

O'Neal to perform with Colorado Ballet in The Nutcracker

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

A charming prince, falling snow, the Land of Sweets and a Sugarplum Fairy are only part of what make The Nutcracker one holiday tradition that transcends generations and keeps audiences coming back year after year. For many, the highlights of the entire production are the youngest cast members in the smallest roles.

Emily O'Neal, 12-year-old daughter of Rupert and Claire O'Neal of Holyoke, has been chosen to dance the role of Angel in Colorado Ballet's 2008 production of The Nutcracker.

O'Neal will be one of 90 students from the Academy of Colorado Ballet South and Central locations to perform in this year's production.

Including children in The Nutcracker has been an integral part of Colorado Ballet's annual holiday production for years.

"The Nutcracker wouldn't be the same without the students," said Leslie Morton Justi, director of Colorado Ballet's South Academy. "Every child that comes to see the production can relate to our students on the stage. It also speaks to our Academies' objective to give our students as many professional experiences as possible."

The Nutcracker is the perfect ballet to incorporate young dancers, as it has various small roles. The cast for one performance alone involves 35-40 youth dancers, and roles range from Angels and Party Girls and Boys, to Soldiers and Mother Ginger's Legs.

"This is a great opportunity for young dancers," said Director of Colorado Ballet's Central Academy Michelle Dolighan-Rodenbeck. "Most professional companies like to integrate children in this production because it gives aspiring dancers a chance to experience the 'behind-the-scenes' atmosphere with costume fittings, strenuous rehearsals and multiple performances."

Neither Morton Justi nor Dolighan-Rodenbeck are strangers to The Nutcracker, having performed principal roles in Colorado Ballet's setting of the iconic ballet for many years. This year's turnout for auditions was the largest they've ever seen, with more than 100 students participating.

Before auditioning, students must meet certain criteria. They must be actively enrolled in either one of Colorado Ballet's Academies at the time of the auditions and, because of costumes, must meet certain height requirements.

"The company owns the costumes for The Nutcracker and has built several over the years, but each costume is constructed for a certain height," said Carol Bargery, wardrobe supervisor for Colorado Ballet.

"The high cost and time required to develop our costumes prevents us from creating new ones each year. Therefore, even if students have the technique and skill level, the existing costume height may dictate whether or not they are cast in the production."

Once casting is complete, the fun begins. Rehearsals get underway, final costume fittings are held and the students get a chance to partake in the making of a professional ballet.

"The students work so hard during rehearsals and offer such a high level of commitment to be part of this production. Organizing and staging the students requires a tremendous amount of time and work for everyone involved," Dolighan-Rodenbeck said.

"But it is a job with great rewards. To see young dancers succeeding with confidence on stage at the Ellie Caulkins Opera House in front of so many people is a wonderful feeling of accomplishment for everyone."

The incredible amount of time and commitment from The Nutcracker's youngest dancers, coupled with the excitement they get from performing in a professional production, proves that the smallest roles truly make The Nutcracker the classic it is.

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The Nutcracker will be performed 24 times Nov. 29-Dec. 27 at the Ellie Caulkins Opera House.

Classic choreography pairs with Tchaikovsky's extraordinary arrangement, bound to complement the magic of any family's seasonal traditions. The impressive list of characters demands three different casts of Academy dancers and up to five company casts, allowing dancers new opportunities as they're circling in and out of different roles throughout the production.

Always one of the company's more lavish productions of the season, all 24 performances of The Nutcracker will feature dazzling sets and costumes, from the glittering snowflakes to the shimmering sugarplum to Mother Ginger's candy-studded bonnet.

Adding to the season's spirit of giving, on Friday, Dec. 5, 2,000 Denver-area students from disadvantaged schools will be welcomed by Colorado Ballet for a free performance of the holiday classic.

This season's The Nutcracker performance will mark Colorado Ballet's reaching its 500,000th person through programs of its Department of Education and Outreach.

Performance schedule and ticketing information for The Nutcracker may be obtained by visiting Colorado Ballet's website at www.coloradoballet.org.

To purchase tickets for The Nutcracker, call 303-837-8888, send an e-mail to info@coloradoballet.org or visit Colorado Ballet's website.