

spotlight

Plenty of good music in this month's new jazz releases, Page C3

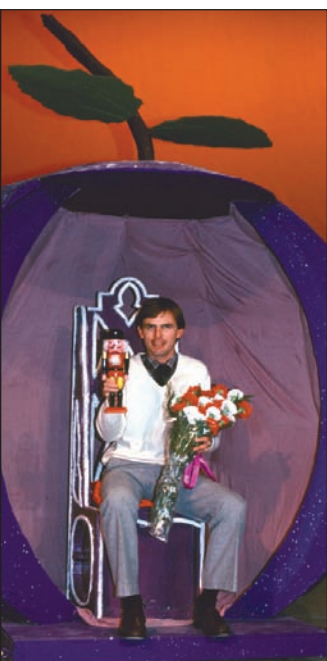
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THURSDAY DECEMBER 6, 2007 THE DAVIS ENTERPRISE

C SECTION

Marginalia



COURTESY PHOTO

Bob Bowen clearly had visions of sugar plums dancing in his head, while preparing for the 1983 "Davis Children's Nutcracker."

The 'ooh' factor

The late 1980s was the golden age, when it came to the technical aspects of the "Davis Children's Nutcracker"; the show's current look owes much to what was fabricated back then.

Several technicians had grown up with the show; they now were old enough to work at the theater, with time on their hands, and a budget that allowed the construction of new pieces.

Chris Wong has been working backstage since 1980; he remembers that all the "big" pieces were built in 1986 and '87. During Clara's dream, the fireplace, clock and chair actually became large.

The Christmas tree — in earlier productions merely painted on a stack of cardboard boxes that rotated — became more realistic, built on Hula Hoops that grew into a large tree.

This was when the "ooh" factor began, with the crew trying to outdo itself each succeeding year.

Wong recalls one infamous year, when the staff logged 300 hours working to build elements in the show.

The flower that held the Sugar Plum Fairy may have been their finest hour. A 300- to 400-pound Genie Lift was lowered through a hole in the stage. The basket of the lift had flower petal rings bolted to its base; the petals were attached to a piece at the top of the flower, over the head of the fairy.

As the Genie extended, the flower was raised off the floor above the stage, and then gently lowered.

As the flower reached the level of the stage, the crew released the strings and it opened petals to reveal the Sugar Plum Fairy.

That got a healthy "ooh" from the audience!

When the new orchestra pit was installed, the Genie Lift no longer could be lowered below the stage; it was replaced by the sugar plum that now is pushed on stage and then rotated to reveal the sugar plum fairy.

The original sugar plum was made with chicken wire and papier maché, but this newer one was rebuilt with foam instead of chicken wire.

Wong, who now works as an information technology person for PG&E, continues to return to Davis each year to run lights for the "Davis Children's Nutcracker."

"It's the only time of the year when I'm working in theater again," he said. "I really enjoy the creative aspect of setting up the lights and watching the show run."

Sadly, a few things have changed, and not necessarily for the better:

"We don't have the stable of people who can take time to re-invent stuff any more," Wong said, adding that while more kids perform each year now, the budget has less money for new scenic elements.

— Bev Sykes

Seasonal tradition



WAYNE TILCOCK/ENTERPRISE PHOTOS
KAREN FROYLAND/COURTESY PHOTOS

Katya Christian, top left, and Marea Newell, top right, flank Clara (Rigel Navarro) as she is paid tribute by the Mouse Queen (Sydney Maguire) and the Prince (Ryan Kreidler) in this year's production of the "Davis Children's Nutcracker." Below, from left, visions of productions past: Bob Bowen coaches young Derrick Wydick in 1978; the 2006 "dancing dolls" gather for a group shot; and Joyce Pexton made a particularly adorable Mouse Queen in 2003.

The holidays wouldn't be the same without the 'Davis Children's Nutcracker'

By Bev Sykes

ENTERPRISE DRAMA CRITIC

Davis would be quite a different town if Bob Bowen didn't like beer. And girls.

Bowen was working with the city's Parks and Recreation Department when he graduated from Davis High School. He enrolled at UC Davis as a political science major, along with his best friend Tom Eddy, whose father was the manager of one of the downtown banks, and whose mother taught in the Davis schools for many years.

As the boys were signing up for classes, Eddy dared Bowen to take a ballet class. Bowen asked what he'd get if he accepted the dare.

"I seem to remember beer was involved," he laughs today.

Bowen enrolled in Jere Curry's dance class. Curry was delighted to have a male student, especially one who seemed able to walk and talk at the same time. Bowen weighed the pros and cons of continuing with the class.

"There were 25 women in leotards ... and me. I could play intramural sports with a bunch of sweaty guys, or hang out with some good-looking gals."

