



MARY BRENNAN

CELEBRATES
BARRINGTON'S
15TH SEASON
OF THE
NUTCRACKER

**MARY BRENNAN AND THE BARRINGTON YOUTH DANCE ENSEMBLE
GET READY TO PRESENT THE NUTCRACKER, A GEM
OF THE ARTS COMMUNITY AND ONE OF BARRINGTON'S
FINEST HOLIDAY TRADITIONS.**



BY LISA STAMOS • PHOTOGRAPHY BY SUSAN MCCONNELL

When the curtain goes up on December 5 at Barrington High School, audiences will be treated to this season's professional performance of the most popular ballet in the world. *The Nutcracker*, with its charming story characters and fairy tale music, will come to life. It will be presented by Barrington Youth Dance Ensemble (BYDE), a not-for-profit dance company that is affiliated with the Barrington Dance Academy. On stage, the drawn curtains will reveal Christmas Eve at Dr. Herr Burgmeister's residence to be completed with family, guests, and holiday merriment. Behind the stage will be artistic director Mary Brennan, making sure her audience is thoroughly delighted.



Artistic director Mary Brennan strategically places dancers in their stage positions.

THE NUTCRACKER — A GRAND PRODUCTION

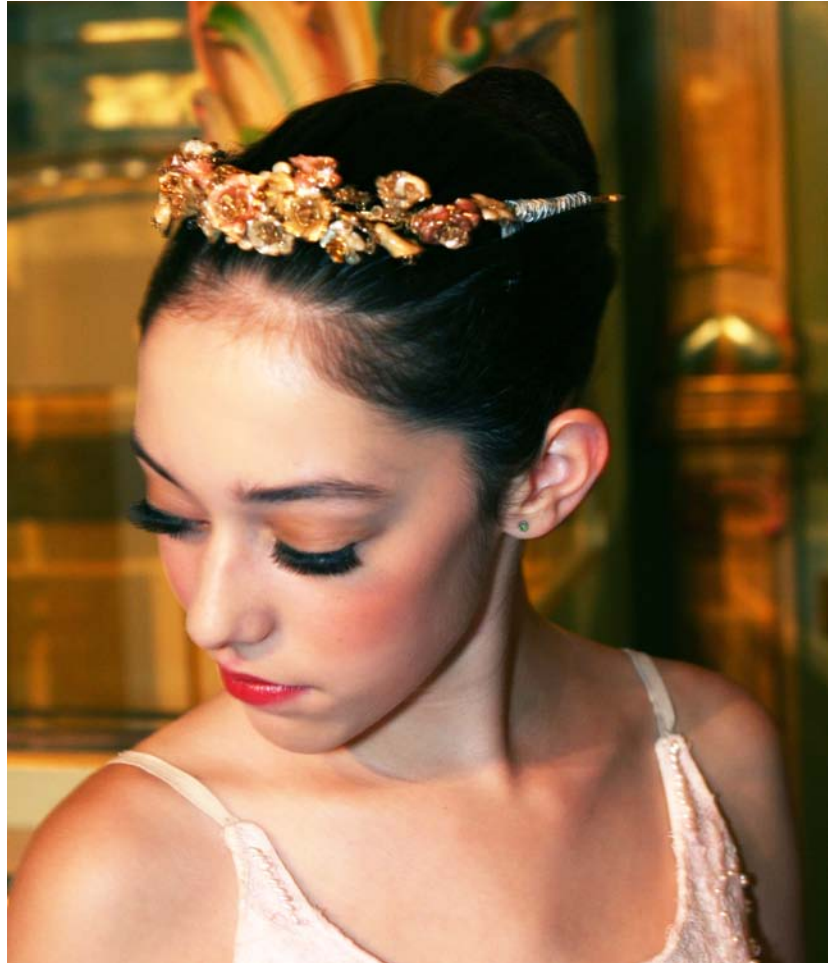
The Nutcracker, based on the original 1816 short story, *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* by E.T.A. Hoffmann, is a classic ballet with four scenes performed in two acts. Hoffman was an author of the German Romantic era, a dominant movement in the arts, philosophy, and culture in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Long before copyrights were a standard form of author protection, many rewrites and interpretations have influenced this popular story that was first performed in 1892 at the Maryinsky Theater in St. Petersburg, Russia. *The Nutcracker* ballet became popular in Russia, yet it did not gain nearly as much of a foothold in Russia or Europe as it would later in the United States and Canada. After following its travels through Western Europe, it was first presented in the United States in 1940 in New York City.

