

A ballet for Raffaella

Annie Aguiar | Dec. 8, 2019

Raffaella Stroik danced in “The Nutcracker” every holiday season since she was 5 years old. Her first on-stage role as a ballerina was delivering flowers to the Sugar Plum Fairy, a part she would eventually dance as she grew older.

Last Thursday, Duncan and Ruth Stroik drove down from their home in South Bend, Indiana, to attend this season’s IU Ballet Theater production of “The Nutcracker” without Raffaella, who died last November.

“She’s not in ‘The Nutcracker,’ and she should be,” Duncan said.

More than a year after the death of their daughter Raffaella, Duncan and Ruth are commissioning and producing a ballet about their daughter’s life. The Jacobs School of Music has agreed to premiere the ballet, which is currently scheduled for the spring of 2022.

Raffaella studied at IU’s Jacobs School of Music Ballet Department until 2017 and began working as a ballerina at the St. Louis Ballet after college.

She went missing in November 2018, and a search party of more than 100 people looked for her before her body was found in a lake in Mark Twain State Park, around 100 miles northwest of St. Louis. Her death was ruled an accidental drowning. She was 23.

Raffaella’s standards were high, Duncan remembers.

When he would take the young ballerina to see professional ballets in New York or Chicago, he would ask her afterwards: “Wasn’t that really great?”

“Dad, come on, that wasn’t very good,” she would say before listing her critiques — a bad turnout or pre-recorded music when she preferred her musical accompaniment live.

It wasn’t that she was unappreciative, Duncan said, it was her love of the art of ballet. Duncan’s worried the ballet he and his wife are producing won’t be up to Raffaella’s standards.

“I’m worried I won’t meet them,” he said. “I’m worried I’ll do things that she won’t like. But that’s good because maybe then I’ll do a better job. But I’m thinking that all the time.”

The show is a special one for the family. Raffaella danced in 17 years’ worth of productions as she moved from school to school and company to company.

At a production one year in Elkhart, Indiana, Ruth was watching from the audience as Raffaella danced in “The Nutcracker” and broke into tears. She was struck by how emotionally connected Raffaella was to the audience.

“I thought, ‘well I’m her mother, I’m connected,’” Ruth said. “But then I looked down the aisle and all the other moms were crying too. So then I felt like, I’m not the only one connecting with her.”

One of four daughters, Raffaella wanted to be a ballerina from early on and started taking classes at age 3. The Stroiks say while she wasn’t always the top ballerina in her company as she grew up, she took it very seriously from a young age.

“I like to dance for others,” Raffaella said in a 2015 interview with the Herald-Times as she prepared for the role of Odette, Queen of the Swans in “Swan Lake.” “When I’m on stage, I just feel this amazing joy and love. I just want the audience to feel that way.”

Duncan said she flowered at IU, especially under the instruction of famed French ballerina and ballet professor Violette Verdy, who died in 2016 after a brief illness at age 82.

Raffaella’s death has changed the Stroiks. They cry every day. They’re devout Catholics, but they can’t help but be angry at God sometimes.

Ruth said they are now living in an ocean of sadness with rare moments of happiness.

“I actually now have a longing to go to be with Raffaella, at the right time,” she said. “I used to pray for a long life.”

A couple of months after Raffaella’s death, Duncan and Ruth were in St. Louis to speak with the detectives when Ruth woke up with an idea.

“Her whole life came to me as a fairy tale,” she said. “Raffaella’s life as a tragic fairy tale. So that’s when the idea came to turn it into a ballet.”

The ballet will be a new work in the tradition of Raffaella’s favorite classic ballets, such as “Swan Lake” and “Giselle.” The story follows a peasant girl in 18th century Italy who is an artist trying to meet her prince. Italy was one of Raffaella's favorite countries she ever visited.

“When you have the death of a loved one, you’re looking for meaning,” Duncan said. “For me, I see the ballet stories and the fairy tales as more real than a lot of our stories.”

Fairy tales cover the basic needs: searching for true love, a fight against good and evil, princesses with fairy godmothers.

The Stroiks created [a GoFundMe campaign](#) on Nov. 10 to raise money for the ballet.

While Duncan, an architecture professor at the University of Notre Dame, will be designing the sets himself, he and Ruth aren’t artists and need outside help for the ballet. The money raised

will go toward hiring a composer and choreographer in addition to constructing the sets, creating costumes and promoting the ballet.

In less than a month, the campaign has raised almost \$100,000 of its goal of \$250,000. The money has come from 295 donors, including Raffaella's friends, members of the ballet community, art lovers and people who have similarly lost loved ones too young. Notes from donors fill the page.

"I am delighted to become part of the Ballet for Raffaella," one wrote. "I can see it now — just wonderful."

Another note simply reads "Love you Raffi," accompanied by a heart emoji.

Duncan said his favorite part of the GoFundMe is the opportunity to thank each donor individually.

"If I had an hour to meet with each one of them, I would love to do that," he said. "But this way, I can actually talk to each one of them a little bit. They're giving to the ballet, and we get to be friends."

Duncan and Ruth said Raffaella would have liked this year's ballet. It had live musical accompaniment, just as she liked it, and everything was beautiful, just like when Raffaella was at IU. It would have been up to her standards.

Even though Raffaella is gone, Ruth said she's still here in small ways. She's alive again when the Stroiks watch old videos of her ballets, still having that emotional connection with the audience she dances for. Ruth said watching this season's production of "The Nutcracker" was similar.

"I feel her presence on the stage," she said. "It's so much her life, her way of making art."

Duncan said his favorite part was the dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy, one of Raffaella's roles.

While watching, he thought: our little daughter used to do all that.