

Generously giving the intangible gift of dance

Actress Victoria Rowell sponsors scholarship for Ballet Theatre of Boston student

By Christie Taylor
CNC Arts Writer

Think of the holidays and think of gifts: huge boxes wrapped in shiny paper with oversized bows and boxes of candy and home-made goodies packaged with care. At Ballet Theatre of Boston, more than 200 children are rehearsing

DANCE nonstop so that they may recount for audiences one of the most well-known scenes of holiday gift giving — the party scene of "The Nutcracker."

There's also a gift being passed around the Ballet Theatre of Boston studios, but it's not a tangible one: It's the gift of dance.

As Jose Mateo, director of the company and choreographer of this original production, rehearses the



Victoria Rowell, star of "The Young and the Restless."

party children for their roles, which they will perform at the Emerson Majestic Theatre from Dec. 10-28, he notes one dancer who has overcome obstacles that the other children have not faced.

The dancer's name is Shirley, who's a 12-year-old foster child on scholarship at Ballet Theatre through the Rowell Foster Children's Positive Plan. Shirley attends class four days per week and rehearses on Saturdays because of a program started by Victoria Rowell, a former ballet dancer and television star ("Diagnosis Murder," "The Young and the

Restless") who started the fund to give scholarships to about 10 students a year to study ballet, basketball or golf.

"It's difficult for children like Shirley because they are in a nebulous labyrinth," explains Rowell, speaking from her dressing room on the "Diagnosis Murder" set. "Even though perhaps in the back of foster children's minds they're not sure where they're going to go next — and that's why I call it the nebulous labyrinth — they have hope. And with the ballet I know that it offers these children this haven from all of the chaos. It is their temple. I always felt that way when I went to ballet," says Rowell, also a foster child, who began ballet lessons at the Cambridge School of Ballet years ago.

"I still have the gift of dance in my spirit," she says. And that's what she wants to pass along. "A lot of our children today, unfortunately through hyped advertising, think that the Mercedes and the Rolex and the fancy pair of NBA sneakers are the end all-be all. But those things aren't the end all-be all. With dance you cannot lie, you really have to work very hard for that technique. So that in itself is a very good lesson for children."

Mateo's philosophy of teaching meshes with Rowell's, which is part of why Rowell chose Ballet Theatre as a site for scholarship recipients. Rowell and Mateo also danced together at Ballet Hispanico in New York.

"Anyone will benefit from the study of ballet," says Mateo. "That benefit really is not just learning how to execute steps. The benefits really transfer into most anything the children do, and so we figure even if their circumstances do not



Shirley's scholarship to Ballet Theatre of Boston is funded by the Rowell Foster Children's Positive Plan.

permit them to continue ballet long term, that they will have gained something very beneficial to their lives in general."

Shirley's favorite aspect of ballet is the movement.

"It's fun," she says. "I also like the acting and being onstage." She says the difficulties for her lie in going to all the rehearsals and learning the steps, but her attendance is fine and she's keeping up with her schoolwork.

"She's a very determined child who has very intelligently responded to the demands of ballet training," says Mateo. "Her discipline, her manner, her behavior and her dedication is apparent at a very

young age. That's certainly going to help her succeed."

Undoubtedly those are the same qualities that helped Rowell achieve her dreams, in addition to a foster mother who consistently supported Rowell's talent.

Rowell says, "Here I was, born into a situation where it would seem most unlikely that I would be able to latch onto something which was truly my passion." But she adds that "people who have the most seemingly normal upbringings never find what their true passion and love is."

In addition to her gift of allowing children the chance to learn what they love, Rowell also offers Shirley and other children the gift

of wisdom.

"Through all the temptation, and through all the peer pressure and all of the negativity out there, she has to remain true to herself and to her passion," says Rowell. "For the sake of dance, I know that if she stays true to herself and she stays focused, she will be able to develop a high standard of dance, and that's a tool she can carry in her life and throughout her life whether she decides to become anything other than a dancer." □

Ballet Theatre of Boston performs "The Nutcracker" at the Emerson Majestic Theatre, Boston, Dec. 10-28. Tickets are \$9-\$28. Call (617) 824-8000.