

PoCo girl to play Clara in the Goh Ballet's Nutcracker

By Sarah Payne, The Tri-City News, November 24, 2009



Even before she was walking, little Michelle Khoo was dancing.

As a baby she loved having music on, said her mother, Joanne Khoo. "She would bounce and bounce and dance around, so I thought it would be a good idea to put her into dance."

It turned out to be a very good idea. Michelle, a 10-year-old Port Coquitlam girl, will play the starring role of Clara in the Goh Ballet's presentation of The Nutcracker this Christmas.

"I wanted to be Clara but I didn't really expect it," Michelle admitted. She auditioned with many other Goh dancers in September and was hoping to land even a small part – maybe one good dance.

Now she'll be in every single scene of the perennial holiday classic. But if Michelle, a Grade 5 student at BC Christian Academy is nervous, she's not letting on.

She's looking forward to the shows and isn't concerned about the crowds that will be watching at the Centre in Vancouver for the Performing Arts. Already a skilled dancer, Michelle said the choreography hasn't been too difficult and it's been pretty cool learning how to do a lift.

"It's mostly when the Nutcracker becomes a real person and we're really happy and I get lifted up a lot," she explained.

But being in every scene means a hectic schedule for the Khoo family. Every day after school Michelle heads to the Goh Ballet Academy in Vancouver for an hour or two of lessons, and the weekends involve about 10 hours of rehearsals each day.

All the driving and waiting is worth it though.

"She was screaming and jumping," when she found out she had the role, her mom said with a smile. "She was jumping higher than me."

"We all work around Michelle's schedule but this is just temporary," added her dad, Chris Khoo. The "normal" schedule is dancing six days a week. "She enjoys it though and she's expressed an interest in doing it professionally one day," said Chris.

And even though it means some late nights while she finishes her homework, Michelle

said she doesn't mind all the practicing and never tires of ballet. She used to do tap and jazz as well, along with some traditional Chinese dancing, but it's ballet that Michelle really loves.



Goh Ballet's 2009 Nutcracker Performance; Photo Credit: David Cooper

"I like the feel of it, the way the movement happens," she said.

When it comes to the Nutcracker Michelle enjoys the whole show but, when pressed, admitted her favorite scenes are at the beginning – the party, and the battle scene after the party.

Khoo will be joined on the stage by fellow Tri-City dancers Reid Cumming as the Snow King, Ben Freemantle, Spencer and Lyndsey Britten and Nicole Nussle.

Anna-Marie Holmes has choreographed the Goh Ballet's production, and they'll be backed up by the Vancouver Metropolitan Orchestra playing Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker Suite. Chan Hon Goh, former prima ballerina with the National Ballet of Canada, is the executive producer and artistic coordinator of the show.

Based on the E.T.A Hoffman fairy tale The Nutcracker and The Mouse King, the ballet is a favorite holiday tradition for both young and old. It tells the story of Clara, who receives a nutcracker doll from her godfather Drosselmeyer. She later dreams that her Nutcracker comes to life and leads an army of toy soldiers into battle against the evil Mouse King.

Once he's defeated, Clara and the Nutcracker Prince journey through the Land of Snow and the Kingdom of Sweets, witnessing a world of breathtaking magic along the way. When Clara wakes up she wonders whether her magical journey was all but a dream.

The Nutcracker was first performed by the Kirov Ballet in St. Petersburg, Russia in December of 1892. Tchaikovsky wrote the score as an adaptation of Hoffman's story but the composer wasn't fond of the project and the ballet was a failure for critics and audiences alike.

In 1954, famed American choreographer George Balanchine brought the ballet back to life when he mounted a production for the New York City Ballet, paving the way for its continued popularity.