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SNOW WHITE

Weekend shows mark first performances for Upstate NY Ballet since 2006

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She loved Gene Kelly and hoped to emulate him by taking tap lessons. Her mother thought otherwise. She enrolled her 7-year-old daughter in ballet — a quieter genre of dance, the mother thought. "One class and I never looked back. I loved it from that first class," says Kathleen Rathbun, adding, "but I had never seen it."

She wound up making ballet her profession as the operator of a dance studio and the founder and artistic director of Upstate NY Ballet.

Absent since 2006, the area's only ballet company returns Saturday with a new mounting of "Snow White," the same production that introduced Upstate NY Ballet 11 years ago. Rathbun will field a company of 55 dancers, performing on professional sets.

Over the years, Upstate has produced full-length mountings of everything from a world premiere adaptation of "Dracula" to beloved works such as "Swan Lake" and "Romeo and Juliet."

However, after her last collaboration with the Syracuse Symphony — a February 2006 production of "Sleeping Beauty" — Rathbun says she knew she needed a personal break and that re-structuring was necessary.

Struggling for funding to mount the full-length works and to hire support and development staff, she says, "I relied heavily on volunteers. But when I checked to see if they had done what I'd asked, it often wasn't."

The search began for a development director. Her first choice didn't pan out. "I lost six months," she says. "But he gave me the name of Renee Boroughs." Boroughs and Rathbun clicked and the restructuring started, which meant reaching out for more funding and full-time staff.

Rathbun carved out a professional career as a dancer after notching credits as a schoolgirl with the old Syracuse Ballet Theater. Her time on stage with SBT came in "Aurora's Wedding." It was far from the spotlight, she recalls. "I had a couple of little foot things, but mostly I just sat on a bench."

Moving to New York City to study on scholarship at the renowned Juilliard School, she found a professional home dancing with the Princeton Ballet in New Jersey.

When a back problem arose, Rathbun says she first tried dancing through the pain with the aid of a heating pad. "Therapy didn't help and muscle relaxants didn't." Something else intervened. The dancer came home for her mother's birthday party, where she met her future husband, Martin Rathbun.

The New York-to-Syracuse commute for courtship ended in marriage and three children. The family set up their home in Westvale.

Rathbun taught in Syracuse University's dance program and at the city's Metropolitan School for the Arts. But when the Metropolitan School closed, it seemed the right time to start her own studio.

Rathbun — whose first lessons were in a church basement — became a church basement lady. Today, she is still one of those women. On the lower level of Robinson Memorial Presbyterian Church in Westvale, she has renovated a space to encompass two studios, a kitchen and a meeting room.

The ballet school has grown from its original enrollment of 60 to between 175 and 200 students. One of Rathbun's former teachers at the school, Karen Henry, who doubled as choreographer on the Upstate NY Ballet production of "Dracula" in 2001, is doing the artistic director proud. She runs her own troupe, Faux Pas Dance Company, in Los Angeles.

Rathbun's tenacity has stood the test of time. She has persevered in seeking grants. State Sen. John DeFrancisco, R-Syracuse, has helped the company receive \$30,000 in performance funds for this year. The Central New York Community Foundation has awarded \$15,000 for each of three years, starting this year, to create a foundation to ensure continuance of the company.

Maintaining a ballet company is a risky proposition, Rathbun knows. One who also knows firsthand the difficulties of the task is Anthony Salatino, who in the 1970s was one of a succession of artistic directors of Syracuse Ballet Theater, before it folded.

Money, Salatino concedes, is a problem, but adds, "It's only part of it." He says there must be a unified view of objectives, without power struggles.

The former dancer, now a director and choreographer in the Syracuse University drama department, believes every community should strive to support a ballet.

"It is important that dancers are represented, that they have a voice just as the symphony, the opera and other arts," Salatino says. "They (dancers) are storytellers who speak to coming generations."

In addition, Salatino says, ballet is useful for young people to learn the art's discipline and its freedom of expression.

"Snow White" stands a good chance at success as Rathbun continues her goal of creating a lasting troupe. The Syracuse Symphony isn't presenting its annual performances of the holiday staple "The Nutcracker." The Moscow Ballet's mounting of the same crowd-pleasing work has scheduled only a single performance, which is Dec. 13 at the Landmark.

Rathbun says she believes audiences thirsting for family dance fare this season will turn up for "Snow White."

Today, Rathbun says she thinks her dancing days are over. She's content to keep improving the dancers she teaches and points out that, this year, she has had to import only six dancers to round out the "Snow White" cast. She's spent time refreshing and upgrading her original choreography for the fairy tale.

Still, there will be a Rathbun onstage this weekend: 13-year-old daughter, Claire, has earned a solo spot.

Here is the company's repertoire of past shows:

1997: "Snow White."

1998: "Snow White."

1999: "Peter Pan."

2000: "Aladdin."

2001: "Sleeping Beauty" in January, the Armory Square Candlelight Series in August and "Dracula" in October.

2002: "Cinderella" in February and the Armory Square Candlelight Series in August.

2003: "Snow White" in January, the Armory Square Candlelight Series in August and "La Traviata" in October.

2004: "Swan Lake."

2005: "Romeo and Juliet."

2006: "Sleeping Beauty."

