

Georgia Ballet marks 50 years

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MARIETTA - It was nearly 50 years ago that a Marietta native's vision for a professional dance company in her hometown became a reality. To celebrate, the Georgia Ballet announced its 50th anniversary season with the return of two of its popular ballets, "A Sleepy Hollow Story" and "The Nutcracker," featuring choreography by its founder, the late Iris Hensley.

"This is a very special year for us to be performing Iris' timeless version of such a beloved story and tradition," said Georgia Ballet Artistic Director Gina Hyatt-Mazon.

"We are so honored to be celebrating 50 years of quality arts education and performances. Performing for our audiences on stage presents the perfect opportunity for us to share our love of what Iris brought to life so many years ago."

Beginning the season in October is the return of "A Sleepy Hollow Story," with choreography by ballet choreographer Janusz Mazon. The Washington Irving folktale originally premiered in the 2006-07 season. It will be performed on the same bill as the fiery, Spanish-themed classic, Paquita, as well as a new work by Mazon. Performances are Oct. 24 and 25 at the Cobb Civic Center.

The Georgia Ballet's version of the timeless classic, "The Nutcracker," features waltzing snowflakes, giant toy soldiers and dancing candies. It will be performed Dec. 4-6 at the Cobb Civic Center.

In February, several choreographers will present new works showcasing the company's choreography in a special project called "Spectrum." A silent auction, art exhibit, refreshments and music are scheduled after the fundraiser.

A major objective of the ballet company this 50th season is to bring together a large gathering of alumni to establish a scholarship fund in Hensley's memory to train more students. More than \$30,000 in scholarships presently comes out of the company's annual operating income.

Respectfully addressed as "Miss Iris" by the ballet community, Hensley founded the Georgia Ballet in 1960 as a vehicle to expose people to the art of dancing and quality dance theatre. A Marietta High School and University of Georgia graduate, she left the limited opportunities in Georgia to dance in New York, Toronto and Washington, D.C.

In 1960, inspired by her love of dance, Hensley founded the Cobb/Marietta Ballet, which is now the Georgia Ballet.

In 1969, Sharon Story, Atlanta Ballet mistress and education dean, began her ballet training at age 11 under Hensley at the Georgia Ballet.

"Miss Iris was a visionary during a time Marietta was a very small, rural community before Interstate 75 and the link to the city," remembered Story. "She always fought for the highest of standards, quality, resources that she could provide. She sought out the best professionals in the field to teach us."

Today, the Georgia Ballet has an artistic staff of 13 that serves the professional company, a dance school and its Arts in Education outreach programs. The company employs 20 dancers and serves 350 students, from age 2 to adults, in the Georgia Ballet School.

Hensley died in August 2003 after a long battle with pancreatic cancer. Before her passing, she named Hyatt-Mazon and school director Michele Ziemann-DeVos as co-directors.

"When the Georgia Ballet was founded, it was one of very, very few resources for dance education and performance in Cobb



The Georgia Ballet is celebrating its 50th anniversary with productions of A Sleepy Hollow Story and The Nutcracker. Both shows will feature choreography from the Ballet's founder and Marietta native, the late Iris Hensley.

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County," said Michele Ziemann-Devos, executive director.

"The Georgia Ballet has survived 50 years due to the extreme talent, passion and commitment of all who are intimately associated with the organization."

Tickets for all performances go on sale Aug. 17. Tickets can be purchased by visiting the Georgia Ballet Web site at www.georgiaballet.org or by calling the office at (770) 528-0881.