



If the Slipper Fits

Syracuse City Ballet's leading lady Kathleen Rathbun has established a big city ballet presence in Central New York. This month, she brings the famous fairy tale "Cinderella" to the stage.

BY COURTNEY RAE KASPER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
ALICE G. PATTERSON

Who doesn't love a good rags to riches story—especially when the story involves a pair of princess-transforming heels and a happily ever after. For Kathleen Rathbun, her “glass slippers” came in the form of satin pink pointe shoes, and the artistic director is finally seeing the dream that she wished come true.

Nearly 20 years in the making, Rathbun has successfully grown her ballet company, the Syracuse City Ballet, from a grassroots effort into a professional quality ballet that instills local pride and brings the community together in collaborative spirit. “The goal has always been to make the ballet part of a thriving arts community that Syracuse can have once again,” she said.

A graduate of Juilliard and former soloist with the Princeton Ballet, Rathbun founded Ballet and Dance of Upstate New York in 1997 after moving back to the area from New York City. The school, where she teaches ages 3 through adult in ballet, jazz, tap, modern, hip hop, and creative movement, is also the home of the regional performing company Syracuse City Ballet.

Rathbun's founding mission was to introduce Syracuse to full-length, family-entertaining classical ballets like “Romeo and Juliet,” “Sleeping Beauty” and “Swan Lake”—all major feats for a nonprofit ballet company that operates out of a one-room studio located in the lower level of a church in Westvale. Yet the company would sell out two or three weekends in a row with three shows a night at the 463-seat Carrier Theater, Rathbun said. The ballet has now moved its one-weekend only performances to the larger 2,117-seat Crouse Hinds Theater, and this performance season marks the company's return to performing two major productions a year.

In addition to presenting their annual December classic Tchaikovsky's “The Nutcracker,” this March the Syracuse City Ballet will dance a favorite classic, Prokofiev's “Cinderella,” with a few new twists—most notably Rathbun won't be cast in it. When the ballet first debuted “Cinderella” years ago, Rathbun often performed with the company because the then startup didn't have enough dancers until an improperly cared for back injury she suffered as a teen eventually halted her performance career. Now with 150 dance students, open community auditions, and bringing in national and international guest artists, Rathbun doesn't have an issue filling the roles and she enjoys being able to watch each show from the audience.

This year's “Cinderella” will also feature vintage Italian opera sets rented from a company in New Jersey, real glass slippers made by Corning Incorporated to be raffled off at the event (in the future, Rathbun hopes to hold a public contest to design Cinderella's pointe shoes), and the stepsisters will be played by males like in traditional English ballets. “‘Cinderella’ is going to be beautiful,”

Rathbun said. “The ballroom music is a lot of intricate work and they're all local kids and they're going to nail it.”

While the company has experienced its share of hiccups, including a major dip in funding during the national economic crash and a fire last May that destroyed the ballet's “Nutcracker” sets and costumes, Rathbun has always remained positive and learned how to use her resources creatively. Think mixing and matching costumes from different shows and employing parent volunteers to create props and sets. “During the tough years, we ended up doing less and doing less well to stay alive. We've never been in debt,” she said.

For ballet productions she relies on some grants, sponsorships, volunteers, and figuring out ways to turn it into a community-oriented project by often partnering with other organizations like the Jenni-Lyn Watson Memorial Fund. “We'll be happy if the ballets pay for themselves, as they don't make money per se. The school is a separate entity,” she said. The production costs alone are in the ten thousand dollar range and above, paying for the venue, stagehands and security. “This is my baby. It sometimes feels like I'm paying everyone else to make it happen, but that's the nature of the beast I guess,” Rathbun said softly with her infectious sweet smile. With no major budget for advertising, Rathbun is currently finding clever marketing ways to promote the ballet such as giving away tickets on targeted social media outlets where a surge of interest is present.

Looking back, Rathbun admits that she doesn't have an answer for how she juggled founding the ballet and school, while raising three children—Daniel, 28, Margaret, 26, and Claire, 18, who is an up-and-coming ballerina herself and just took first place at the Youth America Grand Prix Pittsburgh semi-



RIGHT: Kathleen Rathbun with Syracuse City Ballet dancers Kameron Triche, 14, home schooled; Mary Coon, 15, Westhill High School; and Abigail Carrock, 17, Westhill High School.

finals—with her husband, Martin, but she credits her passion of wanting it bad enough for the community.

With business running a little smoother these days, Rathbun has reached the point in her career where she's able to focus her time on developing creative choreography and networking efforts and building a legacy by surrounding herself with the right team—nine part time employees to be exact, including a ballet mistress and an assistant. "It's taken a long time to get here, and I don't take the credit at all because it's the students and their parents and the teachers together as a group," she said. "It's so great because they are all from Syracuse and I'm just so proud of them."

Admitting to being a tomboy as a child and "wanting to be Gene Kelly in the worst way," Rathbun fell in love with ballet at first plié and she still loves watching that moment click for her students. "It's not like anything else. It's

so difficult and you're never perfect, but you're always striving for perfect artistry. I just love it and nothing else compares. You become a family with all of your dance friends and root for each other. It's real camaraderie." This sentiment shines through in her leadership style. "I don't have to be mean and nasty. They are so disciplined," she said. "I've had teachers that had the stick and those I was so afraid to even walk by. I decided a long time ago that I didn't need to be that way. Although I'll push really hard and won't always give a compliment, I try to see where their personality is and work with it."

And if the level of professionalism that Rathbun's students pour into every performance wasn't evidence enough of the shared respect and team togetherness, Rathbun herself got an up-front dose of her dancers' feelings toward her last Halloween. "My ballet students came in dressed like me! I didn't get it at first, but then they proceeded to play teacher,

doing all the quirky things I do that I never picked up on," she said. "There's a lot of love that we have here and we haven't had this much good competition in studio, rooting for each other but right there keeping up and learning all the parts, in a long time."

If the story of Cinderella taught us anything, it's proof that life can truly be changed once we've found the right fit, whether it be shoes or following through with a chosen career path, and never looking back when it comes to making our dreams come true. "I'm very happy with where I am right now," Rathbun said. "Everyone dreams about being a ballerina, but once I got into it I realized I wanted to go home. I wanted to bring dance back to Syracuse."

It's clear that Rathbun is perfectly poised to ensure that her Syracuse City Ballet will live ever after as a staple in the vibrant local arts community. "I still have this dream for the school:

finding a place where we can really rehearse, bringing in master classes and choreographers, establishing an apprentice partnership with a local college, hosting cultivation lunches where people from the community can come watch some amazing talent and learn about the ballet, and keeping dance professionals in the area," she said. "We could have a mecca; I've seen little tiny towns with nothing but factories turn into ballet meccas because the right momentum got behind it. We're right on the edge of really blossoming. I'm not stressed out. People are doing their jobs, and I can see now that it can happen, and it's awesome." ■

AT THE BALLET

WHAT: Syracuse City Ballet presents Prokofiev's "Cinderella"

WHEN: March 8 and 9; 2 p.m.

WHERE: The Oncenter Crouse Hinds Theater, 411 Montgomery Street, Syracuse

MEMBERSHIP: 315-677-3688; syracusecityballet@gmail.com

VISIT: syracusecityballet.com; balletanddanceofupstateny.com



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