Baton Rouge Ballet Theatre brings dance to schoolchildren in Baton Rouge area

By ELLYN COUVILLON

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Anthony Robertson, a third-grader at South Boulevard Elementary School, recently with his classmates in the school gym, waiting to see a performance called "Ballet for Children." He was asked what he thought it was going to be like.

"Dancing and acting out something," said Robertson, and he was exactly right.

Ballet for Children, an educational program offered by the Baton Rouge Ballet Theatre, is about 45 minutes of dance — from classical ballet to jazz — and as much music, pantomime, and a little dance history thrown in.

Children from the audience are invited to come onstage to demonstrate square-dance steps, the kind that would be danced in an old-fashioned "hoedown."

Little girls in the audience even get to have a "prince" (a member Travis Williams) walk among them, with a cast-off shoe in hand, to see if it might fit someone, like in the story of Cinderella.

The shoe is actually an old work boot in the production, but that makes it even more entertaining for the kids.

Humor, along with a variety of music styles and strong dancing, makes the show highly palatable for the children.

"From most of the schools, I hear that the children leave the performances dancing," said Michele Ball, director of Ballet for Children.

"It really is one of our primary outreach programs. It goes directly into the public and private school programs," said Sharon Mathews, co-director, along with Molly Buchman, of the Baton Rouge Ballet Theatre.

Designed for children ages kindergarten through third grade, Ballet for Children was first launched by Ball in 1977.

A native of Ohio, who grew up in Levittown, Pa., Ball, as a young teen, would take a 45-minute train ride after school to study at the School of Pennsylvania Ballet in Philadelphia.

She went on to get a bachelor's degree in ballet from the University of Utah, then danced professionally with the American Festival Ballet, which toured the country out of its home base in Moscow, Idaho.

When she later went back to the University of Utah for her master's degree in nutrition, Ball was part of a dance troupe that performed schools throughout Utah.

The program, Ballet West for Children, was a state-funded offshoot of Ballet West, a professional dance company based in Salt Lake City.

With a twice-weekly performance schedule and a heavily booked touring schedule each year, the group reaches 15-25 elementary schools in Utah at least once every five years, said Ball.

When Ball moved to Baton Rouge with her husband and infant son in 1995, she began dancing with the Baton Rouge Ballet Theatre.

"She and her husband, Dan, director of the Blevins Parish library system, now have two teen-age sons."

Ball, a consultant dietitian, also started teaching at Dance Workshop, the home of the Baton Rouge Ballet Theatre.

Soon, she began thinking of a way to bring dance into the schools here, in the same sort of program she had been active with in Utah.

"I was looking for a creative outlet—something I could offer to the community," she said.

With the help of a small grant from the Junior League of Baton Rouge to

Sarah Boes performs the 'Songbird' variation from the 'Sleeping Beauty' ballet. This is Boes' last year to perform at area schools for the Ballet for Children program.
the Baton Rouge Ballet Theatre, Ball created her own script and choreography.

The program has evolved over the years. Initially, Ball danced and drew on the talents of the students of an adult ballet class she taught — many of whom had ballet or theater experience.

Today, Ball relies on dancers from the Baton Rouge Ballet Theatre's senior company. She said, "I have only so many dancers doing probably a little more demanding," said Ball, than what she performed in the dance programs for the Utah schools.

This year, Ballet for Children troupe includes Sarah Boies, 17, a student at Baton Rouge Magnet High School; and Leigh Schneider, 15, and Travis Williams, 18, both of whom are home-schooled. Williams will graduate this year. Anja Timmerman, a dancer in her 20s, danced professionally with the now disbanded Crescent Ballet Company in New Orleans.

She's in sales, but takes vacation days off for the Ballet for Children performances. "I really enjoy being back in dance," said Timmerman.

Buttle is 15, a student at Ridgewood Academy in Zachary, and LeeAnna Rhodes, 13, a home-school student, are apprentice dancers.

Luke Fleming, a senior at Baton Rouge Magnet High School, who is also concurrently enrolled in music performance at LSU, enhances the program's music for many of the pieces with his viola.

"I love Ballet for Children. It's my favorite thing I've done," said Fleming, who has also been in Batou Rouge Little Theater productions.

"When you ask for volunteers (from the school), every hand goes up," he said.