The Nutcracker evolved from the golden age of Russian ballet carrying a pedigree that has sustained its story and music through the test of time. Once *The Nutcracker's* libretto, or story text, was completed, ballet master Marius Petipa choreographed the scenes. The services of Russian composer Tchaikovsky were engaged. In those days, ballet composers typically wrote music “by the yard,” and the known talents of Pyotr Illyich Tchaikovsky were ordered via a basic laundry list of scenes for which the music was needed. Tchaikovsky wasn't as inspired about *The Nutcracker* as he was by *The Sleeping Beauty*. As he worked on the second act of *The Nutcracker*, he learned of his

beloved sister's death. The trials and deep emotions of those days seemed to have found their way into portions of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* score. Few composers delivered the sweeping and sophisticated scores that he produced, which also include *Swan Lake*, *The 1812 Overture*, and overtures for *Romeo and Juliet*.

More than 3,000 people will include BYDE's version of *The Nutcracker* in their holiday plans this year. Jessica Till, BYDE executive director and staff teacher who is on maternity leave, has seen the entire life cycle of this local production when the show started in 1994. She saw it as a child, and then ended up in the first two shows. Jessica, who is also the general manager of the show, attended Barrington High School. “I went to BHS primarily for the performing arts department. I was in dance, Orchestras, and in musicals all four years,” she said. She went on to the University of Iowa and received her degree in dance and communication. As a resident of Chicago, Jessica could have found theater work there. “I never thought I'd be doing this back here, where I grew up, and now I've been here for nine years,” she said.

Local audiences have seen BYDE's *Nutcracker* grow in size and sophistication. This year marks the show's 15th year, while being its 14th production. The show did not perform while BHS was under construction one year. “There are 110 dancers this year ranging in age from 7 to 82,” Jessica said.



Above left: Alex Schwartz plays Clara's cousin. Above right: Brittany Bonefas, who plays Clara, is pictured here in a dewdrop costume.

“We have 88 dancers from the school [Barrington Dance Academy], 12 guest artists, and a combination of 10 teachers and dancers from the community.” BYDE works on the production all year long, and things get exciting in the fall when auditions begin. Rehearsals are frequent once the dancers are chosen, and in the week before production, rehearsals are daily. Set construction, repair, and costume work are also a focus.

Jessica studied with Mary Brennan, the founder of Barrington Dance Academy and BYDE. “Mary lives and breathes this place,” Jessica said. “I was one of the eight girls that Mary saw as a group with the potential to perform, and she looked for more opportunities for us.” Jessica was there when Mary made the push to get BYDE to provide those performance opportunities. “Kim Duchossois understood the importance of building BYDE, and offered Mary the founding donation for BYDE. After that, we were off,” Jessica said.

MARY BRENNAN BEHIND THE SCENES

Mary Brennan grew up in the Chicago's northwest suburbs. “I was always dancing around, and I would usually hit my head on the coffee table,” Mary said. For as long as she can remember, Mary was making shows to entertain her childhood friends. There were magic shows, plays, and dancing. For a 2 cent fee, neighbor friends could see her shows, complete with custom-made costumes. “My mom would make the Kool-Aid and cookies, which

helped get an audience to show up,” Mary said. “I would charge a few cents and then my mom would make me pay her back for the refreshments. This was my first experience with how lucrative the arts would be!” When the refreshments didn't work as well, Mary would offer her toys in exchange for an audience.

