

Moms and Dads Are Good Soldiers

Parents play a vital role in 'Nutcracker'

Peter Goodman

On the Isle

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With a broad smile and an upraised arm, Joe Erland led his 15-year-old daughter, Andrea, through the formal entrance of the parents at the party that opens "The Nutcracker," the Christmas perennial of ballet companies and dance schools across the country.

It's the quintessential magnet for stage moms and dads, who often find themselves getting involved for reasons having little to do with dance and end up with experiences more valuable than they expected.

Erland, a Long Island Rail Road engineer, is in his sixth season with Port Jefferson's Harbor Ballet production, and he has progressed from tentative novice to the role of Herr Stahlbaum, the party host. "He knows the whole party scene better than I do," company director John Worrell said. "It's pretty funny. He tells the kids, 'You have to be animated there - you can't just sit there - watch what's going on.'"

"I've coached my kids in baseball and soccer," Erland said. When his elder daughter, Michelle, was in the company, he just helped out backstage. "One time, I got word when I got home: 'You have to go to practice.' I

thought it was for helping with props, but it was for the performance. At first, I was taken aback, but it's a lot of fun. You get respect for the kids, for all the dance steps they have to learn, for what they retain."

In downtown Brooklyn, Kim Wallace was preparing for her very first "Nutcracker" appearance, in the Brooklyn Music School's borough-centric production. She was drawn into it not by a misunderstanding but as something to do while waiting for her children during their weekly dance and music lessons.

"I was kind of here, hanging out," she said. "I volunteered to help one of the teachers on Saturday. Then, I started soliciting adults in the school to see if they wanted a dance class, and we started an adult dance class. I had my first dance recital at the age of 41."

From sports dads to dance moms, parents take a surprisingly large role in the annual local pageants that compose the "Nutcracker" season. While the New York City Ballet and regional touring companies use professionals for the adult roles in Tchaikovsky's holiday classic, family connections abound in community-focused productions, even those as polished as the Eglevsky in Nassau County and the Seiskaya in Suffolk.

"It really does make a difference," Seiskaya ballet director Dmitri Papadakos said. "There's the time commitment for putting on a 'Nutcracker.' When parents get involved at that level, they truly understand what is involved, not only in the production values but also in the level of interest of their particular children."

Some parents have been involved since long before they were parents. Michelle Isabelle-Stark, director of the Suffolk County Office of Cultural Affairs and a "party mother" in the Seiskaya production, studied as a child with the late Andre Eglevsky, founder of the company that bears his name. As an adult, she continued lessons with Valya Seiskaya. "The one great thing about classical ballet," she said, "is that you can have it all your life. It's a wonderful form of exercise. You don't dance en pointe, but you can always take classes and stay in shape."

Which is something that has impressed Sam Power, a Harbor Ballet parent who considers himself "more of a sports person." He plays regularly in a men's basketball league and, even with the limited and, even with the limited amount of movement required for the party scene, has gained a better understanding of the athleticism underlying dance. "I have a new regard for the kind of

shape you need to be in," he said. "We do some limited waltz kind of stuff, which takes coordination and stuff you really have to practice. It looks easier than it is."

That pales in comparison with the effort required of the children. "It just amazes me," he said. "In the scene I go to, there are certain things they do where everyone is in exact step together. You are talking hundreds of steps in the entire sequence. You get a new appreciation for that kind of stuff."

While the Brooklyn Music School's production is tailored to the borough - Clara, the child who receives the Nutcracker for Christmas, gets lost in Macy's and later visits Sunset Park, Brighton Beach and other ethnic neighborhoods - parent and child have just as much work to do. "I never knew what went on behind the scenes to put it all together," Wallace said. "I got to see how much work is involved. It's been a tremendous experience. It's kind of putting your money where your mouth is as far as the kids are concerned."

Power, in Port Jefferson, agreed. "The best thing is hanging around with my daughter," he said.

And, Erland said, now when holiday time approaches, "I look forward to the phone call."