

The Dallas Morning News

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Dallas, Texas, Friday, December 11, 2001
DallasNews.com
Texas' Leading Newspaper

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Dallas, Texas, Tuesday, December 11, 2001

DallasNews.com

Ballet trips on reality

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After three and a half months of drills and rehearsals and painstaking practice, Mary Johnson's dancers are ready to take the stage.

The refreshments are lined up, the invitations are in the mail and the ballerinas are breathless with excitement. Mary doesn't have the heart to tell them they might have to perform in their socks and school clothes

"This is their first experience with anything like this," she said. "These children are used to being let down, but we wanted them to imagine the impossible. We have tried to arrest their attention and transform their lives."

Mary's conversation is like

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As ballerinas perfected steps, sponsor's financing faltered

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that, dramatic and a little exotic, and it suits her. She's a career dancer from New York who grew up in a theatrical family — her mother founded the first African-American dance troupe on Long Island — and she has performed around the world.

Stylish and urbane, she made me feel like I was sitting there in my plaid bathrobe and mop slippers when we met downtown Monday, but I didn't mind. If Mary Johnson seemed glamorous to me, she must seem like a movie star to the 13 little girls from a poor section of southeast Oak Cliff she has been instructing in the art of classical ballet. She's worried sick about letting them down.

Mary moved to Dallas earlier this year, looking for a fresh start after a divorce. She partnered with her daughter, Day, a recent Penn State graduate, to contract with the Dallas school district to provide fine arts instruction as part of an after-school program for low-income kids.

She has been working with a group of girls at B.F. Darrell Elementary School since the school year started. Sunday is the big show, an ensemble performance of Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty*.

"When we started, they had no idea" about ballet, Mary said. "Their idea of dancing was what they saw on television. They had never heard of Baryshnikov."

Like most kids, the girls thought of dancing as what people do in music videos. They didn't know a plie from a fried pie, a *sissonne* from a Slurpee.

They know now. The little girls have been drilled to move and think and behave like dancers, Mary said, not necessarily with the idea of making them all professional performers, but very much with the idea of showing them some of possibilities afforded by education and discipline.

Mary showed me a little "bio" one 8-year-old performer wrote for the ballet program: "I enjoy dancing," she wrote. "I have learned to stand up straight, smile, and be a lady."

The dancers really saw a payoff to their hours of practice when they saw pictures of the costumes Mary and Day had ordered.

For their glorious debut, each dancer was to wear a classical ballet costume with a froth of skirt like floating meringue trimmed in silver, snowy white tights and satin slippers. There were head-dresses, too, circlets of soft white fake fur.

The little girls were dazzled. "They were speechless," Mary said. "It was almost beyond their comprehension."

Knowing that their parents couldn't foot the bill for theatrical frills, Mary and Day found supporters to underwrite costs of the production. They found a lady willing to cater refreshments and an office supply store that helped

with the playbills and fliers and invitations.

They lined up a sponsor, a Dallas businessman, who agreed to contribute about \$2,000 to cover costs of the costumes plus special lighting effects and a smoke machine.

Week before last, the sponsor called with bad news. Business has fallen off dramatically this fall, especially since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The sponsor was worried about meeting his own payroll, much less making charitable contributions. The sponsor was very sorry, but he wouldn't be able to be a sponsor after all.

The costumes are ready to ship — as soon as the bill is paid.

If anybody wants to ride to the rescue, Mary's at 214-752-8470, and she hasn't lost hope, but time is running short. You can see the performance, too, 6 p.m. Sunday at Darrell Elementary, 4730 S. Lancaster Road.

Well, the show goes on. Mary won't even contemplate having to tell the girls they won't have costumes and special effects and theatrical makeup after all.

Day has thought about it, though. Sunday is fast approaching, and the first lesson of show business, as everybody knows, is that the show must go on.

"I'll just tell them that things don't always turn out the way we want them to," she said gravely.

"And I'll tell them to dance their hearts out."

Gift keeps little dancers on their toes

The Fort Worth Dallas Ballet is playing fair: going to start a girls' dance school program, lost funding for a production of Tchaikovsky's classic *Sleeping Beauty*.

Students at B.F. Darrell Elementary rehearsed for months. Last-minute cancellation of a promised donation left no money for costumes or special effects.

The ballet company's board of directors voted unanimously to pick up the \$2,000 tab. The show goes on this weekend.

An added bonus: The young ballerinas will be treated to the Fort Worth Dallas Ballet's production of *The Nutcracker*.

How's that for a fairy-tale ending?

Jacquelynne Floyd