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'Describers' bring ballet to all

By David Lyman
Enquirer contributor

Emily Pennington has been going to Cincinnati Ballet performances since she was just 3 years old.

"It's always great," says Pennington, a 15-year-old honors student at Turpin High School in Anderson Township. "Every year - I can't wait to see 'The Nutcracker.' "

Nothing peculiar about any of that. Except, perhaps, that Pennington has been blind since birth.

For years, her parents - Tim and Deann - sought out seats that were far enough from other patrons so their whispered descriptions of the onstage action wouldn't disturb other people. It was a system that worked well enough for Emily to want to return year after year.

But February last year, the Penningtons stumbled across a service that the Cincinnati Ballet has offered for more than a decade - audio description for the vision-impaired. With the aid of an infrared audio system and small headsets for patrons, a trained "describer" offers a play-by-play description of what's happening on the stage.

"Overall, my parents did a pretty good job," Emily says. "But when they tried describing a ballet . . . well, you know . . . it was hard, because there isn't any dialogue."

But with a trained describer, the ballet took on an added dimension.

"I wasn't sure how they would do it," Emily says. "It was 'Peter Pan.' And it was amazing. He would say things like 'Peter Pan flies through the nursery window and twirls in the air and glides to the floor.' It was really, really cool."

Several local theaters offer the service for at least one performance of each production. Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park began its audio descriptions more than 20 years ago. Now, the Aronoff and Music Hall offer the service, too, as does the Covedale Center for the Performing Arts.

The one common thread through all of this is Mike Snyder, a Fairfield city councilman who began volunteering for the Cincinnati Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired's Radio Reading Services more than 25 years ago. He's been the ballet's describer since the very beginning.

Today, the descriptions are offered to cultural organizations by Cincinnati's Center for Independent Living Options.

"I'd probably only been to one or two ballet performances before I did my first description for the ballet," says Snyder, 65, who works as a customer service representative for Convergys - on the phone, of course. "But since I essentially talk for a living, I didn't worry about it too much."

There's no script for Snyder to work from, though he does regularly attend a dress rehearsal where he can make detailed notes to guide him through the live performance.

In some ways, he says, ballet performances offer him more flexibility than any other type of performance.

"Since there's no dialogue in the ballet, there's more potential for detailed description," Snyder says. "I'm not a ballet expert, so you won't hear a lot of jargon from me. But I try to concentrate on patterns and the types of movement."

He launches into a description of an imaginary scene, sounding slightly like the color man on a radio sports broadcast.

Pennington is absolutely wowed by Snyder's work.

"He's really, really good," Pennington says. "Some of the descriptions you get from describers for movies or TV just crack you up. But the ballet is wonderful. And this time, my sister Lillie is coming. This is the first time she's seen the ballet with description. I can't wait."

Audio description for "Cinderella" is offered free at the 2 p.m. Saturday performance. Headsets can be picked up at the Aronoff's coat check.

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Additional Facts

If you go

What: "Cinderella," performed by the Cincinnati Ballet

When: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2 p.m. Saturday and next Sunday

Where: Aronoff Center, Procter & Gamble Hall, 650 Walnut St., downtown

Tickets: \$25-\$80

Information: 513-621-5282; www.cincinnatiaballet.com
