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Ballet Virginia International opens in Norfolk

NORFOLK

Last month, supporters of the city's newest dance company collected at 700 W. 21st St. to check out its new main studio. "Welcome to Ballet Virginia International!" called out President Hope Paryzek. She stood on the winding staircase to address dozens of young dancers and their parents standing on the tile floor below.

A roaring "Yay!" rose from the crowd.

"We hope to start 'building out' real soon," Paryzek told them.

The real building of this organization has taken place behind the scenes, among dozens of parents who created a dance school and company in the spring - from scratch and in record time. They were motivated by concern about their previous school.

"This year has been interesting," Janina Bove said, with ironic humor. "If it weren't for all of you parents, and especially our girls... "

Bove teared up and couldn't finish her statement. Her co-director, Suzanne Long, hugged her and wept a little, too.

"This is why we're doing it," Long said, looking out at a sea of dancers in pink and lavender leotards. "You guys."

Some of the parents got misty eyed, too.

"So many people have worked so hard," said a teary Sarah Murden of Virginia Beach, whose 13-year-old daughter, Grace, is dead serious about her dance classes.

"We all worked hard," Murden said, looking out at all the tiny, slim-limbed dancers, "because they work so hard."

Ballet Virginia came into existence in April, as a reaction by parents to what they saw as deteriorating conditions at Virginia Ballet Theatre, where many of the company's students had been taking classes. For 47 years, VBT has been the premiere ballet company in this region, training dancers who have gone on to celebrated careers.

But at that time, parents said they were concerned that VBT's funding seemed scarce and their attempts to help raise money were not welcomed. They feared the company might close its doors, and their children would be without dance classes.

So they started their own company, using three scattered venues. Since June, the youngest

students have taken classes at a Virginia Beach dance studio and in a Norfolk church, and the oldest have studied in several locations, including Harrison Opera House in Norfolk. All eight of Ballet Virginia's

instructors came over from VBT.

One morning in late July, Long and Bove were about to begin class in a rehearsal studio at Harrison Opera House. Portable barres were arranged in the large, open space, peopled by leotard-clad girls aged 13 to 18, their hair swept up in buns.

"OK, dancers!" Bove bellowed. "Everyone at the barre, please. Carefully and quietly."

Bove roamed the room to instruct and adjust the dancers.

"OK, first position! To your demi. To your grand pli^À. Little ones, pay attention!"

A few older children with poor earlier training elsewhere worked alongside younger ones, noted Long, standing on the sidelines, because they still need to understand the basics of body placement.

"To press the belly button into the spine, with seat muscles lifted in the back. It's called placement," she explained. "That's truly the foundation for the technique. If you don't have a strong core, it's going to be difficult to do anything."

Bove was out on the floor with the students. "Oil can? Who has the oil can?" Bove said, humorously, as she helped a student open up her hip.

One of the students, Marianne Trimble, 10, of Virginia Beach, has studied under Bove and Long for about five years.

"They have really taught her a true love of dance," said her mother, Robin Trimble, who waited in a break room just off the studio, where she could watch the progress. "They motivate these girls and instill discipline."

After class, more than a dozen teachers and volunteers met in the break room to discuss business.

"There is going to be a location," Paryzek stressed. "We are going to have classes, even if we go to someone's house. We'll make it work."

That July agenda also included updating the Web site and finding interim storage for costumes.

"Alrighty, that's it," Bove finally pronounced.

"Just keep in touch," Long said.

"To the team!" Paryzek called out, and all applauded.

All along, Ballet Virginia's volunteers have focused on pulling together the critical elements of a nonprofit, including a business plan, Web site, fundraising strategies and rental agreements.

The company is so new it doesn't have a solid annual budget figure.

"I mean, we haven't even had a utility bill yet," Paryzek said.

But classes already are growing. In June, they started with about 75 students. This week, enrollment was up to 164.

Getting it together, she said, has taken a community of volunteers. Many of the helpers have been talented parents, such as top local designer Bart Morris, who donated his efforts for the logo and other graphic needs. Amy Sokol, a certified public accountant, is offering her professional skills, too.

Parents also run public relations, marketing, fundraising and many other aspects.

"You should never hire staff where it requires you to raise money to pay them," Paryzek asserted. Instead, she believes employees should be paid through sustainable, ongoing revenue such as class tuition.

"Our goal, the way we have set up our business plan, is to have the academy support the payroll and regular expenses like the rent."

Fundraising will mostly be geared to the needs of the performing season, she said.

The company has a five-member board led by Paryzek, who is chief executive officer of Principle Strategies, a company that helps businesses, including nonprofits, start up and expand.

Bove and Long are the executive vice presidents. Long trained early on at Virginia Ballet, performed for 11 years with a ballet company set in both Cleveland and San Jose, Calif., then came back to teach. Bove danced with Cleveland Ballet and other companies before joining VBT in 1991.

Wendy Sanborn, vice president, has degrees in economics and business administration and was a practicing attorney until 2004. The company's secretary, Trish Upchurch, has been a teacher for 15 years. All but Bove have children enrolled in classes.

The company's performance season opens in late November with "Snow White" at the Sandler Center for the Performing Arts in Virginia Beach. "The Nutcracker" runs Dec. 19 through 21 at Harrison Opera House. The season ends in April with "Alice in Wonderland" at the Sandler.

All the dances will be choreographed by Bove and Long. Performers will be drawn from Ballet Virginia's new performing company, along with guest artists brought in from top national dance groups.

Since the group split from VBT, Paryzek has not wanted to compare the two organizations or further discuss the other dance company.

"We're focused on what we're doing," she said last summer. "We're not worried about other entities."

Virginia Ballet has no full performance season this year, but its new artistic director, Jurijs Safonovs, said he plans to stage a dance concert in late February.

Both companies, however, are presenting "Nutcrackers" - VBT on Dec. 5 through 7 and Ballet Virginia two weeks later. Except, Virginia Ballet will be presenting The Richmond Ballet this year instead of its usual production, since Safonovs is in the process of rebuilding VBT's performing company.

For Ballet Virginia, creating a new company has entailed many decisions, including where and how to sell tickets. For now, its Web site links patrons to either the Sandler Center's box office or to the proper Web page on Ticketmaster.com. The latter helps eliminate the possibility of a patron accidentally buying tickets to VBT's "Nutcracker," which Paryzek said has already happened.

One way the company is raising cash is by inviting donors to fund particular costumes and props for "Snow White" and "Nutcracker." According to the Web site, most of the "Nutcracker" outfits are paid for, but more opportunities remain for "Snow White," such as the dancing bluebirds and doves.

Far more is needed. The board announced a \$200,000 capital campaign in the summer to pay for transforming its new headquarters into a dance studio. That goal has been reduced to \$80,000, because the site needed less work than previously explored options, Paryzek said.

So far, she said, about \$12,000 has been raised to revamp the two-story 8,000-square-foot building, where the company hopes to move by Dec. 1. Also, in the past two weeks, \$15,000 worth of building supplies were donated, she said. (The interior will be divided into offices and three dance studios. Owner Richard Levin is letting the group lease the former catering site for a below-market rate.)

"We're out there, hitting the streets, and it's one donation at a time," Paryzek said. "It's no surprise that this is a tough climate for raising money, but the great thing about this, it's a ballet built by the community, so there is tremendous interest."

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