

## Where dancers can strut Ann Arbor's nonprofit Civic Ballet still going after 50 years

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Sophie Kruz, 16, cannot imagine her life without dance. It keeps her focused and driven, has made her many friends and gives her a chance to perform for a crowd. And, without the Ann Arbor Civic Ballet, she might have never experienced it.

The company's 50th anniversary is this year and, despite some occasional financial concerns, it's still going strong.

"The Ann Arbor Civic Ballet was the first charter ballet company in Michigan and the sixth in the United States," said Lee Ann King, director of the troupe. "I don't know any other company, certainly not in Michigan, that has anywhere near that longevity.

"That says something about our community and about the caliber of dancers and students that we get here. They're good enough to make this happen."

Silvia Hamer and a group of her friends began the company 50 years ago because they wanted to add dance to the already-thriving culture of Ann Arbor. The company had its first performance in 1956 and, aside from producing its own concerts, brought in other dance companies as well.

The goal was to give local artists and dancers a place to strut their stuff. A place for which dancers like Kruz are grateful.

"It's cool to be a part of something that's been going on for so long and also I love it because of all the connections I made," said Kruz, a junior at Huron High School and a performer in the company. "It provides a lot of opportunities for people who might not be able to dance as much in maybe a smaller town or a different town that doesn't have so much culture in it."

The civic ballet is a non-profit organization that holds open auditions each year for its productions; there are usually two per year. The dancers in the company come from throughout Washtenaw and Wayne counties and are anywhere from age 12 to adult. Some past members of the troupe have gone on to pursue prestigious careers in dance.

"There's a pretty impressive list of dancers that have gone on to almost all the major companies," King said. "They keep in contact and they're thrilled to have me know what's going on with them."

The Ann Arbor Civic Ballet has chosen to honor its anniversary with a production of "The Haunted Castle," because it is an original ballet of the company. Also, King said, it's a good ballet to get people interested in dance.

The bright costumes and theatrical sets are entertaining, so even those not particularly familiar with dance can enjoy it. The full-length, three-act show may sound scary, but it's geared to children as well as adults.

"I think it's a perfect ballet for people who are not that technically aware of things. It's a really good ballet to hook in children," King said. "I think that's one of the roles of the civic ballet - to get the young people educated and exposed to dance. It's easier for their love of it to grow."

Aside from the dancers in the production, many other members of the community pitched in to help as well. Volunteers made props, rigged the lighting and drew the poster. On the night of the performances, more volunteers will help to usher and work backstage to keep everything running smoothly.

"We pull it in as we need it. We utilize other people," King said. "The response, especially on this ballet, is that they love it. In this production we have to bring in somebody who does some juggling, and a mime and a magician. These are all outside people that we have to integrate into the show. Their reaction has just been so overwhelmingly positive."

For King, it's easy to see why the Ann Arbor Civic Ballet has stood the test of time: Everyone can enjoy dance on some level.

"Sometimes the audience isn't educated with the technique but can appreciate the movement and the music working together and creating lines and space and shapes," she said. "Dance is natural to the human body. Children just naturally respond to music and want to move. Everybody has it in them."