

Classifieds

Employment
Real Estate
New Home
Living
Virtual Tours
Automotive
Merchandise

Menu

News

Obituaries
Opinion
State
Nation
World
Neighbor
Archives

Sports

High School
Baylor
Professional

Money

Stocks
Lottery

Brazos Living

Waco Today
Bridal/Anniv
Entertainment
Games
Travel
Teen Trib

Health

Archives

Weather

National

Marketplace

Advertisers

Circulation

Subscribe
Make a Payment
Customer Service

How To

Buy a print ad
Buy an online ad
Staff directory
Reach web staff
Write to the editor
Set my homepage

Suite Memories

By ANNA HANKS *Tribune-Herald staff writer*

KILLEEN — Tiffany Ross wants to be a ballerina, a dream that has her mother traveling up and down Interstate 35 as regularly as a long-haul trucker.

In order for the 13 year old to study dance, Barbara Ross regularly drives her blue 15-passenger van from the family's home in Waco to Killeen for lessons and rehearsals. These days, the show putting the miles on the van is "The Texas Nutcracker" — a version of the classic holiday-themed ballet with uniquely Texas touches.

Tiffany is dancing four roles in the Killeen show — a living doll, a snowflake, The Jackalope King and a dancer in the Spanish "pas de deux" in the Land of the Sweets. It's her seventh or eighth year to be in "The Nutcracker" ballet — a number that isn't unusual for little boys and girls who set their sights on being professional dancers one day.

A performance of "The Texas Nutcracker" by Ballet Renee in the Vive les Arts auditorium in Killeen may seem a long way from the dance capitals of New York and Paris. Yet, in the world of dance, it really isn't very far.

"The Nutcracker" is strongly tied to the lives of ballet students and professionals all over the world. For dancers, being in "The Nutcracker" is practically a rite of passage.

Watching a "Nutcracker" performance is often what propels a child into a life of dance, said Bill Piner, director of Ballet Austin Academy.

"It's kind of their inspiration to get them started," he said.

Like other young dancers, Tiffany was first exposed to dance seeing "The Nutcracker."

But for her to be as involved as she is in the holiday show, it requires lots of time and dedication from her family.

"My husband and I talked about this before we decided to do this," said Barbara Ross, an enthusiastic woman sitting only a few rows from the stage during the Killeen dress rehearsal.

Twice a week during the school year, and three times a week in the summer, Barbara Ross drives her daughter one hour each way to dance lessons in Killeen.

While Barbara sails down I-35, her husband, Michael, stays home and fixes dinner for Tiffany's six siblings still living at home.

In addition to the time invested driving Tiffany to dance classes, Barbara Ross also homeschools her daughter.

With so many children at home, why are the Rosses willing to invest this time and energy into Tiffany's roles in "The Texas Nutcracker"?

"It's another performance opportunity, and you just can't get enough of those," Tiffany Ross said.

A holiday staple

"The Nutcracker" is a perennial holiday favorite with audiences all over the country, often drawing sold-out performances week after week, year after year. This year, Ballet Renee of Killeen is performing its "Texas Nutcracker" five times. Ballet Austin is doing 11 Nutcracker performances in Austin, and they brought one show to Waco on Nov. 24. Houston Ballet is doing 33, and the famed New York City Ballet is doing 46 performances of the holiday classic.

Joy's School of Dance is the only Waco studio that regularly performs the show, and it produces "The Nutcracker" every other year. The school plans to stage a version for Christmas 2003.

For many ballet companies, "The Nutcracker" is so popular that proceeds from their productions often subsidize the rest of their seasons. Thus, almost every major ballet company in the country produces a version of the ballet, along with scores of regional and local productions.

"Anybody who knows anything about ballet knows about it," said Kristin Porter, 26, a dance teacher at Joy's School of Dance who said she was in "The Nutcracker" consecutively for seven or eight years.

Based on a story by E.T.A. Hoffman, with music composed by Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, the classic ballet tells the story of Clara, a little girl whose magician-Uncle Drosselmeyer comes to visit Christmas Eve. Among his gifts is a toy nutcracker, which is broken during the Christmas party, then left under the tree to recuperate. That night, Clara gets out of bed to find her new toy under a growing Christmas tree.

Magically, the nutcracker comes to life. Moments later, the Nutcracker Prince heads an army, engaged in a battle to the death with the Mouse King and his minions. After the battle, the Nutcracker Prince is changed into a handsome prince who whisks Clara away to the magical Land of the Sweets. Snowflakes come to life, tiny children emerge from under the gigantic skirt of Mother Ginger, and the Sugar Plum Fairy ends the ballet with a classic "pas de deux" with her cavalier. After a few bars of

transitional music, Clara wakes up under her Christmas tree, nutcracker doll in hand.

Starting small

From young ballet students to professional dancers, there is a definite progression in "Nutcracker" roles, although the sequence varies from company to company. Very young children — boys and girls — can be guests at the Christmas party, "bon bons" or "ginger children" streaming out from underneath the enormous skirt of Mother Ginger.

Older children can be soldiers under the command of the Nutcracker Prince, or mouse soldiers in the service of the Mouse King. Older and more accomplished dancers can take on the more difficult dancing of the Spanish dance, snowflakes or flowers in the "Waltz of the Flowers."

"This is the first year I am dancing in 'The Nutcracker' where it has challenged me to get it right," Tiffany said.

One of the most coveted roles in any production is Clara, a part she understudied.

" 'The Nutcracker' is pure magic for both the dancers and the audience," said Heather Thomas, who has danced Clara for Ballet Austin. "I love dancing the part of Clara. It's a joy to watch little girls out in the audience . . . dreaming of being Clara as I did as a child."

Another coveted role is the Sugar Plum Fairy.

"It was amazing because it's one of the roles you grow up watching the big girls do," said Sarah Pierce, 20, of Waco. She danced the role of the Sugar Plum Fairy last year for Joy's School of Dance.

"I would love to dance that part," Tiffany Ross said about the role of the Sugar Plum Fairy.

Each year, Ballet Austin brings a Nutcracker performance to Waco, and area dance students participate in the production.

"I think it's an excellent experience for them. They get to work with a ballet company and everything," said Regina Nix, Owner and Director All That Jazz Academy of Dance in Waco .

Carly Connally, 10, is a fifth-grader from Lorena who was a Ballet Austin "bon bon" this year.

"I thought it was really fun being in Austin Ballet," said the outspoken and freckled Connally, who has her eyes on a career in dance.

Tiffany Ross' partner for the Spanish "pas de deux" in "The Texas Nutcracker" is Joseph Hernandez, 14, of Copperas Cove, a young man seemingly destined for a career in professional dance.

Focused on dance

Hernandez just relocated back to the United States from Germany, where his father was a USO musician. Hernandez currently takes most of his classes on full scholarship at Ballet Austin.

"The Nutcracker" is what got him involved in dance, said Laura Hernandez, Joseph's mom. She said Joseph was first exposed to dance when he watched a videotape of dancer Mikhail Barisknikov's performance as the Nutcracker Prince. Joseph started jumping around the house, saying he wanted to go to ballet school, she said.

Now, at 14, he's making his rite of passage in his first production of "The Nutcracker."

"Professional dancers need to have a background of performance opportunities because that's what you do as a professional dancer," he said.

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