

VAN ALLSBURG

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the reasons Van Allsburg hasn't written a book in seven years. He says becoming a parent for the second time was "kind of a wonderful distraction in my life." Of course, working on film projects has taken up a great deal of time as well. While Zathura is currently in the development stage by the same studio that produced Jumanji, Van Allsburg's perennial holiday favorite, The Polar Express, is chugging along and set to arrive in movie theaters in late 2004. Unlike his books, Van Allsburg has very little control over the finished product. His books - there are 16 of them now - are painstakingly rendered. His latest took more than

10 months because of the unusual process. Van Allsburg used a litho crayon and paper hardly ever used by artists anymore. "It was done on Coquille board with sharp texture," said Van Allsburg. "It's like drawing on a sidewalk. You have to get it to sit on the tooth of paper. It's difficult to get texture consistent. You have to not press hard. I was spending almost as much time sharpening the litho crayon as drawing." But before Van Allsburg lays down any strokes at all, he sees the entire story in his mind's eye. For The Polar Express, he envisioned an old train standing on the tracks at midnight. Soon, a young boy would board for an unforgettable trip to meet Santa. It was at that point that he would receive the gift of a reindeer's bell he alone could

hear ring for the rest of his life. "It's like a stream of images like a movie," said Van Allsburg. "I selected moments in time that made the best pictorial charm. The boys' relationship is an important component of the story and the terrible things that happen to them in outer space. My daughters served as models, costumed in sweat shirt, jeans and a plaid shirt. "The story grew out of different motivations. I'd received lots of letters from kids who were desperate to know what happened to Walter and Danny but that alone wasn't sufficient. In Jumanji, I wanted the last wish at the destination that would have happened. Studio artists often get involved in refining an idea. Going back to

Jumanji, I was tempted to do a variation on it to make it more gripping as a story." After more than 20 years of illustrating and writing books such as The Garden of Abdul Gasazi, Van Allsburg still strives to do the best he can do. He's a role model for children and aspiring children's book illustrators and authors. His values were formed right here in Michigan. This is where Van Allsburg spent his first 23 years. "He'll tell you 'it feels like home.' That's why he'll return to visit his father and sign his books Thanksgiving week. Van Allsburg's curiosity and imagination were first piqued while growing up in his father's dairy farm in Grand Rapids. After high school, he went on to earn a bachelor of fine arts degree at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Afterwards, he taught at Rhode Island School of Design after receiving a master's degree in sculpture. "I was doing sculpture in a cold, far away studio and drawing at night when I started to write a story," said the 63-year-old Van Allsburg. "It was not as crowded a field then. I started at age 29, fairly late. "It's getting your work in the hands of a publisher, sometimes through an agent. Find a story you loved to tell. It's your commitment to story and pictures that will make it



good or bad. I do know I was always a storyteller." Have an interesting idea for a story? Call Observer & Eccentric arts reporter Linda Ann Chomlin at (734) 953-2145 or send e-mail to lchomlin@home.com.net.

OBSERVER & ECCENTRIC GUIDE TO THE MOVIES

A large grid of movie listings for various theaters including National Amusements, Showcase Cinemas, Star Rochester Hills, Star Southfield, Star Westland, Star Theatres, Star Great Lakes, United Artists Theatres, United Artists West River, United Artists Commerce Township, and Showplace Grandview. Each listing includes the movie title, showtimes, and contact information.

Movie listings for theaters such as Showcase Maple 16, Main Art Theatre III, Main Art Cinema III, and Oxford 7 Cinema, L.L.C. Listings include titles like 'The Santa Clause 2', 'The Ring', and 'The Matrix Reloaded'.

Movie listings for theaters including AMC Lincoln 20, Ford Wyoming Drive-In Theatre, and Showplace Grandview. Listings include titles like 'The Santa Clause 2', 'The Ring', and 'The Matrix Reloaded'.

