

# 'The Nutcracker' features local performers

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an adult master class on Tuesday evenings and checks in on the rehearsals for this year's 'Nutcracker.' Mrs. Feder passed the directing baton on to her long-time student and highest-certified Cecchetti diploma-holder, Mary Schnepf. She has directed and choreographed for many companies, as well as her own. Mary has probably danced every role in 'The Nutcracker,' so she knows exactly what she wants to see on the stage from each dancer and from the cast as a whole.

"She asked another GNBC alum, Molly Vine, to co-direct with her. Molly has directed several children's ballets.

"Both ladies are very excited for their GNBC directorial debut. The Greater Niagara Ballet Company board of directors is excited to have these ladies continuing The Greater Niagara Ballet Company's holiday tradition of presenting 'The Nutcracker!'"

It's "Big shoes to fill indeed," Schnepf said. "When you have somebody who's been running a company for over 50 years – who built it from the ground up – there's so much knowledge. Mrs. Feder just has all this knowledge of it, and I just have the utmost respect for her. It's been tough not having her around as much as usual, but she's still helping us out. She has come to rehearsal here and there, and she's given me advice as we've gone on, which has been very useful."

Vine said, "The Nutcracker' is so traditional. It's a Christmas tradition. Everybody expects something wonderful and magical out of it. So, it's definitely kind of intimidating. But it's been nice to have

Mrs. Feder to lean on or ask a question to.

"I am super-thankful I'm directing with Mary, because she's been with the company for so long. She knows the ins and outs. And one thing I love is that we have a board of directors. They're taking care of all the details. We go in, we run rehearsals; it's a lot of people working together. I think that's fortunate."

Schnepf said, "I think we're lucky that there are so many veterans who have come back this year. Some people who haven't been around for a while have been helping us out a lot – just taking care of things that we didn't even think to think about – all the props and costumes and all sorts of things like that."

Feder said, "I have confidence in the girls."

She explained, "Mary worked with a lot of the choreography. She reversed back to a lot of the beginning choreography, so it wasn't so difficult. And she's worked hard to get them to a standard. ... I think Mary will do a good job."

And speaking of Vine, Feder said, "She danced with our company. She's lovely with the children. And I think it's good, because it's coming down to their level."

Schnepf has danced with the GNBC for more than two decades as a principal dancer and soloist.



Mary Schnepf, at right, will direct and perform in this year's presentation of "The Nutcracker."

The Niagara Falls resident earned a bachelor's degree in theater design with concentrations in costuming and set design from Buffalo State College, plus an M.A.H. in film and performance and an M.F.A. in dance from the University at Buffalo. Schnepf received her Cecchetti dance training at the Feder School of Classical Ballet, completing all the student examinations, including the Enrico Cecchetti final diploma in April. She has studied ballet and modern dance with Finis Jung, Joseph Cipolla and Ana Marie Forsythe. She has choreographed pieces for the GNBC, Ballet ex Machina and the M.F.A. dance program at UB. Recently, Schnepf has been teaching dancers at Erie Community College and the College at Brockport. She will reprise her role of the Sugar Plum Fairy in this year's performance of "The Nutcracker."

Vine is from Bemus Point and started her ballet training at the age of 12 with Jill Keating at Pointe Chautauqua Dance in Mayville. She transferred to the Chautauqua Regional Youth Ballet in Jamestown two years later. She has worked with myriad masters, including Monika Alch, Laurie Donner, Fiona Bell, Mansur Kameledinov, Denis Malinkine, Tatiana Jouravel, Daniel Ulbricht and Jonathan Stafford. After studying classical ballet and Martha Graham modern technique at the Hartt School of Dance at the University of Hartford, she returned to Jamestown to begin her teaching career at the Chautauqua Regional Youth Ballet and to dance for the

Renaissance Ballet Company. In 2015, Vine founded the Buffalo Dance Ensemble. In addition, she is the general dance teacher at the Elmwood Village Charter School.

With such impressive resumes, "We've definitely been putting our unique tweaks and touches in," Vine said.

She added, "Things are a little bit different, but I think this year is a very good mix of the traditional company's 'Nutcracker' with a little bit of Molly and Mary spice, I guess."

Schnepf said, "Both Molly and I have added new choreography. We're very excited. It has been challenging, I will say. It's been challenging to make as many updates as we have; but it's also been exciting. It's nice to just change things up a little bit.

"But it is a tradition. It's still 'The Nutcracker.' It's still the traditional 'Nutcracker' that people want to see and come to see."

The co-directors said it's been interesting teaching dance to children during a pandemic.

"The biggest challenge for me has been kids out of rehearsal due to quarantining, or not feeling well for a weekend," Vine said. "And so, knowing that they'll be back, saving their spot and working around that. At the same time, asking a kid from a different group to fill in, just so they can know it better, or so we can keep the flow going.

"As far as facial expressions, we've kind of been working more like, 'Widen your eyes, ladies (laughs).' Or a lot of gesturing and things like that."

Schnepf said, "We've been following the regulations. All the kids are wearing masks. All the corps de ballet and all the adults involved are wearing masks. All the volunteers are wearing masks. Yes, a lot of students have to be out, too. So, we have had to adjust with that.

"But it's really no different than what we've been used to. We've been able to manage the problems I think fairly well. We just do what we can. We understand that it's still trying times."

Feder said, "Mary knows the challenges that she has, and she has adapted. And I think Molly has, too. They've adapted to the level that they can present the audience with 'The Nutcracker.'"

While there are competing presentations of "The Nutcracker" this season in Western New York, "We have a lot of heart," Schnepf said. "We're trying to get the company to grow; so it is a transition year, for us as new directors and everybody off for a year and everything. But I think it's the sense of community. We've become a very tightknit group, and it shows on stage. All the work and all the love that goes into the show – I think it really does come through on stage in a way that, I think, makes us a little unique.

"We do have hired dancers but, for the most part, the dancers are from Niagara Falls; we do have some from Lewiston, and we have some from Buffalo. In a normal year, we have some from Canada. This year, we don't have any of our Canadian dancers, unfortunately. They'll be back next year, hopefully, once all the border restrictions are just back to normal.

"It's that sense of community, that sense of a family – that Christmas has, too – and it being a Christmas tale. It just seems to work and come out on stage."

Vine said, "Even going into rehearsal, I walk in and I have all these things on my mind, and then by the end and the kids are leaving, I'm like, 'I love you so much! I can't wait for next week!' No matter how stressed I am through it, at the end I have this, 'That was awesome and I'm so glad we are all here together doing this.' So, I hope the audience will walk away with that same feeling, like, 'Wow; I'm so glad I was here to be a part of this,' just like I am."

"The Nutcracker" is on stage Dec. 10-11 at the Niagara Falls High School Performing Arts Center, 4455 Porter Road. Friday's performance begins at 7:30 p.m. There is a 2 p.m. matinee and a 7:30 p.m. show on Saturday. Tickets are available online ([www.greaterniagaraballetcompany.org/purchase-tickets](http://www.greaterniagaraballetcompany.org/purchase-tickets)), at Trait-Carré (480 Center St., Lewiston), or at the door.

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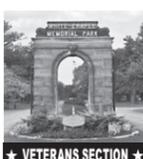
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