

Ahwatukee's 'Nutcracker' features cast of 135

by *Coty Dolores Miranda* - Dec. 8, 2010 09:38 AM
Special for the republic

Holiday magic happens each year when the Ahwatukee Foothills Ballet presents "The Nutcracker."

This year, the 11th annual production, comprising 135 cast members from ages 3 to 22, sumptuously dressed in 400 hand-designed costumes and headpieces, will again feature dancing against and amid falling snow, angels dancing on clouds and a Christmas tree that grows through the stage roof.



Performance photos

It's the performance most local dancers eagerly await, often competing against dozens of other hopefuls for plum roles.

For younger dancers, it starts as an onstage performance as a snowflake or Christmas mouse.

Desert Vista senior Sarah Johnson knows all too well how climbing the ladder to a principal role takes time and talent.

For the second year, Johnson performs her "dream role" of the Sugar Plum Fairy. She began 10 years ago, playing all roles including a dancing Bon Bon, Dew Drop, Butterfly, Party Girl and Snow Queen.

"I was so happy to get the part, even better to get it twice," said Johnson, a National

Honors Society member and captain of Desert Vista's Senior Company Dance Group. "I think it will be a little sad this year because 'The Nutcracker' has always been a part of my Christmas, but it makes it very special."

Lexy Mattouk, 12, is a newcomer this year though she has attended "The Nutcracker" with her mother, Holly, since she was 3 years old. A sixth-grader at Horizon Community Learning Center, she was one of 37 who auditioned for the lead role of Clara.

It was her first attempt at this production and she recalls the August audition process took more than six hours.

"Lexy's very disciplined about school work and dance," her mother said. "She's also very dedicated."

She will be the first Clara to dance "on pointe," performing steps while on the tips of the toes using a special blocked shoe.

"Dancing calms me down; it reloads me," said Lexy, a straight-A student who, during the party scene, dons a dress heavily encrusted with rhinestones. "It makes me feel like a princess just wearing it."

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"We definitely go the extra mile with our costumes," said Kimberly Lewis, owner of Dance Studio 111, which produces Ahwatukee's own version of the much-loved holiday ballet. Until she moved her studio last summer to larger quarters, it was called for 16 years the Kimberly Lewis School of Dance.

"We design most costumes in-house and have some tutus made in New York or Los Angeles. One hand-stitched tutu can take 12 to 16 weeks to make," Lewis said.

The dancers appreciate the care that goes into the costumes.

"My Snow Queen costume is such a gorgeous thing," said Caitlin Hoeft, in her second year and playing the Marzipan Queen. "I'm wearing a hand-beaded white tutu with white flower rosettes and a silvery gold ruffle."

Three holiday performances will be presented at the Desert Vista High School Fine Arts Theatre: 7 p.m. Friday, Dec. 17 and Saturday, Dec. 18 at 2 and 7 p.m.

The afternoon show includes a post-performance visit with cast members and Santa, who arrives onstage by sleigh to the audience singing "Jingle Bells."

Spectators may take photos with Santa and cast, or pose on Clara's Land of Sweets throne. The stage settings have become a popular family holiday photo opportunity.

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