NUTCRACKER



Kelly Girsakis plays Clara in the Plymouth-Canton Ballet Company production of The Nutcracker.

never know, you could be Clara one day. A very little mouse is just as important as Clara. Clara - that's mostly who little kids want to be. Lila Weinstein of Farmington Hills is happy just to play one of the little girls coming out from under Mother Humors' skirt in the second act. The 10-year-old is in her second Nutcracker. "I'm also in the party scene opening presents and chatting with friends in the first act," said Weinstein. "It's my favorite part because it's really fun." Gina DeSilva's been in the Nutcracker since age 7. Like Weinstein, her first year was as one of the little girls in the Mother Humors scene. This holiday season the West Bloomfield 14-year-old plays Clara. One of her early roles was as one of the mice. "My advice to mice aspiring to dance the role of Clara one day is to try their hardest and try to have fun with it, put a lot of effort in it but don't get nervous," said DeSilva.

PLYMOUTH-CANTON BALLET

All of the dance troupes have stories to tell about their mice. Dawn Greene, artistic director of the Plymouth-Canton Ballet Company, says her favorite mouse is 6-year-old grandson Ian Smith of Canton. The Plymouth-Canton Ballet joins with the Plymouth Symphony Orchestra, under the direction of Nan Washburn, Saturday-Sunday, Dec. 7-8, at Plymouth Salem High School in Canton. Children can meet with dancers and ask questions about their roles during a Sugar Plum Tea after matinee. "Our oldest mouse is age 9," said Greene. "We thought Ian was too young but he was watching rehearsals (his mother, June, is ballet mistress and assistant director) and we found out one day in the living room that he could do all the things the mice could do. Mice work really hard just like the dancers. Almost all our Claras start out as mice." Erika Martin of Canton has played one of the mice for going on four years. At age 11, she fears she'll never have the opportunity to play Clara because she's "getting too old." "But I like playing one of the mice," said Martin who's been dancing since age 2 at Joanne's Dance Extension in Canton. "It's a lot of fun to meet new people and cheer on the Mouse King."

LIVONIA SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

There are other plum roles besides Clara for young dancers. Breanne Hoernschemeyer's favorite is the Spanish solo she dances when the Danabros and Julebirds join the Livonia Symphony Orchestra Saturday, Dec. 7, at Church Hill High School in Livonia, and Friday-Saturday, Nov. 29-30, at Ford Community and Performing Arts Center in Dearborn. Hoernschemeyer began dancing at age 4. She's now 17 and a junior at Mercy High School in Farmington Hills. "I absolutely love The Nutcracker," said Hoernschemeyer of Plymouth. "Rehearsals are time-consuming. It takes a lot of dedication but when I'm up there on stage it's worth it and the orchestra completes it." Jean Newell couldn't agree more. Her Livonia Civic Ballet has been doing productions for 20 years. They dance at Clarenceville High School in Livonia Saturday-Sunday, Dec. 14-15. "Our mice range from age 3 1/2 to 6 years old," said Newell, who's owned Miss Jean's Dance Arts in Livonia for 43 years and has a few tales of her own. The 6-year-olds lead younger children. One year she went on with her daughter, Detroit Ballet, based at the Birmingham Dance Academy and Betty Johnston Dance School in Farmington Hills, like most local productions uses young dancers in its production Dec. 13-14, at Historical Players Playhouse in Detroit. But Rose Marie Floyd prefers her Contemporary Civic Ballet mice a

little older. They perform Sunday, Dec. 8, in the Scottish Rite Cathedral at Masonic Temple in Detroit. "A lot of our dancers have become professionals with major companies. Our mice are ages 12-16. They're really good kids. It isn't demanding as far as being a good dancer but it's effective. It's a fun scene and a challenge." Rose Marie Floyd Contemporary Civic Ballet

DETROIT OPERA HOUSE

The Michigan Opera Theatre Dance Series is offering an all-new production this year by the Cincinnati Ballet Sunday, Dec. 8, at the Detroit Opera House. As in years past, 100 local children take on a variety of roles. "We always like to use local children," said David DiChiera, artistic director of Michigan Opera Theatre. "We audition children in the schools to give them the chance to be with professional dancers on stage. We rehearse them for weeks before and then when the company comes we bring them together. "This year we restore Mother Ginger with all the little children under her skirt. People who come to our productions must know that. We have a tree that keeps growing up and up, underneath it all, the mice and toys come to life. I think it's going to be a wonderful treat for children. For me, Christmas is not Christmas without The Nutcracker." lchomlin@home.com.net (734) 953-2145