



The Ballet Theatre of Boston stages its "Nutcracker" at the Emerson Majestic Theatre.

A family affair

Children and parents work together to make Ballet Theatre of Boston's 'Nutcracker' a success

By **Margareta Mildsommar**
CNC ARTS WRITER

In addition to the 26 professional Ballet Theatre of Boston dancers, more than 200 children of all ages are performing in this season's "The Nutcracker," running at the Emerson Majestic Theatre through Dec. 26. Many parents will sit in the audi-

DANCE

ence, adoring their youngsters as they perform in the roles of angels, mice and soldiers. But numerous parents will also be

backstage, replacing popped-off buttons, coloring cheeks, curling hair and coordinating stage entrances and departures. It seems BTB's "Nutcracker" has become something of a family affair.

"I think we have a record number of families participating in this event," says artistic director and founder Jose Mateo. "Initially, it started as parents were looking for roles for their children who had some experience performing on stage, but over time, [the parents] have come to realize that their participation really ... ends up

FAMILY, next page



"The Nutcracker" children at the Ballet Theatre of Boston

Boston's other 'Nutcracker'

BALLET, from previous page

being a positive experience for them.

"Soliciting volunteers is part of our normal work," Mateo continues. "It is just nice to receive it in this particular form at a time when we have to coordinate so many different people to get a production on stage of this size and of this many performances."

In this year's 28 performances, there are dads performing as Mother Ginger and moms appearing in the holiday party scene. The rest of the volunteering parents — 20-plus per show — are behind the scenes, keeping things running smoothly as well as adding a calming effect for the many young participants.

While Kelly Nieves' two children — 11-year-old Jeffrey and 8-year-old Nicole — are in the spotlight, Nieves is backstage, with her needle, scissors, costume hooks and elastics. As the costume coordinator, the Newburyport school teacher is ready to repair at any moment.

Nieves and her husband, who is also putting in several hours of volunteer work during the production, are also responsible for the cleaning of the clothing, which includes taking the 200-something costumes apart and then sewing, stitching and matching the pieces back together.

Having returned for her second season with "The Nutcracker," Nieves says she truly enjoys being involved, mainly because of her children.

"I think, especially, during this time of year, you get really lost in being so busy," she says. "And now we are all busy, but we are busy together, so it's kind of neat. We pack a cooler and we just bring it with us and we eat together and we spend a lot of time together; I think if we weren't doing this, we would all be off doing our own things."

Like Nieves, many other parents and children come back to the production year after year.

"We have a lot of returning children; it becomes more and more of a family affair as people return," says Mateo. "It is always nice when we have our auditions to see how many people really do come back; it's always a welcomed surprise to see that that many do. So we have some cast members and families that have participated five, six, or seven years, and

that is always an encouraging indication that we are doing something right."

Darlene Sutton has been a volunteer for five years. Her 13-year-old daughter, Amy, performs this year as a party girl. After doing the children's hair for her first couple of years, then helping them into their costumes, Sutton, who is an activities director at a nursing home, is now the "Nutcracker" coordinator.

"I am in charge of all of the children," she explains. "Jose works with three different casts — there are three cast coordinators that work directly under me. Then there is a coordinator for hair and makeup and there's a coordinator for children's costumes and dressing. And under the cast coordinators are several volunteers. And they are all parents of 'Nutcracker' children."

Parents volunteer their time because they love it, says Sutton.

"I work a full-time job and I volunteer a full-time job," she explains. "I have not had a day off since August."

Still, Sutton and her daughter keep returning — driving back and forth from their home in Kingston, N.H.

"There is a lot of work involved, but funny enough, it's kind of like having a baby — you forget about it," Sutton says. "You know, nine months later, when you go to audition again, you forget about all the work that really was involved, the huge commitment — because it is a huge commitment, for both of us."

For John Wipers, who has two daughters in this year's "Nutcracker" production, his involvement came as a surprise.

"They needed men to play Mother Ginger," he recalls. "I guess there were not enough men out there who were willing to go out there and make fools of themselves."

Wipers didn't mind. The Boston editor of America Online learned to walk on the 12-foot stilts and don his heavy makeup and the skirt under which 12 girls hide — one of them his own daughter.

"I have to watch so that I don't fall. Or step on girls' feet," Wipers says. "I even had to shave my beard off." □

The Ballet Theatre of Boston's "The Nutcracker" is at the Emerson Majestic Theatre, Boston, through Dec. 26. Tickets are \$9-\$29. Call (617) 824-8000.