Dancing Dreams

Lafayette Ballet Theater gives students a foundation

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The chill of the air outside of the Heymann Performing Arts Center last December was no match for the energy and electricity in the lobby as parents, grandparents, siblings, friends and dance lovers gathered for Lafayette Ballet Theater’s annual production of The Nutcracker.

As is the case for LBT’s annual event, the cast was large, pulling together local dancers of every age, community members eager to take the stage in the classic work and professional lead dancers brought in for the week from Pacific Northwest Ballet. And while many in the audience were eager to see the work of the visiting artists, at the core of the cast were a bevy of young dancers, from elementary school-aged dancers cast as angels to two teenage dancers essaying the show’s coveted role of Clara.

The show began, and while the principal dancers received applause for their technically impressive performances, an equal amount of applause was reserved for the show’s young dancers. Some of it is familial support, but even the most jaded audience member had to admit: these kids had talent.

That youthful energy, even for the most green

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dancers on the Heymann stage, was one of the most electric elements of LBT’s Nutcracker, and it stems from the company’s deep investment in the interest and ambition of Acadiana’s young dancers.

And it’s an investment that’s paying off in spades.

For the past 25 years, LBT’s Dance Conservatory has trained more than 90 percent of the dancers that have journeyed through LBT on their way into adulthood, and in some cases, professional dance careers. The conservatory, which offers classes in everything from creative movement to pre-professional ballet training, embraces both girls and boys 4 to 19.

At the helm of the conservatory are Shannon and Mitzi Heath, both artists in their own right. Their résumés include work with the Joffrey Ballet, American Ballet Theater and the Bolshoi Ballet.

That rich professional experience is brought to every class, and the effects are apparent. Students of the LBT Dance Conservatory are spending their summers at some of the most prestigious study programs in the country.

This summer, at least five LBT conservatory students will be attending summer work at major national companies. Many of the students have been offered spots in multiple programs, and several have been offered scholarships.

“Each summer, the nation’s most prestigious ballet companies and schools accept elite students and young professionals into intensive study programs,” said Lisa Blackburn, media representative for LBT. “Consistently, LBT’s best gain entry into these programs, and sometimes they gain entry into very exclusive levels within these programs.”

One such case is Blake Musso, whose acceptance into American Ballet Theater’s New York program this summer is an unusual jump. Typically, students come up through the ranks of ABT’s regional programs, but Musso has bypassed the regional ranks and will be stepping into the program’s most elite level.

She won’t be alone. LBT dancer Adrienne Boudreaux also will be studying in ABT’s elite New York program. Other dancers at LBT are weighing their options in programs in Boston, Dallas and Chicago.

LBT also is looking forward to some big news in 2011, when the company will produce its most ambitious stage production yet — Peter Pan.

The company typically produces a spring show to complement its winter production of The Nutcracker, but the size and scope of Peter Pan, originally scheduled for this spring, forced a postponement.

“Peter Pan will be the most elaborate, most expensive production they’ve ever produced,” Blackburn said. “That will be a huge opportunity in itself, as it is the first time this ballet will ever be presented in Louisiana.”

In both the classrooms of the Dance Conservatory and on the stages of Acadiana, Lafayette Ballet Theater is cultivating a generation of performers that make success look as effortless as dance.