

Molly Tiernan poses at a rehearsal in Waterloo for 'The Nutcracker: A Canadian Tradition.' The Kitchener teen has graduated from being one of the local youth performers to earning a spot as a member of the touring cast for the production by Canada's Ballet Jörgen.

Dancing in 'Nutcracker' is like a dream

Sharing stage with professionals inspires young performers

BY BRIAN WILLIAMS

PHOTOGRAPHY • CRESTINA MARTINS

It will feel like a dream coming true for Molly Tiernan when she steps on the stage in December at Centre in the Square to perform in "The Nutcracker: A Canadian Tradition."

It feels that way every time she dances in a show because in that space she is surrounded by what she loves – ballet. The art form and the community created by Canada's Ballet Jörgen have captured the Kitchener teenager and she never wants to leave.

This year's Nutcracker performances come with a bonus as she has earned a spot with the touring cast. This means the two shows

at Centre in the Square will be among up to a dozen around the province for her.

"Ever since I was young I've always dreamed of being a dancer," says the St. Mary's High School student, who will turn 15 in early December. "Ballet Jörgen has really made it click in my mind that ballet is something I want to do for the rest of my life. And I guess coming on that stage and being able to dance with the professionals just makes me smile."

Taking in a production of "The Nutcracker" is a Christmastime tradition for many Canadians. For families like the Tiernans it is extra special because, for the fourth year in a row, Molly is one of the performers.

When Ballet Jörgen stages a show at a theatre such as Centre in the Square, it involves local dancers in the youth roles, working alongside the professional members of the cast.

It's an invaluable experience for young people who live and breathe dance to be mentored by and form relationships with professionals who understand better than anyone the dreams of the young dancers around them.

"Watching the professionals on stage and knowing that potentially one day that could be me is so inspiring for me whenever I step on stage with them," Tiernan says. "It gives me motivation to be able to get there someday."

In particular, she looks up to Ballet Jörgen company dancer Taylor Gill.

The first time Tiernan took notice of Gill was in 2014, when Tiernan was one of the youngsters cast as a Chipmunk.

"She's just flawless and she makes everything look so effortless," Tiernan says of

SHOWTIMES

Local performances of *The Nutcracker: A Canadian Tradition*, by Canada's Ballet Jörgen.

Guelph

Dec. 20 and 21 at 7:30 p.m., River Run Centre

Kitchener

Dec. 28 at 2 and 7 p.m., Centre in the Square

Gill. "As a person she's also very inspiring. If you say something to her she'll have a conversation with you."

Gill, 31, knows how much it means to a young dancer to have a professional offer advice or stop to talk.

While growing up in Alberta and Winnipeg she was one of those young dancers in similar productions and those experiences are what inspired her to make it a career.

"I was in that same situation when I was about her age and now I'm on the other side of it so I know what it's like to be her," says Gill, who is in her ninth season with

Ballet Jörgen.

Each year since her first turn in "The Nutcracker," Tiernan has been given roles with more responsibility.

In 2015, she graduated to playing a Squirrel and then, last year, she was transformed into a Dragonfly.

While some young performers may repeat roles from year to year, there are others like Tiernan who demonstrate they've grown as dancers and can step up to the challenge of a new role, says Clea Iveson, education manager with Ballet Jörgen.

Being cast as a Dragonfly, which involves a duet, signaled that the team has recognized Tiernan's talent.

"When somebody is making it through to Dragonfly their eagerness and ability to improve and continue to grow in dance is clear," Iveson says.

And this year Tiernan takes another step up, joining the touring cast.

Training almost 11 hours a week at the Dance Centre in Kitchener, where she first

walked through the doors at age three, Tiernan hasn't limited herself to ballet.

During an interview in the living room of her family's Kitchener home, she spoke fondly of other styles of dance. Through her dance school, she has also performed at Centre in the Square with the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony for the Yuletide Spectacular and, two years ago, showed off her Irish dancing skills during a show by the Barra MacNeils.

But as the conversation comes back to her experiences with Ballet Jörgen, you can hear her passion for ballet in her voice.

"The Nutcracker" has opened the door to other Ballet Jörgen experiences. In 2015, she participated in "Sleep Beauty." Last year, it was "Swan Lake." Then, in September, when the company staged "Anastasia" at Dunfield Theatre in Cambridge, Tiernan was in action again as one of the local performers.

The "Anastasia" production led to one particularly busy weekend. After the two

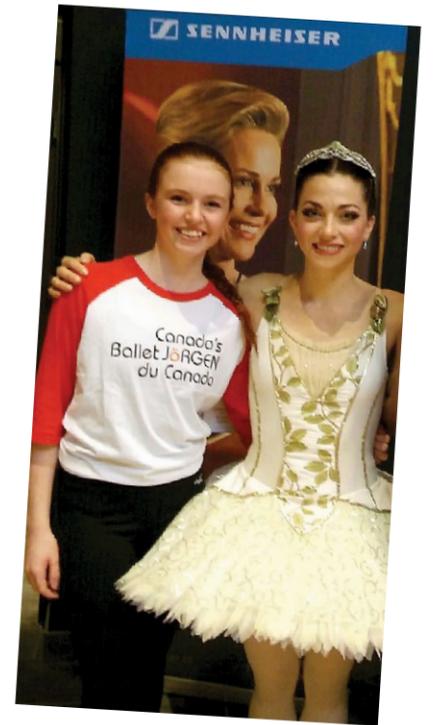
"Anastasia" shows on Saturday, Tiernan was up early Sunday with a smile on her face for "Nutcracker" rehearsal in Waterloo.

She also spent a week in the summer in Toronto at a Ballet Jörgen camp at George Brown College. Ballet Jörgen runs the dance program at the college in a partnership that allows students to earn a diploma and leave prepared for employment in the dance world. It's a post-secondary program that is definitely on Tiernan's radar.

First up, though, is this year's "Nutcracker" tour. Along with her primary role as the Woodchop, she will also play a Beaver, Deer, Rat and Dragonfly.

And if she does go on to be one of the professionals the youngsters look up to, she's already thinking like one, offering encouragement to those toying with the idea of auditioning for a Ballet Jörgen show but questioning their ability.

"It's always a really positive experience," Tiernan says. "I definitely recommend going for it." 



Molly Tiernan poses with Taylor Gill after last year's 'Nutcracker' performance at Centre in the Square.

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