

The VELVETEEN RABBIT

By Jeff Reid

Photo by Amy Conry

Every child dreams about his or her toys coming to life. Both imaginative tots and nostalgic adults have the chance to see this dream come true right here in Wilmington. The Dance Element adaptation of the classic children's story *The Velveteen Rabbit* will be performed at The Community Arts Center on Friday, August 5 at 7pm and on August 6 at 3pm and 7pm.

To capture the magic of inanimate playthings springing to life, director Ashley Barnes has once again (last years production was *Peter and the Wolf*) designed and made all the costumes for her summer dance troupe. The 40-minute long production is an adaptation of the book by Margery Williams told though music, dance and a beautiful Grammy nominee narrative by Meryl Streep.

The production is the result of a four-week intensive dance camp held by the Dance Element. There are twenty dancers from the ages of 5–15 with some returning “veterans” from last year’s production.

“These kids are focused and quite disciplined,” says Barnes who graduated from ECU in 2007 with a degree in Fine Arts. “I am so blessed to have students of this caliber who are so dedicated and focused. These kids want to be here.”

Even though this is a summer production for Barnes, the work began in January. Once she decided on the play to perform, she began to sketch the costume designs of the characters: the Skin Horse, The Mouse, The Lion and of course the Velveteen Rabbit. Sewn entirely by hand, the costumes are not only a reflection of her love for what she does, but also shows the commitment to her students of having a unique performance experience.

“The most challenging costume was the horse - the challenge being that it wanted to fall forward or backward off the head,” she explains with laugh.



“I solved this problem by adding the little saddle that attached the costume around the waist.”

To see her costumes “come alive”

that makes the rabbit real.

“Real isn’t how you are made...” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves

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and then to put them on the kids and watch them dance around is pure joy for Barnes. Not unlike the transformation of the toy rabbit that becomes real in the story.

Along with Susan Turner as Assistant Director (also playing the role of Nana), The Dance Element ensemble heartwarmingly moves though the story that tells us of a young boy Alex (Faith Seamon) and the Velveteen Rabbit (Devon Hamerski) he receives for Christmas. The rabbit is teased by the other toys in the nursery, The Clockwork Mouse (Zoe Flournoy), The Skin Horse (Christina Scott), The Wooden Lion (Hana Brookins), The Toy Engine (Bradley Lloyd), The Model Boat (Daniel Reaves) and by The Real Rabbit (Monica Lower) and her chorus of rabbits when he is left outside. Alex loves the Velveteen Rabbit very much, and it is his love

you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become real.” It’s amazing how simple passages from a children’s book can grasp the essence of love, understanding and life.

After watching a special performance at The Dance Element studio, I felt as if I had witnessed a transformation of sorts and I began to understand the message of the Velveteen Rabbit more clearly. Young, bubbly, excited dance students became serious artisans when it came time to perform. The costumes, the music or perhaps performing for me certainly had an affect, but there was something else. There was a spirit coming from the dancers that was timeless, profound, and beautiful. And then I realized, it was love, a love for what they were doing and it touched me, making me feel as real as the Velveteen Rabbit.