Fortunately for Davis, Bowen continued dancing.

In 1972, Roger L. MacDonald asked Curry for help with a project he was undertaking to raise money for a Sacramento boys' home (a project that grew into "Best of Broadway"). MacDonald was seeking someone who could perform in a few numbers and act as the show's emcee.

By now, Bowen was a regular in Curry's classes and also was taking lessons that Curry taught on the side at the Odd Fellows Hall. Curry sent Bowen to MacDonald, who immediately cast him.

Over the next few years, Bowen watched MacDonald at work.

"I saw the logistics of how you get massive numbers of people on stage and off stage," Bowen said. "Doing a small show with a dozen people is one thing; doing a major cattle call, with hundreds of people, is another."

At the same time, Bowen continued to work part time for the Parks and Recreation Department, while performing with local theater groups.

Then the Veterans' Memorial Theater opened in 1973.

It was like a serendipitous big bang: All the elements fell into place. Bowen had been involved in the holiday recreation program for the elementary school children, when they were out of school in December.

"We'd do things such as cooking — which was mildly interesting to some kids, but mostly they were making a mess — or showing movies. We borrowed 16mm movies from everybody that we could, for free. We also did some basketball, and occasionally took busloads of kids to Sacramento to see the ballet version of 'The Nutcracker,' but the program really wasn't very creative.

"I was thinking maybe we could do better."

Then Bowen happened to see an issue of Women's Day magazine, which featured an article that explained how to mount a production of "The Nutcracker" for preschool or elementary school children. A light bulb went off in his head.

The Davis Children's Nutcracker

Where: Veterans' Memorial Theater, 203 E. 14th St., Davis

When: 7 p.m. Dec. 12-16, with a matinee at 2 p.m. Dec. 16

Tickets: \$9 general, with a maximum of six per sale, available during normal office hours at the Davis Parks & Community Services Office in City Hall, 23 Russell Blvd.; call 757-5626

"It was a pared-down version. It didn't involve copyright, so I could rewrite it ... which I did a lot. It doesn't take a full orchestra. It's just a little stage production."

Other elements played into the production of 1977's very first "Davis Children's Nutcracker": Since it would be a city production, there were no up-front costs for theater rental, and Bowen had a ready-made crew in the recreation department staff.

He was able to twist the arm of some friends — Kate Boyce (now Bowen's wife) and Dina Williams (now Dina Silver) — to make simple costumes: burlap tunics over tights for most of the basic ones. They borrowed a few costumes that had been made by the Davis Art Center's Ann Ough and Marinka Pfaff. Since no children's theater existed at the time, they were available.

Sets also would be very simple: a chair and a Christmas tree made out of cardboard boxes, with a green tree painted on one side for the party scene, and a snow-covered tree on the backside for the show's fantasy portions.

Bowen put a notice in The Davis Enterprise, soliciting children between the ages of 5 and 12, for auditions at the Chestnut Park Roundhouse. He didn't know if anybody would come, and he promised that everyone who auditioned would have some role in the production.

As it happened, about 50 children showed up.

Scott Cauchois was the prince in the first production. ("I was 11 years old and was one of the taller guys," he recalls.)

Now a software salesman living in La Jolla with his wife, Cauchois' fondest memory was just working with Bowen: "I remember his enthusiasm. He made it a very fun and pleasant experience."

In the interests of full disclosure, I must confess a warm spot in my heart for the "Davis Children's Nutcracker," because all five of our kids performed in the first two productions. In fact, my son Ned first met the woman who became his wife, Marta Wilson, when both were in the clown group. (To commemorate that meeting, I decorated their wedding cake with clowns and balloons.)

That first show took two weeks to rehearse, and only one performance was scheduled. Bowen didn't know if he could sell all 325 seats at the Vets' Theater, but he actually over-sold the production ... and had to turn away Mayor Sandy Motley at the door, because she had no ticket and had no child in the production.

Unwittingly, Bowen created a Davis tradition that still goes strong 30 years later. He continued to direct the shows for the first 10 years, after which Kate took over, while Bob continued to act as producer. Kate had graduated from UC Davis and had been teaching for two years, but needed money; when Bowen suggested she help direct "The Nutcracker," the timing worked into her schedule.

"Barbara Wells, my principal at Pioneer School, knew that 'The Nutcracker' was an important community event, so she arranged my schedule so that I could have every afternoon off, leading into the show," Kate said. "She always supported any type of children's theater."

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TRADITION: By the 10th year, the city had to set up a lottery system to cast the show

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"And now it has come full circle. Pioneer just built a multi-purpose room with a stage, and dedicated it to Barbara Wells."

