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## Arts Features



Locally raised Patti Caplette couldn't have predicted her dance career would lead to corraling cartoon characters in *The Backyardigans: Sea Deep in Adventure*.

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### From ballet to Backyardigans

By Janet Smith

Patti Caplette's long dance career has taken her from performing en pointe classics with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet to choreographing ceremonies for the 1999 Pan American Games. But these days, the choreographer-director-writer behind internationally touring kids' theatrical spectacles finds herself just as inspired by her mother's old Betty Cross School of Dance in Cloverdale.

"Pretty much everybody who grew up in Surrey took dance there," says Caplette, over the phone from her Koba Entertainment headquarters in Winnipeg. There, she's putting the final technical touches on the 3-D-projection-pumped *The Backyardigans: Sea Deep in Adventure*, which is set to hit town this Sunday (September 13) for two matinees at the Centre in Vancouver for Performing Arts. But it all started back at her mom's studio, at age five: "It was the theatrical realm of dance; she often had text in her works and we always had this imaginative dance world that the dance served. She was doing it on a small scale, and now I'm doing it on a large scale."

Caplette admits she never could have pictured herself choreographing performers wearing cartoon costumes with gigantic feet. "It's certainly a career metamorphosis that I didn't anticipate at all, but suddenly it all makes sense."

What Caplette does demands a unique set of skills. Koba gains the rights to popular children's TV series or literature and then Caplette builds a theatrical touring production out of it, overseeing the original music, dance, sets, costumes, and story lines. Koba does more than 200 shows a year; right after *Backyardigans* kicks off its 34-city Canadian tour, Franklin the Turtle goes to France, and then Little Bear heads out across this country.

Of all of them, *The Backyardigans* offers some of the richest material. Hugely popular with hipster parents and their kids, the TV show matches cool, genre-jumping songs by the Lounge Lizards' Evan Lurie with digital animation that's based on live performances by dancers. "In this one [the live show], we get to do samba, ragtime, cabaret, and there's a good deal of psychedelic soul," says Caplette, who got to sift through hundreds of Lurie's songs to choose her numbers. "And there's even a Bollywood-mermaids scene."

The stage show also uses big, moving three-dimensional projections to help the set morph from the animal characters' back yards to their imagined underwater worlds of

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octopuses, jellyfish, and dolphins.

Don't assume Caplette has an easier job serving up entertainment to preschoolers than she might have had perfecting classical ballet.

"I'm a stickler for detail. It may be the opposite of what one might think. My attention to detail has to be every bit as exacting as I would be if I was producing *Swan Lake*. Kids want to see the exact images they've seen on TV....A little kid will say, 'That doesn't sound like Uniqua!'" she says, referring to a favourite, pink-polka-dotted character on the show. "Their expectations are very high."

Caplette adds that she also strives to appeal to the adults in the audience—to offer enough quality in the songs, dance, and eye candy to ensure they won't feel like they've been dragged to the theatre.

In all, you get the sense she's never been so fulfilled—big-footed creatures and all. "I feel really fortunate now to really create things; the world of entertainment is so huge and I keep adding to my experiences," she says. "For everything I do, I feel like I've got an experience in my back pocket to apply to it."

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