"They love it," agreed Boies.

"They have the most blunt, honest critique," said Schneider, "It's a formative ballet program," that involves talking to the audience, as well as dancing, she said.

"I will be the last year for Boies and Schneider to perform with Ballet for Children, both of whom have been with the program for three years.

Next year, Boies hopes to attend the Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet, a preprofessional school in Carlisle, Pa.

Schneider will be moving with her family to Alexandria, Va. She's also been in local Baton Rouge Little Theater productions, and is working to get a role in the theater in Alexandria.

Of the Ballet for Children program, Schneider said, "It's really special. I'm just a kid's kind of person."

At South Boulevard Elementary on a recent May afternoon, Boies and Schneider were the program's "curators," dressed in classic pink and black and performing a ballet "barre," a warm-up.

The four students, one dancer in the audience, asked them what they were doing, and set up the premise for the program. Ball joined them to answer questions, and the program was off and running.

Before long, the kids in the audience had seen a moment of court dances (illustrating the origin of ballet), and even a little flapper dance of the 1920s.

There was a fast-moving jazz number, complete with backward, gliding "moon walking" by Boies to cheers from the kids.

There was more — tap, modern dance, short classical ballet pieces, all with different music and costumes.

"Each dancer wears about five costumes in 45 to 50 minutes," said Ball. "I think that's something that's enticing" to the audience.

The program moved quickly. Ball doesn't want to lose the children's attention.

The children were especially tickled by the brief appearance of Williams in a huge bear costume — a character from the Nutcracker. Kathy Harris, the music teacher at South Boulevard Elementary, had contacted Ballet for Children after getting a recommendation from a parent, she said.

She was interested in the program coming to the school because it would bring "exposure to different forms, different types of music, different types of dance.

Ballet for Children has been performing at 10 to 12 area public, private and parochial schools each year.

In recent summers, the Audubon Regional Library system in the Clinton, St. Francisville and Martha Washington area and the Iberville Parish Library system have brought in Ballet for Children.

Over the years, the dance group has received, under the umbrella of the Baton Rouge Ballet Theatre, various grants from the Louisiana Division of the Arts and the Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge, as well as funding from the local arts council through its Community Fund for the Arts.

While Ballet for Children still seeks grants for support and new aspects of the program, it has become primarily self-supporting in recent years, through performance fees.

The fee, $250 for schools bringing in the group, covers the cost of the teacher and passport charge.

Schools can apply for state grants to bring the group, through the Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge, the community development coordinator for the council.

The deadline for school grants applications for performances is June 30, she said.

"I had the privilege of seeing them in a site in St. Helena Parish, in the most underprivileged area of the community," said Yancey of Ballet for Children.

The group, she said, brought something new to the students' lives.

The dancers receive a modest fee for their roles, something that Ball feels is important.

"I think I wanted it to be a professional production," she said.

Ballet for Children is "a good opportunity for the dancers to get professional experience. It's a good chance for them to be out on stage and over and over." That's not to mention, said the dancers, the experience they've gotten in dancing in all types of performance spaces and handling their own costumes and costumes changing.

The PTA at South Boulevard Elementary paid to bring in the recent performance of Ballet for Children at the school, said Cheryl Miller, PTA president.

The PTA has also funded performances by the Baton Rouge Symphony Orchestra at the school, she said.

I kept this (dance program) until after testing. These are things we need in the school," said Miller.

"The arts are critical," she said.

"Now that we're done with testing, it's time to see the world with different eyes."

This summer, Ballet for Children will be appearing at 10 a.m. in the following locations on the following dates: American Legion Park, Clinton, June 6; Jackson Hall, St. Francisville, June 7; Jackson Civic Center, Jackson, June 9.

The group will also be at the Civic Center in Plaquemine at 10 a.m., on June 14, and at Our Lady of Prompt Succor auditorium, on the same day, at 1:30 p.m.

On June 15, the group will perform at 10 a.m. at the East Baton Rouge Elementary gym in St. Gabriel, and at 3:30 p.m. at the Cross Roads Church, LaPlace.

Ballet for Children will also perform in front of State Capitol on July 25 at 2 p.m.

For more information about the program, call the Baton Rouge Ballet Theatre office at 766-8739.