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Ballet reaches out to students

By DAN BARKER, Times Staff Writer
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Hundreds of Fort Morgan students had a chance to take in the beauty of dance as the Colorado Ballet Studio Company came to Fort Morgan High School on Monday.

Dancers from the studio company are the youngest of the performers, who come to the Colorado Ballet much like students go to college, said Anne O'Connor, director of education and outreach.

Dancers do outreach every year in the Denver area, but this year the company received a grant from the Colorado Council on the Arts which allows them to come to places outside the metro area, she said. They were in Colorado Springs last week.

The Colorado Ballet wants to reach some new people, especially young people to help them learn about ballet and break some of the stereotypes they may have about dancers, O'Connor said.



Kevin Wilson, left, and Chris Moulton danced the battle scene from Romeo and Juliet for local students as the Colorado Ballet studio company came to Fort Morgan High School on Monday. Part of the visit was to teach kids to overcome stereotypes about dancers, who must be as fit as professional athletes. (Dan Barker/Fort Morgan Times)



Some Fort Morgan High School students tried out the basic ballet foot positions with a little help from Anne O'Connor, director of education and outreach, middle right, after the performance by the Colorado Ballet studio company Monday. (Dan Barker/Fort Morgan Times)

For instance, some people may be surprised to learn that ballet dancers don't just listen to classical music, but enjoy the same things others do, she said.

Ballet students come from all over the world to audition to join the Colorado Ballet studio company, vying for 18 spots, O'Connor said. After two years in the company, a couple of them are chosen to join the professional company, which has about 50 dancers plus other staff.

These are young people who are used to long hours.

Some of them lived in dance boarding schools while in secondary school, said dancer Morgan Buchanan, who is from Houston, Texas.

That meant going to regular classes in the morning and then dance classes from noon to 6 p.m. each day, said Kevin

Wilson, who is from Alaska.

"It's a big sacrifice," Buchanan said.

This group of the studio dancers ranged in age from 18 to 20 and still kept similar hours.

They come in to do warmup exercises from 10 to noon each day, followed by dance practice until 7 p.m. unless there is a performance, O'Connor said.

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It is not a soft life, she said. Dancers train like professional athletes and must be strong.

"It's definitely a full-time job," O'Connor said.

"Male dancers have to be strong," O'Connor told the audience. They must be able to lift a partner and be able to dance with her in their arms, as well as be able to jump like a basketball player while maintaining a character.

The dancers come to schools to show kids that dance is worth watching, said Gil Boggs, artistic director for the studio group.

As people watch dance, they can experience every emotion while enjoying the sheer athleticism of the performers, he said.

"The grace of the dancers is an amazing thing to see," Boggs said.

>Bringing the dancers to Fort Morgan was a project which took 1-1/2 years, said Jodi



The Colorado Ballet studio company dancers came in to warm up before their performance at Fort Morgan High School. Each day, they take two hours to warm up before another seven hours of practice. (Dan Barker/Fort Morgan Times)



From left, Jessica Ruckstuhl, Christina Schifano, Morgan Buchanan and Faith Madsen took time to answer questions while still in their costumes from their performance. (Dan Barker/Fort Morgan Times)

Walker, director of The Production Co., a local group which is dedicated to the arts.

She started talking with O'Connor about having dancers come out and that eventually led to the grant and the traveling dancers, she said.

Morgan County residents have little exposure to professional-level dance, because it is hard for local dancers to get to big productions, Walker said.

It is also a great experience for the younger kids to learn that dance is something they might want to try, she said.

For this first year, Walker said she only brought Fort Morgan students to the performance, unsure how to handle students from all over the county, but kids from other school districts might be able to watch next year.

The company performed short pieces from "Sleeping Beauty" by Pyotr Tchaikovsky, "Cinderella" by Sergei Prokofiev, the soldier doll dance from "The Nutcracker Suite" by Tchaikovsky, "Amor Kitri" from "Don Quixote" by Ludwig Minkus and the battle between Tybalt and Romeo from "Romeo and Juliet" by Prokofiev.

They also took time to do a mini-dance lesson for students during lunch and answered questions from the audience. During that session, they went over their warmup technique, showed kids some pointers and worked on jumps.

One of the fascinating things about ballerinas is their pointe shoes, which are actually made of paper mache-type material, O'Connor said. One pair of them might be completely broken down after one long performance.

Pointe shoes can hurt at first — since the performer has to use the strength of toes and ankle to balance — but the dancers get used to it, said Jessica Ruckstuhl, who is from Virginia.

One of the messages the dancers try to convey is that ballet uses movement to tell a story and to express emotion, O'Connor said.

The Colorado Ballet is doing a four-city tour of a show called "All Pointes West," which was created by Boggs.

On Saturday, the show will be at the Lincoln Center in Fort Collins at 7:30 p.m., with seats ranging from \$16 to \$30.

Boggs said the program demonstrates how the distinctive Colorado perspective has played a role in the art of ballet.

"All Pointes West" begins with a piece originally choreographed for Mikhail Baryshnikov, and centers around folk-based music.

The program continues with a pair of dancers doing part of the wedding scene from Marius Petipa's "Sleeping Beauty" choreography, followed by "Ave Maria" by Rhoden and ends with "Rodeo" set to Aaron Copeland's score.

To purchase tickets to the Fort Collins show call 970-221-6735 or visit www.fcgov.com/ltix.

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