

Ballerina begins her flight to fame

Story: GLORIA SLIMAK

"It keeps you on your toes" is more than just a saying to 12-year-old ballet dancer Elizabeth Larson of Avon Township. Although Beth has studied ballet for five years, she has been dancing with toe shoes for less than a year.

"I've always wanted to dance on my toes... you're free like a bird," Beth says, with enthusiasm lighting up her brown eyes.

"When I got on toe shoes a whole new world opened up in front of me."

The seventh grader didn't anticipate that part of her "new world" would include her recent acceptance into a two-year apprentice program with the Detroit City Ballet (DCB).

OF 12 GIRLS who auditioned for the apprentice company, Beth was one of eight chosen.

Receiving the acceptance letter was "one of my thrills," she says. "The other thrill was getting my toe shoes last January."

Marjorie Hassard, artistic director of Detroit City Ballet, organized the non-profit organization in 1958 to "give young Detroit dancers a chance to work in a semi-professional way."

At present, Beth is the youngest dancer in the apprentice ballet program, which she hopes will culminate in her admittance into the DCB company at age 14.

But before that day arrives, Beth must study every Sunday morning at DCB to "learn everything I need to get into the company."

According to Ms. Hassard, Beth and the other dancers have to "be attentive, learn to work more with their own teachers, be strong and not phase out."

THE YOUNG dancer will continue to work at least two days a week with her teachers, Amy and Claudine Cooper of Cooper Sisters Dancing School in Avon Township.

Amy Cooper, who suggested the DCB audition, feels Beth has "basic talent" and has "improved greatly in the last year."

Standing 5-foot-3 and weighing 95 pounds, Beth is "built very well for ballet," says Ms. Cooper. "She has a strong body, long legs and good control."

Beth's mother, Margaret Morrissey, laughs and says "It's nice to see someone with a little grace in our family."

Mrs. Morrissey took ballet lessons, but lasted only two months as compared to Beth's five years. Beth nods and says "Our family is known as the klutzes."

Beth's idol is Russian dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov, featured in the movie "The Turning Point."

The dancer recalls that as a little girl one of her favorite books was about ballet. She was too young to read the words, but so was impressed with the pictures of the beautiful tutus (long, bell-shaped skirts) that she decided to be a ballerina that Halloween.

Thoughts of ballet lessons followed.

THE FANTASY of pretty costumes met with hard reality when Beth had her first lesson at the age of seven. "I couldn't stand it," she says.

Finding out she would have to practice at least an hour a day was especially difficult. "I never do like to practice," she grimaces.

"I think she should practice more, Beth's mother says. 'She's a money dancer,'" Mrs. Morrissey adds with a laugh.

Beth's favorite time to perform is at the annual recital put on by the Cooper Sisters students.

"I love recital," she says. "I like the costumes and seeing the other girls dance and I love performing."

As she waits offstage, the dancer says she's nervous for the other girls performing, but not for herself.

Once she's dancing, she "forgets everything. I don't think of the steps. I just get the beat and count."

An all-A student (except for a B- in shop) at Reuther Junior High School, Beth keeps a low profile.

She found it "kind of embarrassing" when classmates congratulated her about the apprenticeship.

"I really didn't want anybody to know except my close friends. It's just my hobby," she says modestly.

ALTHOUGH SCHOOL work comes first, the hours spent practicing for this "hobby" sometimes interfere with Beth's social life.

When she was a Girl Scout many activities conflicted with her Saturday

ballet lessons. "I thought it wasn't fair," she says.

Every year Beth thinks maybe she'll quit ballet lessons to have more time for her other interests — doll collecting, reading, writing and playing on a summer baseball team (which she had to quit because it could ruin her arch for toe dancing). But she continues to take dance classes.

There's always an incentive to keep her interest. Getting toe shoes was a "big inspiration" as is performing with the Detroit City Ballet at the end of the apprenticeship.

"Now I'm glad I continued, because I've progressed. Now I don't want to quit," she says firmly.

A thoughtful look crosses Beth's face as she talks about the future. She does not want to be a famous ballerina. "Be-

lieve it or not, I want to be a writer."

She explains how bodies of most ballet dancers wear out for dance purposes at about age 30. "I want to have something to fall back on," she says with a maturity well ahead of her youthful years.

"Don't get me wrong. I'd love to be in the New York City Ballet, but not for my career."

Beth's mother doesn't feel a 12-year-old should be worried about a career decision. "I'm very proud of her," Mrs. Morrissey says. "I don't believe in stage mothers. As long as she's having a good time — that's what counts."

"If I were to go to New York to dance, I'd have to bring my mother, so she could put my hair in the French braid I wear when I dance," Beth adds good-naturedly.

Stories come to life

A collection of whimsical stories and vignettes, titled "Whales and Other Tales," will be performed for Detroit Youththeatre's "Something Every Saturday" audiences on Dec. 1.

Two performances by the six professional members of Michigan's Other Things and Co., are planned at 11 a.m. and 2 p.m., in the Detroit Institute of Arts auditorium-theater.

Mime, music and movement will be combined by the ensemble to illustrate the tales in a contemporary style.

"Whales and Other Tales" is designed for families with young people 5 years

of age and older. Children younger than 12 must be accompanied by an adult and those younger than 5 will not be admitted.

In addition to Youththeatre's professional performances, free, guided "Backstage Tours" are offered for young people 10 and older. Youththeatre's Birthday Party Packages can also be reserved.

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