

Birmingham Ballet's 'Nutcracker' takes to the air next weekend

The community-based Birmingham Ballet, directed by Cindy Free, has been staging "The Nutcracker" since 1996, and boasts enthusiasm that soars — literally — through aerial ballet.

"Dancers are so beautiful when they jump into the air," Free says. "The shapes they create are just gorgeous, but they have to land. So when you create aerial movement it lasts longer and fills the whole rectangle of the stage."

Young Clara's godfather, Drosselmeier, will fly through the air to direct the battle between the Nutcracker Prince and the Mouse King, but that's only one of the production's high points.

"I'm inspired by Cirque du Soleil and productions like 'The Lion King,'" says Free. "I look at ballet and ask, 'what does the public want that's true entertainment?' It's the visual imagery and surprises and beauty of movement."

Heading next weekend's cast for the holiday classic are two dancers from the Suzanne Farrell Ballet in New York — Venezuelan ballerina Mariaelena Ruiz and Bulgarian dancer Momchil Mladenov. Each has won several competitions and racked up impressive professional creden-



Michael Huebner

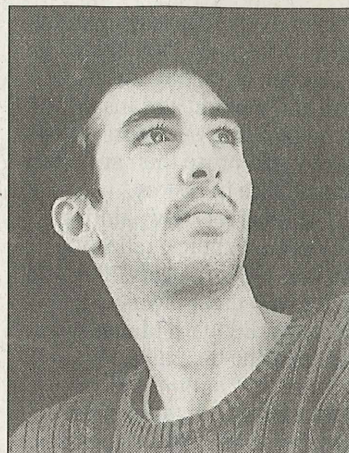
tials. Four additional soloists are college level dancers from Birmingham-Southern College and the University of Alabama. The remainder of the cast of 160 comes from children and adults in the Birmingham community.

"It's a big community event," says Free. "We have 74 schools and 20 different ballet schools represented. It's full of youthful energy."

Free added that the production depends heavily on the cast and volunteers to haul props, paint sets, sew costumes and construct the Christmas tree.

"Our mission is to provide a training ground for dancers," she says. "The way that happens is to become involved in all areas of the production."

Three public shows will be held at Samford University's Wright Center. Saturday at 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. and next Sunday at 2 p.m. Tickets are \$25,



SPECIAL

Bulgarian dancer Momchil Mladenov of the Suzanne Farrell Ballet stars as the Nutcracker Prince in Birmingham Ballet's "The Nutcracker."

\$12.50 for children. Call TicketMaster at 715-6000 or purchase on line at www.birminghamballet.com. An additional performance for school groups will take place at 10 a.m. on Thursday.

Time travel

Ready for warm wassail toast, the ceremony of the salt and the procession of the Boar's Head? For four evenings starting

Thursday, the Alys Stephens Center will be transported to Elizabethan England for "Ye Olde Madrigal Feast," an evening of music, comedy and lots and lots of feasting.

The UAB Madrigal Singers and a brass ensemble will be dressed in period garb and perform traditional Christmas music. A jester will provide additional entertainment. Guests can gulp down breads, cheeses, wine, fruit, a main course and a flaming dessert. Period chalices and traditional pouring vessels will adorn the head table.

Tickets for the second annual event are \$75. Seating is limited, and tables for 8 are available. Doors open at 7 p.m. each night from Thursday through next Sunday. Reservations are required; they can be made by calling 975-2787.

Pianist Rob Conway

New music specialist Rob Conway, known for his interpretations of John Cage, Elliott Carter, Iannis Xenakis and other big-name modernists, delivered a gripping program of adventurous, avant garde works Monday. Held at Samford University's Wright Recital Hall and sponsored by the Birmingham Art Music Alliance, the concert spotlighted some of Birmingham's best composers.

The Detroit-based pianist started with Dorothy Hindman's piano and tape dialogue, "fin de cycle," which creates an engaging, conversational give-and-take in a variety of moods and textures. String plucking and other inside-the-piano devices added to her expansive sonic arsenal.

Michael Coleman captured listeners' attention with a stark, clean and airy style in the first of two bagatelles and pounding rhythmic and frighteningly loud chords in the second. Robert Train Adams' "Piano Sonata (Four Mobiles)" moves gradually from colorful tonal landscapes to dissonant angular strides, Conway conveying the composer's imagery and driving rhythms with conviction.



SPECIAL

The prince is regaled at last year's "Ye Olde Madrigal Feast" at the Alys Stephens Center.

In "Sojourn," Michael Angell has created a unique and attractive sound world based on Carson McCullers' short story, "The Sojourner." Drawing on a variety of percussion instruments, metallic sonorities and a wisp of an organ melody in the tape, it migrates from the naive to the otherworldly, the nostalgic to the ostentatious. It's not an easy score to play, but Conway handled it with ease.

James Jensen's "Eight Preludes for the Dance" was the program's most conventional, and least venturesome work, its language borrowing from jazz,

the romantics and the impressionists.

Kurt Carpenter's "Transylvania" requires virtuoso playing, and he received it in this potent reading from Conway. The piece explores the top-to-bottom extremities of the piano, fluctuating from near-ambient stasis to boisterous, clashing harmonies. Carpenter uses silence and tone clusters particularly well, captivating listeners on a formal as well as sensual level.

Michael Huebner is fine arts writer for The Birmingham News.

The UAB Madrigal Singers perform at last year's "Ye Olde Madrigal Feast" at the Alys Stephens Center.

