

Crozet Goes for Ballet

By Kathleen Jump

In February 2005, Albemarle Ballet Theatre adapted the loft of Crozet's old fruit cooperative, above Maupin's Video, into a studio where dancers can peer out from barre work into the heart of downtown Crozet.

ABT's founder, Sally Hart, by her two daughters - Veronica, 21 and Nicole, 19 - in guiding some 100 children and adults in ballet, jazz, theatre, and stage make-up in the range of beginner to the most advanced student.

Hart, a former dancer with the Joffrey Ballet, has been teaching for 15 years. She performed with Kevin McKenzie, then a principal with the American Ballet Theater (currently its artistic director), at the opening of the Kennedy Center and served as ballet mistress of the Ballet Theatre of Lynchburg for Keith Lee. She has taught at the Classical Ballet Academy of Northern Virginia, a school with a reputation for producing professional dancers.

To capture the imagination of her very youngest students, Hart uses storytelling, encouraging the children to "jump over alligators" (to execute step, step, gran jete), do "Toad Mobile," (alternate flexing and pointing of feet) and make "windshield wipers" (rotate at the hips to turn feet in and out).

ABT also offers advanced classes to the most serious dancer. To teach a professional level class, you need to have danced professionally and had a certain level of training", says Hart. "You know the stages where you need to get a student."



Albemarle Ballet Theatre's Sally Hart helps Haley Neisser, on her way to a summer program with the Richmond Ballet, with proper toe form.

"One of the things you learn with ballet is that if you are repetitive and follow instruction, you will progress. Ballet is an art. You have to work at it. That is what the arts teach. It's the opposite of instant gratification."

More than a few of students ABT's students want to be professional dancers. Hart says a student needs more than good training to land a professional career: "They have to have all their ducks in a row-tremendous drive and the right body type," Hart says.

In May, ABT announced an ambitious, full-length production of "Little Red Riding Hood" involving 50 students. The performance featured Kelly Knox as Little Red Riding Hood, Mary Meslar as the Grandmother, Daniel Mathews as the Woodsman, and Caitlin Cosby and Kyle Patterson as the mother and father. It was an elaborate staging for a school with only a 15-month history, but one that Hart did tackle to showcase the talents of its students.

Each year the school awards 10 to 15 scholarships to families who need assistance. Some of these children Hart has found, others have found her.

"Parents complain that their kids get into trouble, but you have to give kids something to do or they will get in trouble," Hart says. I want them to get in here and dance.

With that aim, last spring Hart founded the Studio for the Performing Arts, a 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation designed to support dance scholarships and performances in Albemarle County. It will help get more youth into dance classes and bring events into local schools.

"The arts cannot be for just those who can afford it; otherwise, nobody is educated about it and you have no audience."

For more information, go to www.aballet.org, email dance@aballet.org, or call 434-823-8888.