



**GOOD CHEER:** Audrey Curtis, Ella Ullrich and LeAnn Sims display evident joy as they rehearse Act I's party scene at the VCBC studio in Midtown Ventura.



# BRINGING A FANTASY TO LIFE

Amazing grace and dedication bring Ventura County Ballet Company's production of *The Nutcracker* to the stage.

**INTRO BY NANCY D. LACKEY SHAFFER**  
**PHOTOS BY MICHAEL MONTANO**

**M**agical princes, toys come to life, sugar plum fairies and dancing cookies — these enchanting visions leap from the imagination to the stage with every production of Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker* ballet. It wasn't always so: Its premiere in St. Petersburg in 1892 was met with a lukewarm response, with critics calling the choreography "disorderly" and "amateurish," criticizing the ballet for using children instead of professional dancers and veering dramatically from the E. T. A. Hoffman story, which itself was an adaptation of the Alexandre Dumas, père, original.

Today, of course, a performance of *The Nutcracker* is one of those events that ushers in the holiday season, as much as Christmas carols on the radio and Rankin/Bass television specials.

Rehearsals for the Ventura County Ballet Company's production, which kicks off Dec. 2, started in September, with hour upon hour devoted to choreography, costuming, pointe work and precision. VCBC invited *Ventana Monthly* behind the scenes a few weeks before opening night to get a glimpse of how reality becomes fantasy, and to see the cast — young children from the ballet school, gifted students and seasoned professionals — in its natural element. These graceful dancers are living proof that dreams can come true.





**FAR LEFT:** Choreographer and Associate Artistic Director Marina Flagina oversees with a watchful eye, ensuring that the precision and technique for which ballet is known meet her exacting standards.

**ABOVE:** The excitement builds as performance time gets near. A smiling Noelle Hall (center) gets fitted for her Princess Puppet costume as Campbell Barkley, Kaylee Rice, Avery Ohl and Alessandra DeMarre look on.

**LEFT:** Professional dancer Ryan Camou is all a-leap for the Russian dance variation, "Trepak," which also features ballet students Makena Large, Sienna Darlucio, McKenna Parcher, Miranda Aguilar, LeAnn Sims and Molly Globerman.