miss Julie taught me dance – she’s taught me confidence,” says 11-year-old Chloe Chay, a recent addition. “Coming here, no matter how big or small or short or tall or how young or how old, you can always join. It’s never too late.”

Ruby Engum agrees. She dances

as the Sugar Plum Fairy this year, but she did not begin ballet until age 13. At that time she feared she might be too old to start. Ruby, who admits to some confidence issues, says the experience is a little surreal.

“I looked up to the Sugar Plum Fairy, and now I am it,” she says. “You get to be someone else that you maybe couldn’t be.”

Another PBT star, Austin Ford, 15, is dancing the title role of the Nutcracker. “It’s a fantastic experience,” he says. “But it is hard to do all the practicing and the steps and the memorization – and you have to make it look easy.”

In Pendleton Ballet Theatre, the dance does look easy – though not always perfect. Dancers continue to participate, even when life trips them up. This year, 15-year-old Brittany Case is wearing a boot over her foot because of an injury. She helps with practices from the sideline – but she’ll be onstage for show time, in a hooped dress hiding the cast. Julie Sneden Carlson says it’s not the first time.

“We’ve had kids on crutches on stage,” she recalls, with a smile. “It’s not about being perfect. We want to make each one of them shine.” Instead of a competition, ballet becomes a collaboration and a mentorship program.

Sneden Carlson concedes they couldn’t do it without the commitment of so many local families. “It is a lot of work, but we know why we do this: It brings the magic, and it lets people dream.”

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