

Pas de Vie prances out a post-turkey plum

Amanda Sieradzki
Council on Culture & Arts

Post-turkey coma, Pas De Vie Ballet wants to entice Tallahassee's sweet tooth with their production of "The Nutcracker" this Thanksgiving weekend. Over their 30-year tenure, ballet school director Natalia Botha says the iconic holiday-season story ballet grew slowly from excerpting a single act into creating the full two-act performance.

"We did our first performance in the

Monticello Opera House," says Botha, who will oversee the Nov. 29 and Dec. 1 performances this year in Lee Hall Auditorium. "We try to have something new or different each year. It is fun for us, the dancers and the audience if they notice it."

Botha and her husband, ballet company director Charles Hagan, like to keep everyone on their toes with the choreographic changes that take place from year to year. One year they had six silly mice skitter around main character

Clara en pointe instead of 12 tiny mice. Other times, various dolls and toys have been added to the opening act's party scene.

As a choreographer, Botha says movement ideas are music-driven. She often listens to WFSU's classical music radio station, WFSQ, in addition to perusing her personal music collection that spans forty years and a multitude of genres. As long as she has a tune in

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Pas de Vie is presenting "The Nutcracker" on Nov. 29 and Dec. 1. SEAN PUSHOR

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mind, she can create anywhere.

"I choreographed a whole ballet in the driveway one year," laughs Botha. "It was fun."

Ballet runs deep in Botha's genetic code. Her mother, Gwynne Ashton, was a ballerina who became the ballet mistress of Canada's Royal Winnipeg Ballet. Botha began her training at the Royal Winnipeg Ballet School and won a full scholarship to the Joffrey Ballet School in New York by age eleven. She continued to study at the National Academy of Arts in Illinois and was a member of the National Ballet of Illinois before joining the Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre in 1976.

Botha feels lucky to have worked with both up and coming choreographers and iconic members of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo — a dance company that produced some of the most influential ballet dancers of the 20th century.

"Both my husband and I had the opportunity to work with these people that were part of a golden era," says Botha. "We were fortunate enough to learn from them, watch them and listen to

their stories. We're trying to pass along to our students all of the influence we received."

During her professional career, Botha danced classical, neo-classical and contemporary ballet roles. Some of her favorites included a lead in "Rodeo," choreographed by Agnes de Mille and working with notable ballet choreographer Bronislava Nijinska for an original 1923 Ballet Russe work, "Les Noces." Botha also got the chance to work with famous Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin, when he set "Tabula Rasa" on the Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre.

Botha would go through a tremendous amount of rehearsing to prepare for the stage. First she would work at a slower tempo to find the correct movement sequencing before upping her pace. When it came to switching between more classical shapes and more contemporary balletic movement, Botha would allow each style to touch her differently so she could more fully explore it emotionally.

"Once you have the groundwork of your technique, what you are doing becomes muscle memory," says Botha. "Then you let the emotions flow into it and the picture becomes a full painting."

Pas De Vie teaches many ballet styles given Botha and Hagan's backgrounds and studies. This includes the Royal

Ballet training that favors athletic, speedy dancers, the Italian Cecchetti method devised to increase strength and elasticity, the Russian Vaganova method that focuses on whole body expressivity and the Danish Bournonville method that asks dancers to perform with grace and drama.

Botha is appreciative for the Tallahassee community's continued support of the school and company since their inception. The company has worked with the same stage manager and pianist for many years and considers everyone on the team to be "part of the family." They're excited to have worked with the Tallahassee Symphony Orchestra as well, and providing live music for story ballets like "Peter and the Wolf."

In addition to new costuming by Claire Walker for the snow scene, Botha is looking forward to having 21 male performers in this year's "Nutcracker." She considers the corps de ballet, or members of the company that dance as a group, to be the backbone of every production and feels the most rewarding part is seeing that group come together harmoniously.

Watching her students grow from one role to the next is yet another treat as she witnesses them mature into roles like the Sugar Plum Fairy. The work that

If you go

What: The Nutcracker

When: 2:30 p.m. (children's performance) and 8 p.m. Friday, Nov. 29 & 2:30 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 1

Where: Lee Hall Auditorium, 1601 S Martin Luther King Jr Blvd

Cost: \$20 adults, \$15 students/children/seniors

Contact: For more information, call 850-290-2247 or visit <http://www.pasdevieballet.com/>.

goes on behind the scenes however, especially in rehearsals, is Botha's favorite part of the process.

"When you work with other people and you are sharing yourselves together, their souls are right there in the room exposed just as much as yours," says Botha. "That is a very personal and special part of the process. You almost don't want to open the curtain. You want that to go on forever."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).