Others also knew the importance of "The Nutcracker" to the community. Children who had been in earlier productions came back to work as leaders for new groups of kids, or to work on the show's technical aspects.

"It was 'the thing' to do on your Christmas vacation," insisted my daughter, Jeri.

"It's where all your friends were."

"We were the crew that built 'The Nutcracker,'" Ned boasted. "Bob Bowen created the show, and then the tech part of it took off when we showed up."

"We" was a group that included Ned's siblings, Jeri and Paul, along with Greg Wershing, Jon and Joel Lee, Chris Wong, Derrick Wydick, Paul Kagiwada and Phil Sequeira, among others.

Ned, now 40, still works backstage at the show, having returned to team up with his friend Wershing, who began working backstage when he was 15; his sons now have performed in the show for several years.

"The tech crew always looked for the 'ooh' factor," Jeri added, "how many times an audience said 'ooh' during the course of the performance." (See sidebar, Page C1.)

"It was all about upping last year's performance," laughed Sequeira, who remembered the "Vegas curtain" year, when Bowen found a way to use some glittery curtain in the show.

"With Bob, it was always, 'We have this cool thing ... how can we use it in the show?'" said Ned, remembering one year that featured a hot air balloon during the soldier/air balloon fight scene.

Why? Because Bowen had found a hot air balloon.

Wong ("the eternal Nutcrack-



KAREN FROYLAND/COURTESY PHOTOS

Clockwise from top left, Alistair Wandesforde-Smith (the Prince) and Amanda Altier (Clara) prepare for the 1984 production; the 2004 gnomes assemble for a giggly group shot; Miguel Piedraheta looks the part of a Spanish dancer; the 2006 production was large enough to field a large and colorful group of insects; and three mice have a grand time between scenes of the 1985 production.

er guy," Jeri said) was responsible for building most of the more spectacular effects, like the huge flower that rose up out of the floor, with petals that slowly opened to reveal the Sugar Plum Fairy.

"We were insane," Jeri laughed. "We had the run of the place, and we had Bob Bowen ... who trusted us and was willing to go along with anything we wanted to try."

Like drilling holes in the stage floor, and filling tubes with flour

that could be blasted through the holes, when a cannon supposedly went off.

The popularity of the "Davis Children's Nutcracker" kept building. By the 10th year, the city had to institute a lottery system to cast the show, because they'd reached the maximum number of kids (200) who could participate.

The 1977 production featured eight groups of clowns, mice, soldiers, Russian dancers and

so forth. The 2006 production featured 18 groups, including some that Tchaikovsky never envisioned: country line dancers, birds, insects and gnomes.

By 1997, Bob Bowen's job duties took him away from what was now the Department of Parks & Community Services. Carrie Dyer took over as producer of "The Nutcracker," a job she shared with Marianne Moore ... even the year both were pregnant.

Dyer continued to produce through 2006.

"It's a lot of work," she said. "It's exhausting, and the rehearsals take a toll on your own family, but it started as a work assignment and became something I really loved."

This year, Dyer stepped down and turned the production duties over to Shannon Clegg and Kristen Hilton, who had worked with her in 2006.

For Sally Hosley, whose three boys have performed, it's the

highlight of her year.

"My oldest son is now 16," she said, "and he has been performing or working with 'The Nutcracker' since he was in the first grade." She added that her sons found it a treat to move through the ranks of the show, and end up as group leaders.

Hosley credits Ann Smalley, who has directed the show for the past 17 years. "It wouldn't be what it is without Ann."

Smalley's 28-year-old daughter was a snowflake at the age of 6; when the city asked for help, she readily agreed.

"I enjoy theatrical things, I love children and I love music," Smalley said. "I love 'The Nutcracker,' and I am blessed to be able to do it. I was in the right place at the right time.

"It wouldn't be Christmas without this in my life. My children grew up with it."

Ryan Kreidler, the Nutcracker in the current production, is a genuine pro, having worked his way up from Teddy Bear to Russian Dancer, and now to the show's lead.

"It's a lot of stuff to learn," he said, "but the fun keeps me coming back."

"Ann is an incredible lady," said Laurie Carpenter, whose children have been part of "The Nutcracker" since they moved from Benicia six years ago. "It's a way for us to kick off the holidays.

"We cross our fingers each year. We've been fortunate: We've been called even in the lottery system. I can't imagine our holidays without it."

"For anybody who has become a part of 'The Nutcracker,'" Carrie Dyer said, "it remains a part of their lives forever."

Bob Bowen still can't quite believe how his little germ of an idea has blossomed.

"Long after all of us are gone, it'll be quite a legacy, to say you did something that takes on a life of its own.

"I had no idea."