

Los Angeles Times CALENDAR weekend



WITH THE KIDS

Dancing on ice

By Brenda Rees
Special to The Times

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Tom Dickson knew he wanted to be a figure skater when he saw the spinning cheese wedges.

Growing up in Newport Beach, Dickson frequently vacationed with his family in Sun Valley, Idaho, where they would see elaborate ice shows. He was mesmerized. "I remember watching a segment that involved giant skating Swiss cheese wedges," he says, adding that a mouse figured into the scenario too. "I told my parents that's what I wanted to do."

Dickson eventually made that dream come true, and today, he's working with another mouse, Mickey Mouse, on an even more sophisticated ice show that, for better or worse, involves no rodents or dairy products.

As choreographer of the new Disney on Ice show "Princess Classics," Dickson worked with seven popular characters, including Sleeping Beauty, Belle, Snow White and Ariel. The show features abbreviated stories of each princess in the first half, while the second half is a retelling of Cinderella capped off with a grand wedding finale.

It's the first time Dickson has tackled a production of this magnitude — and he says the Disney call last November seemed to come out of the blue. "I sent my reel a few years back but didn't hear much from them," he says. "It was a happy little surprise when they called."

Named choreographer of the year in 2002 by the Professional Skaters Assn. and the United States Figure Skating Assn., 41-year-old Dickson certainly knows his way around frozen water. He started skating at age 9, practicing at rinks in Anaheim and Costa Mesa, and later he competed as an amateur figure skater. He was the U.S. Junior Champion in 1980 and won the 1992 U.S. Open Professional Challenge Cup after a nine-year hiatus from competition.

But theatrical ice shows were more enticing than competition. Dickson toured with the Ice Capades for eight years, including a stint as a huge chess piece. While with the Ice Capades, he met his wife, Catarina Lindgren, a former Olympian from Sweden. Together, they've performed with such skating stars as Brian Boitano, Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean.

Today, Dickson spends most of his time working with top amateurs from his home in Colorado Springs, Colo., and abroad. He's currently choreographing routines for a young skater in Japan as well as for two American teenagers.

"These days you need both coach and choreographer to compete," he explains. "I can suggest new ideas or directions that the skater might not even think about."

Dickson wanted his Disney princesses to have athletic and challenging choreography — but something that would be dazzling for the audience. Working with his wife, they sketched out moves on paper, on the ice and even on a chessboard.

The chessboard came in handy choreographing the show's four big production numbers, particularly the one involving 20 precision skaters as castle guards whirling around the ice at breakneck speeds. Before Disney rang, Dickson and Lindgren worked with a Swedish synchronized skating troupe, and that experience gave them a step up on this relatively new style of skating.

Indeed, the first half of the ice show is a whirlwind of locales and princesses, says Dickson. "I love that we are in one world and then there's a transition to another," he says. "You're watching Sleeping Beauty and hearing Tchaikovsky when the lights go down and all of a sudden you hear calypso drumbeats and you're under the sea with Ariel. That's magic."

Disney on Ice 'Princess Classics'

Where: Los Angeles Sports Arena, 3939 S. Figueroa St., Los Angeles

When: Today, 7:30 p.m.; Friday, 11 a.m. and 7:30 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, noon, 3:30 and 7:30 p.m.

Tickets: \$13 to \$50

Contact: (213) 480-3232

Also: Wednesday to Jan. 19 at the Long Beach Arena, 300 E. Ocean Blvd., Long Beach, (562) 436-3661