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Cover story



20 Bask in the Sun Warm up to some vintage rock 'n' roll, performed in Chris Isaak's inimitable style, when the musician performs next week at Civic Arts Plaza in Thousand Oaks.

FEATURES



16 Sweet dreams realized "Nutcracker" season begins this weekend with performances by Ventura County Ballet. Makena Ortiz is psyched because, finally, she gets to dance the role of Clara.

SUNWEST PHOTOGRAPHY/CONTRIBUTED PHOTO



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Tiffany Van Meerten (right) started dancing when she was 5 and her children followed in her footsteps. This weekend her kids – Isaac, 7, Michael, 9, Estelle, 11, and Sophie, 14 – will perform 14 roles in Ventura County Ballet Company's production of "The Nutcracker."

Venture Out

Sweet tradition

■ Sugarplums will dance back into our lives this weekend as 'Nutcracker' season begins

By staff reports

The sugarplums didn't fall far from the tree in the Van Meerten household.

Mom Tiffany Van Meerten began dancing when she was 5 and her four kids with husband Mike — Isaac, 7, Michael Jr., 9, Estelle, 11, and Sophie, 14 — have followed her footsteps into "The Nutcracker," the beloved fairy-tale ballet teeming with sugarplum fairies, snow princesses, evil rats and dancing princes and driven by an enchanting Tchaikovsky score.

The Van Meerten children will fill 14 roles and join a cast of 130 dancers this weekend when the Ventura County Ballet Company kicks off the local "Nutcracker" season with performances in Oxnard.

"This will be the children's fifth time on stage with the production," said Tiffany Van Meerten, whose brood is based in Camarillo. "As you can imagine, it takes a lot to keep this entire family dancing!"

The Van Meertens' story is nothing new. Family ties have long run deep in local "Nutcracker" productions, with sisters and brothers — and even parents — often sharing the stage.

When Moorpark Civic Ballet presents its "Nut-

cracker" next month, the cast will feature sisters Michelle and Alyssa Peters. They've been taking part in the ballet for a dozen years.

"I have danced so many parts," said Michelle Peters, a senior at Thousand Oaks High School. "There's so much work that goes into this production but ... we have a lot of fun."

Michelle Peters started small in "The Nutcracker," first playing a "little party girl." This year she'll dance the role of the Dew Drop Fairy.

Pam Rossi, the artistic director of Moorpark Civic Ballet, loves to watch that kind of progression.

"I've seen so many dancers grow up in this program," Rossi said. "It gives me great joy to see dancers have their dreams become a reality ... (and get to) dance in the parts they have been idolizing for years."

Here's a rundown of local "Nutcracker" productions, in chronological order:

Ventura County Ballet Company: Makehna Ortiz and Madeleine Riddle trained all summer to play the lead role of Clara in this production. Riddle will dance the role at Saturday's matinee and Ortiz will play Clara at the other two shows. "When I found out

I was Clara, I felt like it was a dream," said Riddle, a student at Foothill Technology School. "I feel like I'm going to wake up and realize that I'm not Clara, but I know this is real." The cast also will include Season Winquest (Boston Ballet, Santa Clarita Ballet) as Dream Clara, Ryan Camou (Houston Ballet, State Street Ballet) as the Prince and a pair of local celebrities: Bo Jaxon (a DJ at B95.1 Radio in Ventura) and Dedria Brunett (Miss California International 2012). The 52-piece Ventura College Symphony Orchestra will handle the music. A free sugarplum cookie reception will take place after each matinee, 2 and 7 p.m. Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday, Oxnard Performing Arts and Convention Center, 800 Hobson Way, Oxnard. \$10-\$25. 486-2424; venturacountyballet.com.

Joffrey Ballet: The acclaimed Chicago ballet troupe will perform "The Nutcracker" in Los Angeles for the first time since 1994. 7:30 p.m. Dec. 1-2 and 7:30 p.m. Dec. 2-3, and 2 p.m. Dec. 4, Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles. \$34-\$125. 213-972-0711; musiccenter.org.

Los Angeles Ballet: The professional dance company will open its sixth season with "The Nutcracker" at three venues: the Alex Theatre in Glendale (7:30 p.m. Dec. 3 and 2

p.m. Dec. 4), Royce Hall at UCLA (1 and 5 p.m. Dec. 17-18) and the Redondo Beach Performing Arts Center (7:30 p.m. Dec. 22-23, and 1 p.m. Dec. 24). \$24-\$95. 310-998-7782; losangelesballet.org.

Malibu Civic Ballet: The

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