

THE SUN POST NEWS 2005
IN STEP TOGETHER

Two fathers and their daughters will dance in 'The Nutcracker,' beginning Saturday at the Plummer Auditorium.

By BARBARA POTTER Sun Post News

One father is hanging up his tool belt for a twirl around the dance floor this weekend. Mark Montoya of San Clemente is joining his daughter, Alexa, 13, on stage in the production of "The Nutcracker." Montoya, the owner of Mark's Concrete Pumping business, says his adult sons are disappointed that they "won't be seeing me in tights." He will be wearing a black tuxedo as one of the production's party guests.

"This is the fifth year my daughter has been in 'The Nutcracker,' and she has been asking me for the past few years to be a party guest in the production," Montoya said. "But this year she caught me in a weak moment and I gave in." Youth America Ballet will present "The Nutcracker Ballet" Saturday and Sunday, and the following weekend, at the Plummer Auditorium in Fullerton. Mikhail Kaniskin, Principal with the Stuttgart Ballet of Germany, will star in the production, which has only six performances scheduled. "Mikhail is by far one of the best male dancers in the world today," said Victor Kasatsky, one of the artistic directors of Youth America Ballet. "We're lucky to have him as our special guest artist." Co-director Tatiana Kasatsky added, "It's an incredible experience for our students to dance with a professional of his caliber. He is every choreographer's dream."

About 75 percent of the dancers in the cast are from San Clemente as the ballet company, Pacific Coast Academy of Dance, is located here in the community. "The Nutcracker's" primary role of "Clara," will be danced by Paige Gammell, 14, of San Clemente. Her father, Rick, who is also a party guest in the production, said he is proud of his daughter. "She is very self-motivated. Ever since she started dancing at the age of 3, she has been into ballet," he said. Donning a tuxedo in the production, Gammell, a retired Las Vegas casino executive, said he and Mark Montoya have had to learn only minimal steps for their parts. Reciting his moves on stage, he said, "We've had to learn three dances – three steps forward, one step back, kneel down while a dancer walks around us, then a 1-2-3 waltz, turn. We never get past the count of three," he said. Although their parts require only 30 minutes on stage, Gammell said they have worked long hours on their dances.

Rehearsals for the two dads have required about 23 hours in the past weeks. "We don't want to mess up. Anyway, no one will probably be watching us. It's a blessing that we will be in the back of the stage," he said. Montoya said he just plans to follow the rest of the party guests. "Thankfully we have coaches preparing us."

The experience of "dancing," in "The Nutcracker," has taught him that he is capable of learning the necessary steps. "Not good, but trainable," Montoya said. "I've also learned to appreciate how dedicated these dancers are." So would he do this again? "Sure, I would do this next year – it's been fun," Montoya said.

Other San Clemente cast members include: Marisa Prolo as "Fritz," Alexa Prolo as "Dewdrop Fairy," Isha Cecere as "Snow Queen," Briana Pagliaro as "Dancing Doll" and Danielle Luna as "Arabian." Rik Gagnon returns as "Mayor Stahlbaum." His daughter, Megan, who graduated from Youth America Ballet, now trains with Universal Ballet in Washington, D.C.

Several pairs of San Clemente sisters are also featured throughout the two-hour production: Laura and Emma Hatanaka, Lauren and Nicole Denney, Sofia and Isabella Mendoza, Madison and Makayla Gordon, Devon and Delaney Shanely, and Sara and Laura Anderson. Skye Gallagher, dances the role of "Gingersnap."

A holiday classic, "The Nutcracker" offers extravagant costumes, spectacular scenery and special effects. Dolls come to life, mice stage battles with toy soldiers, a Christmas tree grows to the top of the theatre, and Clara with her charming prince, travels to the Land of the Sweets in a magical sleigh. Fun and entertaining, this ballet is truly a family affair – for both the cast and audience.