“My mom finally gave in and arranged for me to take dance lessons,” she said. Her first lesson was at age 8. There were not many local options for proper or classical training, but she found a studio in Arlington Heights. She also took lessons while in junior high at the former Stone-Camryn School of Ballet in Chicago, where she would take the train downtown by herself to the Loop. She was not only intrigued with dance but was also concerned with doing it properly and investing time in class and practice. In addition to studying dance, Mary loved ice skating and gymnastics. “This was a part of my life that I really enjoyed,” she said.

Mary's mother was supportive of her dance lessons. “She was low-key about it and didn't put pressure on me — there were no expectations one way or another,” Mary said. “This was good, because the inspiration could be my own.” Mary took ballet, jazz, and tap as many of her own students do today. Most intrigued with ballet, she pursued dance with the now retired husband and wife team of Christine Duboulay and Richard Ellis. “They were genius teachers, and tough. You just knew you were with someone special,” she said.



From left to right, Brittany Bonefas, Julie Hancock, and Anne Lenz prepare for a festive evening.

Mary's dance education also includes studies with Michael Maule, Gus Giordano, Pamela Johnson Tanis, Judith Svalander, and the Royal Academy of Dance in London.

"Dancing is sheer joy for me," Mary said. "Dancing takes me to a different place. No matter what happens during the day, I can dance and the day melts away. For me it was an ultimate personal challenge where I spent time with like-minded people."

Mary says that dance requires drive and stamina. "Successful dancers have to have an amazing memory" she said. "I found myself becoming an expert on copying and executing dance movements that were physically challenging yet artistic. You make it your own yet you have to fit into a group. It teaches you humility. It felt pure to me — it was my own private thing. No one else could own a piece of that. You set your mind to a goal you can see, and then you do it. Dance allowed me the opportunity to get out there and say to myself 'I can do this.'"

Mary received a speech and theater education degree at the University of Illinois, where she danced during the day and was a waitress at night. She had a scholarship with the National Academy of Dance. Mary became the drama director for the public school system in Champaign following her graduation. Later, she owned a private school for dance while doing post-graduate work and performing with regional companies. "I bought a ballet school in Champaign from a woman who had owned it for 50 years. A friend of hers told me that she was retiring, and might sell her company. I went to lunch with the owner and found her to be the most vibrant, kooky, and fun 82-year-old I'd ever met. She told me not to worry if I didn't have the money to buy the business. She would give me the business if I bought her building"

Mary said.

"I rented rooms upstairs to help pay for the space, and ran the school downstairs. I was studying dance as a student during the day, and then teaching classes at night. I had to create a progressive dance plan for all of the different age groups taking classes at my school," Mary said. The coffee shop nearby provided some inspiration. After school, and before the dance school's classes began, Mary would spend a few hours there to write program ideas, read about dance, and write notes from the classes that she had observed. "I loved working with children, and knew that my career would revolve around them," Mary said.

Mary moved back to the Chicago area where she continued her dance work with Gus Giordanos in Evanston, and then lived in Inverness. "When my daughter was 2, we moved to Barrington and my goal was to be a stay-at-home mom," Mary said. She taught dance part time, and a woman she met in an exercise class approached her about opening a dance school in Barrington. "My son was a year old and I was

busy with family matters. Yet, I told her that I would help."

After a full year of helping the dance school owner get ready to open the doors, the owner changed direction. Mary said, "All along, the plans were for me to only teach dance classes, and to never be a business owner. I had a young family and barely enough time for that." She then turned to Nancie Tobison and asked her for guidance. With help from Nancie and others, Mary decided to continue plans to open the school.

