

Local play remains popular

By JUDY DUFFY
Enterprise entertainment editor

Once upon a time, 14 years ago, a recreation supervisor named Bob Bowen was reading Family Circle magazine and came across the script for a holiday pageant. He recognized immediately that this show could be presented by good little girls and boys from across the land, and especially by those boys and girls between the ages of 6 and 12 who lived in Davis.

Since the town's holiday break recreation program was wallowing in such trite activities as organized games and arts and crafts, Bowen decided to jazz things up and get a few kids together to put on the show.

Much to his wondering eyes did appear over 50 children to sign up for parts. And even more amazing, opening night brought a crowd of parents, grandparents and other assorted relatives and friends to clamber at the box office window for tickets to the show.

"I was just amazed," said Bowen. "I went outside when the place was packed and asked the people in line if they had kids in the show and some raised their hands so we squeezed them in. I sent everybody else home."

And "The Davis Nutcracker" has been going strong ever since.

This year tickets for the five performances sold out in only seven days, despite the addition of a special "preview" performance at reduced rates. Around Davis, tickets for the show are harder to get than tickets for Kings games. And it's not just the mothers, fathers, grandpas and grandmas of the

more than 250 kids who make up this year's cast that are anxious to get in to see the show.

The parents of kids who have become too old to perform still like to see the show. The kids themselves get a kick out of it, too. Some of them even manage to turn their involvement with the traditional show into a little hard cash for holiday spending.

They serve as the "leaders" who direct the individual segments that are woven into a whole by the director. The leaders are hired and paid by the city to accomplish the teaching and direction of little children into polished gum drops and flowers by the first performance. They meet with groups twice a week beginning in early December and manage, somehow, to get it all together in time to step under the lights by Dec. 20.

This year the pieces are being picked up and juggled into a coherent performance by Ann Smalley. She's directing her first "Nutcracker" this year and having "a ball. An absolute ball." That comment despite the fact that she's at the helm of a cast of more than 250 children and has more than a dozen assistant directors to coordinate, not to mention the technical aspects of the show. Costumes and

sets are stored from year to year, but there is still installation and repair to be done yearly.

While the original philosophy of Bowen's project was to let any child who wanted to participate have a role in the show, the numbers of children who show up for sign-ups has grown so large that roles in "The Davis Nutcracker" are assigned on a lottery basis after certain considerations, such as size and training for dance, have been looked at.

"We try to be fair as we can," said Smalley. "We look at how old the kids are and try to let everyone participate at least once before they hit the age limit. It's really very fair."

The show opens this year on Dec. 20 at 7 p.m. at the Veterans' Memorial Theater. Performances are also scheduled at Dec. 21 at 7 p.m., Dec. 22 at 2 and 7 p.m. and Dec. 23 at 2 p.m. All the tickets are sold, but there is a waiting list for cancellations. There have been no reports of scalping of tickets by either parents or grandparents.