

## O P I N I O N

WOOG'S WORLD / Dan Woog

## The Magic of the Dance

A young girl waits patiently in the spare, skylit room. Two walls are white; the other two are lined with mirrors. The wooden floor is spotless, if you don't count the half-dozen water bottles scattered about. In a few days this girl will be a lovely sugarplum fairy, performing in the Christmas classic "Nutcracker"; this Saturday afternoon she is one of dozens of Academy of Dance students, dressed in well-worn tights, practicing diligently for her big moment on stage.

Artistic Director Ted Pollen motions the girl, and one other, onto the dance floor. He wears wire-rimmed glasses; standing erect in a form-fitting dark shirt and black tights, he exudes a dancer's muscular grace. Gently yet purposefully, he directs these two sugarplum fairies. His demeanor is serious, professional and joyful, all at once.

Several other dancers sit off to the side, engrossed in the action while waiting their turn. When the music ends they clap, but Ted is not finished. He demonstrates a few subtle steps and asks, "Can you give me a more generous extension?" Then, softening, he praises, "This was a beautiful moment." The girls relax.

"I want emotion!" he exhorts. "And lunch!" he adds. He has been working since early morning, without a break.

At first glance lunch looks decidedly un-dancer-like — it comes in a plastic bag from nearby Boston Market — but it turns out to be a healthy chicken sandwich, and soup. As he eats, Ted talks.

He explains that this is his 18th year with the Academy of Dance, a little-known yet venerable institution housed in

a small white house on South Compo Road, not far from the Post Road. The Academy was founded a quarter century ago, as a private school aiming to give quality dance training to area youngsters. It currently serves 450 students (primarily girls) between the ages of 3 and 18, plus a few adults. Most are from Westport; a smattering come from Fairfield and Norwalk. The Academy presents a yearly "Nutcracker" — this is the 17th edition — along with recitals, Apple Festival and Levitt Pavilion performances, and a touring competition program.

Some of the students hope to dance professionally; others seek only fun and enrichment. Ted Pollen serves them all.

His position as artistic director is listed as part-time, though his schedule mocks the term. He works from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. on weekends, and some weekday afternoons and evenings as well. It is not an easy commute: His day job is teaching fifth grade at Midtown West, a public magnet alternative school in New York City, where he lives. Some of his classroom students have roles in Broadway shows.

Ted's introduction to dance came as "a typical hyperactive kid," growing up in Brooklyn. In those pre-Ritalin days, his parents were told to enroll him in dance class. He loved it, and earned a scholarship with Alvin Ailey. At 17 he was invited to join that fabled company. He danced with the Repertory Ensemble for three years, then earned a degree from New York University's school of business and public administration.

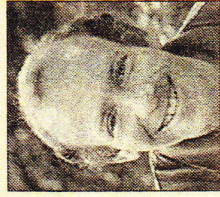
What impels this native New Yorker to spend so much time with Westport's

Academy of Dance? "I have a love affair with children," he answers simply. "It's wonderful to work with them in different capacities. The children in my fifth grade classroom are wonderful, and so are these children. They are not nearly as diverse here as in New York, but they are so appreciative."

He enjoys giving Westport youngsters a positive growing-up experience through dance, and is equally proud that he can watch them grow up. He points to Tollie Uccellini, who began as a 3-year-old "Nutcracker" angel and is now an Academy of Dance instructor, then mentions another girl whom he had not heard from in 16 years. She recently phoned; she's in law school, but wanted Ted to know she still loves dance performances. "It's a good feeling to see these people become patrons and supporters of the arts," he says with satisfaction.

But right now, "Nutcracker" is foremost on Ted Pollen's mind. It is a community event — fathers help build sets, and the cast parties become enormous, extended-family affairs — but Ted also tries to make it as professional as possible. He brings in friends from the Dance Theater of Harlem (he calls it "my bit of cultural exchange"). This year the "Nutcracker" features a part-Asian Clara, a Dominican cavalier, and a black Snow King.

Yet the professional dancers never crowd out the local students. And, unlike some area productions, the Academy of Dance accommodates as many children as possible. There are auditions, but Ted tries to give every child a chance to be at least a bonbon or angel. This year, 100 children will dance; in the past, there have been



130. "It's all about community-building, motivating and enriching children, giving them goals" he says. "I don't want to turn anyone away."

The mother of a 5-year-old is grateful for that philosophy. "I was so glad to hear they weren't going to turn a little girl away," she says. "My daughter isn't the Snow Queen, but she's in it. And now she has a dream that maybe some day she can be Clara."

"We're a private company, not a professional one," Ted Pollen emphasizes. "After 17 years we've learned how to put on a slick production, but this is ultimately a children's ballet. And it's a community event. You can go spend plenty of money, and lots of time, to see the City Ballet with dancers you don't know, or you can go see this one right here in town, inexpensively, with hard-working, enthusiastic kids and professional partners."

The Academy of Dance's "Nutcracker" will be presented at Staples High School on Friday, Dec. 11 (7 p.m.), and Saturday and Sunday, Dec. 12 and 13 (1 p.m. matinees). Tickets are \$15 and \$10. And, oh yes: For the Saturday performance, Ted Pollen is renting a bus to bring his fifth grade class. He wants the children from that part of his life to see what those from the other part do.

("Woog's World: The Sequel," a collection of nearly 100 of Dan Woog's best Westport News columns, has been published, just in time for the holidays. It is available at Barnes & Noble in Westport, or from Woog's World Books, 301 Post Road East #1, Westport, CT 06880, at \$19.95 plus \$3 shipping and handling out of town; free delivery within Westport.)