

Prairie Nutcracker members provide an

Artistic *informance*



SONORA J. MAZSON/The Hutchinson News

Betsie Andrews, director of the *Prairie Nutcracker*, shows schoolchildren how to wave like wheat in a field during an informational performance Friday at the Fox Theatre. Nearly 1,000 second- and fifth-graders from nine area schools got a sneak peek at how a theater performance runs on stage and behind the scenes.

By Kelly McGuire

The Hutchinson News

Nearly 1,000 students from nine Kansas school districts filed into Hutchinson's Historic Fox Theatre Friday for a crash course in theater and a special sneak peek of tonight's "Prairie Nutcracker" performance.

The event, called an "informance," was a sampling of not only the individual dances seen in tonight's show, but also a look at what goes on behind the scenes to make a successful performance.

The event was made possible by a program called "Buy the Bus," in which companies, groups or individuals can rent a bus to pick up children from their respective schools and deliver them to the Fox for special events.

Friday's informational performance was designed for children in second and fifth grades. "Prairie Nutcracker" director Betsie Andrews spoke to the students about the different parts of the stage, the responsibilities of the stage and lighting crews, and explained some of the terminology used in the theater.

In between explanations, the audience was treated to samplings of several dances. Andrews enlisted the help of several volunteers from the audience who became extras in some of the scenes. Some imitated

If you go

What: *Prairie Nutcracker*
When: 8 p.m. Saturday and 3 p.m. Sunday
Where: Fox Theatre, 18 East 1st
Tickets: Adults, \$12; children ages 4 to 11, \$8, available at the Fox Theatre box office or by calling (620) 663-1981.

shocks of wheat, while others joined in a quick game of Leap Frog.

Fox Theatre Executive Director Mary Hemmings said it was just one way of exposing area children to the arts.

"I believe strongly that children who are exposed to theater and the arts early in their lives become better citizens, and that it enhances their lives," Hemmings said.

Andrews and Hemmings said they hope to start a long-term program to ensure that by the time students graduate from high school, they would have been to the Fox at least four times.

"Each time will be a different experience for them," Hemmings said.

Teachers were sent a packet before Friday's event about the history of the Fox, of ballet, of the traditional *Nutcracker* story, and even on theater protocol and behavior,

allowing them to incorporate the experience into lesson plans.

As an added treat, "Prairie Nutcracker" composer Rick Kuethe, from Boston, arrived moments before the informational performance was to end to offer advice to the students.

Kuethe flew from Boston to Kansas City, then drove to Hutchinson to make the informance. A missed turn near Salina caused him to be fashionably late, but his tardiness was quickly forgiven by the receptive audience.

Kuethe told the students they each possess the ability to be creative, and that all the people they hear on the radio or who they read about at school started out just like them - in school.

"I wanted to tell the kids about creativity - to start with an idea and follow through with it," he said. "Getting an idea, an inspiration, is how it all starts."

Lincoln Elementary School teacher Glinda Theus said she thought the event was a good lesson for her students.

"It lets them know what goes on behind the scenes and how much discipline it takes," she said.

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