"We opened in 1984 and the first year was exciting," Mary said. There were 80 students. "It took me a few years to educate the parents about dance. Parents needed to learn that for the time and money outlay for our dance programs, they were investing in the highest caliber dance education. We wanted parents to realize that this would be a profitable endeavor for their child and offer them skills for life, and that dance was not just a recreational outlet," Mary said. Parents had to participate by making sure their children were on time and properly attired. "The key element of our dance programs is respect; parents, teachers and the children all have a common goal of respect," Mary said. She helped parents by having them observe what their child was learning for a few days of class. "Parents reported back to me that they were amazed at what went into the dance programs, which are based on the Royal Academy of Dance," she said.

Today, Mary has her sights set on expansion for the growing dance company and its performance needs. "We are now getting serious about expanding our facility to include costume work space, more adequate administrative offices, and a performance space that would be open to local groups, as well as BYDE. It is long overdue, and with adequate funding would be a dream come true for our community," Mary said.



The mice cuddle together as the battle-scene soilders practice their prances.

LAUNCHING BYDE'S FIRST NUTCRACKER

Mary realized that she had a special group of girls with talent, and she took them to dance for the children at Hough Street and St. Anne schools. They performed the one-act ballet *Peter and the Wolf*, and each girl had a part. They took their show on the road and toured at local schools and some senior citizens residences. Kim Duchossois had both of her daughters at the school, and offered to help with costs for the set and costumes. Kim also suggested to Mary that if she was going to continue to do this, that it might be wise to pursue a not-for-profit status to allow for fundraising to support the shows. Together they formed a board of directors, including Kim, Mary Jo Gumowski, Diane Crawford, and Mark Brennan. BYDE was born.

They took measures to mount a ballet and the first choice was the third act of *Sleeping Beauty*. They also hired Winifred Haun, an award-winning choreographer who focused on modern dance. Winifred donated her choreography and also helped assemble an artistic advisory board. That board now consists of Randy Duncan, Eddie O Campo, Julie Salk, Harriett Ross, Daniell Duell, Greg Etter, Keith Elliot, and Winifred. Then they considered producing *The Nutcracker*. A talented team donated one year of their time for the first *Nutcracker*. "I wanted to do just a few sections but we ended up with a whole show," Mary said.

"Many volunteers were needed, and there were these wonderful dads who came in and every night would work on building the set," Mary said. The set workshop was located in a local barn. "I would stop by every night to

see how things were going, concerned that our set wouldn't get finished in time. Jim Estes, who has been with us for every *Nutcracker*, also plays Herr Drosselmeyer. Like the character he plays, one who fixes Clara's broken nutcracker, Jim has helped to build and fix our sets from the very beginning."

Mary looks back at the success of the show. "This is a big boat to put in the water and you hope that the people in the show enjoy taking their place in this big extended family," she said. "This is a wonderful opportunity for the children to work with our guests who are international stars and professional dancers. And they love the children who are in awe of this endearing relationship."

The first *Nutcracker* had excellent attendance. "I was so very proud of the kids and felt so amazed at what everyone did" Mary said. "Fortunately, many people pushed me past where I wanted to go, to help me create *The Nutcracker*. The volunteers helped me get moving. I made sure that I had lots of good food and lots of laughter as we pulled things together."

Mary Brennan was not ready to produce *The Nutcracker* in its entirety as her thoughts turned to this classic ballet in 1994; it seemed too complicated at the time. But like the large family dancing on stage, the one who gathers to tell a story of holiday tradition and of the magical journey for a young girl named Clara, Mary found herself surrounded with her own large dance family. This extended family of staff, volunteers, students, and their parents made sure that the whole story would be told. Mary's own dance family showed her that dreams, like those reminiscent of childhood's promise for young Clara in *The Nutcracker*, can indeed come true.

