Ingeborg Heuser Brought Professional Ballet to City

By Iriana Fogle and Kathryn Guerra

Ballet, which began as a Renaissance Italian court entertainment, was further developed by French courts, particularly by Louis XIV in the 17th century. It evolved into a popular European and Russian form of dance and was established in the United States by Russian dancers in the 1930s. In El Paso, the art of ballet arrived with German native Ingeborg Heuser, who came to the desert in 1954 and made it her home. True to the Southwest spirit, she pioneered local ballet, opening schools and entertaining locals, helping El Pasoans to learn and love ballet.

Heuser was born in Berlin, Germany, and her mother, a student of modern dance instructor Rudolf Von Laben, encouraged her daughter to love the arts, as did her grandmother, a concert singer.

Heuser was accepted as a dancer in the company and received her dancer’s diploma at age 14. At 15, she received her job teaching ballet, but she told the Times students didn’t return after the first class. “I didn’t know how to teach,” Heuser explained. “I think I scared them off.”

It was during one of the Ballet Centre’s early performances that Heuser’s long-standing career at UTEP began. In a 2006 UTEP online news article, Laura Ruelas wrote that in 1959, then-chairman of UTEP’s Music Department, E. A. Thorndalska, was so impressed with Heuser that he established the Texas Western Civic Ballet and hired her to run it. The dance company later became the University Civic Ballet and then Ballet El Paso in 1977. In 1980, ballet classes officially began at UTEP, the first university in the UT System to ever offer ballet. For many years, UTEP offered a major in ballet.

Heuser eventually turned over her Ballet Centre to a longtime student, David Duran, so she could dedicate more time to the university. Over a 47-year tenure at UTEP, Heuser produced more than 35 ballets. Some of her original choreographed works include “The Red Shoes,” “Firebird,” “Carmen,” “Peter and the Wolf,” “Hansel and Gretel,” and of course, her best known and long-standing holiday production of Tchaikovsky’s “The Nutcracker.”

Not only did Heuser teach and choreograph for UTEP, but she has also had many guest instructor assignments in Berlin, Rome, Mexico City, Houston and Los Angeles. She has been a guest choreographer in Alabama, California, Utah and Italy. Heuser also directed three tours of Northern Mexico, all highly successful.

Heuser’s passion for ballet can also be seen in the success of her students, many of whom have gained national and international acclaim and have been accepted by major ballet companies all over the world. According to the personnel page of El Paso Conservatory of Dance, Heuser can boast of five gold and bronze medal winners in national and international competitions among her former students.

According to a 1964 El Paso Times article, Heuser’s former student Barbara Begany joined the San Francisco Ballet after graduation from Burges High School. On a visit to El Paso in 1964, the ballerina emphasized that Heuser demanded “hard work and dedication as a prerequisite of perfection.” In an interview for the article, Heuser said of Begany, “Many people have talent but that is not it. Many will work but do not have the energy. Ballet takes tremendous energy, and she has it.”

Besides dance, Heuser taught Begany other skills: knitting and costuming. With the money she made from her knitting, Begany paid for dance lessons for eight
Washington continued from page 8

moral in the lives of the people they touch, whether they are African American or not. They should become more involved in community.” She sang in

Students to “have certain standards and morals and principles.”

Another way Washington helped El Paso youth was to work as a coordinator for the Miss Black El Paso Scholarship Pageant for about 23 years. Her daughter, Valerie Northington-Geason, emphasized that her mother “was very aware and wanted to keep the African American population here active and involved in the community as a whole.” Northington-Geason commented that Washington “saw an opportunity to get our young ladies involved in a positive light.”

Washington also used her writing and musical skills for the community. From the 1950s through the 1980s, she wrote and edited The Southwest Torch Newspaper, begun in 1937 because local newspapers were not that interested in El Paso’s black population. The paper changed its name to The Good Neighbor Interpreter and covered the activities of the African American community. In the 1970s, she composed the words and music to El Paso’s official song, “City of El Paso.”

Washington’s dedication to her craft and her students did not come without a price. Her first marriage ended in divorce. After the birth of her second son, Christian, her second marriage also ended in divorce, but personal struggles were not the only battles to be fought.

In 1991, Leona Washington donated dozens of boxes of photographs and other papers documenting African American history in El Paso to the Special Collections Department of the UTEP Library. One librarian said, “It is the largest collection of its kind we’ve received in recent years. Until now our collection has not had any information on the black community of El Paso.”

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In 2001, the El Paso Association for the Performing Arts honored her with their Image Award, and Heuser was inducted into the El Paso Women’s Commission Hall of Fame in 2009.

Heuser continued from page 12 —

for almost half a century, Heuser has entertained El Pasoans at the theater with her beautiful stage sets, and many others who were critical. In 1997, Ballet El Paso folded due to financial trouble. “That really affected me,” Heuser told Maribel Villalva of the El Paso Times on Dec. 2, 2006. “After that I even broke my arm [while dancing].”

In a personal interview with EPCC student, Iriana Fogle, who has lived with heuser’s ballet company, Marta Katz.

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