

Roaring Fork

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L I F E S T Y L E ™

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BEHIND THE
SCENES OF ASFB'S
"THE NUTCRACKER"

ARTISANS OF
DECK THE WALLS
HOLIDAY MARKET

NEW YEAR'S EVE
CELEBRATIONS



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PHOTOGRAPHY SHAREN BRADFORD

FOR 23 DECEMBERS, ASPEN SANTA FE BALLET'S PRODUCTION OF "THE NUTCRACKER" HAS DELIVERED ITS SPECIAL CHRISTMAS MAGIC TO VALLEY AUDIENCES OF ALL AGES. But for the young local dance students who have themselves performed among the toys and snowflakes over the years, the ballet is more than a fleeting holiday reverie—it's a tradition. Perhaps even more importantly, it's an introduction to the hard work (and the opportunity) of the professional stage.

There are dancers like Danielle Way of Rifle, a 14-year-old freshman at Glenwood Springs High School and an Advanced level student with the School of Aspen Santa Fe Ballet (ASFB), who has made performing in "The Nutcracker" a part of her life. Way has been dancing since the tender age of two, beginning her studies with ArtillumA in Rifle and the Center for the Arts in Glenwood before landing at ASFB.

It was a production of "The Nutcracker" that, several years ago, inspired her current artistic ambitions.

"When I was eight I saw it for the first time, and was captivated by it, and that was when I realized I wanted to be a professional dancer," Way recalls. "After I started doing more rigorous training with ASFB I was able to perform in the production. The first year, in seventh grade, I was a soldier; last year in eighth grade I was a marionette doll in the party scene, and this year I'll be a caroler and a soldier again."

Way is in the process of auditioning for prestigious out-of-state ballet programs that may soon draw her away from the valley, but in the meantime she's training three to four hours per day, six days a week with ASFB. Since November, her Saturdays have been spent rehearsing "The Nutcracker" in Aspen.

"It's a big commitment for our family," says Way's mother Dana. "We have a younger daughter who dances in Level 4 as well. It's become our way of life. When a child has a dream, a passion—and when they work this hard—it is a pleasure to do this for them."

The families of some 160 other student dancers will also commit to supporting their children's dreams as they perform in the beloved Aspen production this holiday season. With so many participants and a host of other moving parts, how does ASFB pull off "The Nutcracker" before Christmas every year? Over time, their team has honed the process to a science. Here's how it all comes together, month by month:



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Holiday Tradition

FOR MANY OF THE VALLEY'S BALLET STUDENTS, "THE NUTCRACKER" IS A CHRISTMAS DREAM COME TRUE; FOR ASPEN SANTA FE BALLET, IT'S A DAZZLING FEAT OF PRECISE PREPARATION



September

Nearly four months before opening night, as summer temperatures are still cooling across the valley, student dancers complete the enrollment process for the school year and decide whether they want to perform in "The Nutcracker." Of approximately 300 kids who are taking classes at ASFB's school locations in Glenwood, Carbondale, Basalt, and Aspen this year, about half sign up.

"One factor that makes our production unique is that we don't do auditions," says ASFB instructor and school director Melanie Dorskocil. "We find a role for every student who wants to participate, whether they have professional aspirations or not. We have different roles that require a range of skill levels, so it's possible to find opportunities for beginning students as young as five, all the way up to high school seniors who have been dancing for many years."

When enrollment closes mid-month, Dorskocil and her team spend the remaining two weeks of September observing and working with the students to determine which roles will make a suitable challenge for each.

October

Dorskocil estimates that it takes about a month to complete casting. Since the production runs for four performances, many of the student roles are cast four times over—meaning that every show will have its own unique assemblage of talent.

"And other roles are split between two dancers," she adds. "For example, we almost always have two for Clara. Partly because we try to spread that opportunity out as much as we can, but also because it's good to have an understudy for that kind of important role, just in case."

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November

Rehearsals begin early in November, and continue every Saturday until the week of the show. Duskocil is tasked with not only managing rehearsals for the large number of dancers, but with ensuring that the rehearsal process is a feasible one for her students' parents.

"We try very hard to make it manageable for families across the valley. We don't want to take up their entire fall with rehearsals," she says. "So we work very quickly, very efficiently. And many of our older, more experienced students become great role models for the younger dancers during rehearsals. They're very supportive and helpful."

December

Pre-show preparations buzz with all the sparkle and happy chaos you might imagine during the final week of rehearsals. The enormous cast, complete with guest performers and ASFB's professional company members, comes together for two final dress rehearsals onstage at the Aspen District Theatre. Until this point, the students have only practiced in a studio setting.

"In the studio they have no sets or props to work with. So onstage, part of the process for them is dealing with the huge sets, going up and down the stairs, understanding the props, or dancing with masks," Duskocil notes. "During the stage rehearsals we also call each group for costume fittings, so that adds another new element."

The excitement reaches a fever pitch just before showtime, when everything has fallen into place, and the wide-eyed young dancers gather together backstage with the professionals.

"I remember being so elated my first year to meet the company and be in a professional production," says student Way, who will perform her parts in all four shows this year. "I'm obviously nervous, but so grateful. All the anticipation leading up to the performance, feeling proud of yourself after putting in so much hard work—that's the reward."

And then, curtain up. Catch Way and the rest of the cast in their dazzling performances on December 21 and 22. For full details visit AspenSantaFeBallet.com.



Danielle Way, in the role of the marionette, waits backstage during the 2018 production. Photo courtesy of Way family.