• MEMORIES OF A MAGICAL JOURNEY •

RUSTY HERNANDEZ,
PRESIDENT, BYDE BOARD
OF DIRECTORS

I was first exposed to BYDE in 2002 when their annual gala was held at the Sanfilippo Estate. I was impressed with the energy and quality of the dancers, the dedication of the parents, and the professionalism of the group. That same year our family went to see *The Nutcracker*. The experience was magical. I was so impressed with the production. At the time, I was working for a mid-size theater company in Chicago. I realized that BYDE's *Nutcracker* is a professional production that had nothing to envy of the numerous shows in the city. I carried this overwhelming admiration for BYDE and the feeling that I had discovered a hidden treasure in Barrington. A year went by, and I was ready to leave my job in the city, fueled by the desire to get involved with this amazing dance company.

I expressed my interest to Mary Brennan, and shortly thereafter I started to sit in at technical rehearsals for the following *Nutcracker*. What I witnessed was an ardent desire to be the best at what each individual has to offer, from the young children and company girls, to the staff and the parents. I have great pride in being part of such a dedicated group of dancers, faculty, board, parents, and volunteers. The surprise of having discovered a hidden gem in Barrington has been replaced with the feeling of knowing that I am part of one of Barrington's greatest little treasures.



KIM DUCHOSSOIS, BYDE
BOARD OF DIRECTORS

My daughter Jessica is 30. She began her dance career at age 3. Our introduction to Mary Brennan occurred when the village's original dance maven, Miss Martha, retired around the ripe young age of 83.

Ballet was my daughter's passion. Clearly, it was Mary's, too. For parents of little girls, it is a common desire to expose them to the ballet and dance experience to nurture poise, posture, confidence, and grace. Mary provided so much more. From this demanding environment, Jessica learned about discipline, commitment, perseverance, patience, and how to get along with other prima donnas.

We watched Mary build a strong and invaluable resource for youth development in our community. She brought together a devoted and talented team of instructors, staff, and volunteers who exemplified the character and work ethic we all hope to instill in our children.

Out of Mary's traditional dance studio morphed another vision and opportunity, the Barrington Youth Dance Ensemble, of which my daughter was privileged to be an original member. A cultivated and focused group of students were trained by Mary and her colleagues to perform beyond the classroom, not only for major productions, but also, very deliberately, for outreach performances. Mary was determined to use these capable dancers to bring enlightenment as well as entertainment into our schools, our churches and retirement homes, and to underexposed communities. The benefits to the dancers and their diverse audiences went well beyond the performance itself.

Jessica went on to major in dance at the University of Illinois and received her MA in London in Arts Criticism. The experience gleaned from this cultural gem in our hometown has shaped my daughter's life. Mary and BYDE will forever receive a standing ovation from us!

ELIZABETH GULLUM,
FORMER EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR, BARRINGTON
DANCE ACADEMY

I enrolled our daughter, Lindsay (now almost 19 years old) in a creative movement class at Barrington Dance Academy when she was 3 years old. I was struck by the professionalism and creativity of Mary Brennan. She loved teaching her "babies." She was instilling in them an appreciation for dance, music, and self-expression.

Lindsay learned to carry and present herself as a confident young girl because of the early lessons from Mary. Lindsay danced for seven years with Mary, until soccer became a bigger priority for her. Yet the lessons she learned from Mary and her staff have stayed with her. I got involved with BYDE when Mary asked me to volunteer backstage during the first *Nutcracker* performance. I was amazed at the level of professionalism and commitment by the guest artists. How wonderful that my 6-year-old was going to be exposed to these creative and talented people! I could quickly see how much these dancers admired Mary and came back year after year to dance with her students. I was awed by her energy, dedication to her students, and to the artistic integrity of her productions. The costumes, the scenery, and the dancing combine to make this a professional production that happens to include young dancers. Our community is fortunate to have Mary. The arts are alive in Barrington and Mary Brennan is one of the people responsible for keeping it that way.





Above: Snowflakes perfect their ending pose in the snow scene.

Inset photo: A dancer practices an attitude turn for her entrance into the snow scene.

