

# 'EXCITING THINGS COMING TOGETHER'

## Teaching milestone, new lights make spring show a big one for Ballet U

SCOTT GIRARD  
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Charmaine Ristow began teaching ballet her senior year in high school and hasn't stopped since.

That was 1964, making this upcoming year her 50th of teaching the dance style, and her ninth in Verona. To celebrate, the students at Ballet U, housed in the Verona Athletic Complex, will perform a shortened version of the same ballet she did as a senior in high school, "Coppelia."

To top it off, they'll perform it in a space that feels much more like a stage than it had in years past, at their own studio.

Ristow and business partner Stephanie Tollefson made the decision to install stage lighting in the practice studio, which had doubled as a performance studio for the group's shows, aside from the Verona Youth Ballet's annual Nutcracker show at the Verona Area Performing Arts Center.

Previously, the shows were performed under the studio's fluorescent lights, which didn't give the true "performance" feeling. The new lights instead transform the studio from practice to a stage-like atmosphere with the flip of a few switches.

The new lights have offered inspiration for Ristow's choreography, as



Photos by Scott Girard

The new lights at the Ballet U studio give the room a "performance" feel compared to the fluorescent lights that normally light it during practice times. Until this year, the studio had to perform under those same fluorescent lights. Left, the control board for the lights, which can change colors to create different atmospheres.

well.

"When you do it in a theater setting ... it was a whole different experience for me," Ristow said. "The ideas came flowing quite a bit more easily."

It will also give the chance for the studio's youngest dancers, the 3-year-olds, a chance to feel like true performers on stage when they do a demonstration for parents later in the spring.

"They will actually be able to have the stage lighting experience, whereas before the little ones didn't get that," Ristow said.

And that feel will also offer an opportunity to serve the larger performing community around Verona and the entire Madison area.

Tollefson and Ristow said the studio would be open to outside groups looking for a performance space to use theirs, whether it's for a full audience or just a piece or two for close

friends and family.

"We would love to see it used," Ristow said.

That's something Ristow has experience with as well, having run a co-op studio in Madison that brought together different groups of dancers in 1986.

Although Ristow has that experience, it's now Tollefson's final decision as to how the studio is used, as Ristow officially sold the business to her late last year.

"Nothing's changed," Tollefson quickly said, and Ristow agreed, as the two still discuss every decision that's made just like they have since Ristow told Tollefson she needed help on the business side if she was going to move to the VAC.



Charmaine Ristow, left, and business partner Stephanie Tollefson have been in business together at Ballet U since it moved to the Verona Athletic Center in 2010. Ristow officially sold the business to Tollefson late last year, though they still work together to make decisions for the company, and Ristow still teaches at the studio.

"I won't do it unless you're with me," Ristow said she told Tollefson.

The spring shows will be May 15 and 17, though both of the shows on the 17th have already sold out. The performance on the 15th will be at 7 p.m.

With the 50-year

milestone along with the new lights, it's sure to be a memorable spring show for the pair that has been in business together for four years.

"Exciting things (are) coming together," Tollefson said.



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