



Audrey MacLean as Snow Queen with soloists (in blue) Chelsea Andrews, Addie Jordon and Amanda Fahey in the Robinson Ballet Company's "Nutcracker." [Buy this photo](#)

Robinson Ballet readies 'Nutcracker' tour

By [Alicia Anstead](#)

Friday, November 24, 2006 - Bangor Daily News

By Alicia Anstead

Bangor Daily News

Getting the perfect Christmas tree each year is always a problem. Too big, too small, too thin, too thick, or, in the case of Robinson Ballet Company, too fake.

A tree that starts small and then grows to giant proportions is, after all, part of the magic of "The Nutcracker," which Robinson performs annually around the state during the holiday season. If, at the moment of Drosselmeyer's sorcery, the tree jerks awkwardly upward or rattles noisily, then the illusion of wizardry goes up the chimney.

That's not the only problem Robinson has faced with its onstage tree. The ropes used to raise it toward the stage ceiling have to be looped around pulleys — or sprinkler system pipes or some other theater structure that wasn't designed to, well, lift fake Christmas trees. With more than 20 child dancers onstage, the green piece was also a safety hazard. "We needed a new tree," assured Maureen Lynch, co-artistic director at Robinson.

"Every year we were asking: What can we do to fix the tree?" Last year, Robinson's managing director, Julie Arnold Lisnet, posed the tree dilemma to the mechanical engineering technology program at the University of Maine, and two teams of six seniors spent the a year designing a realistic, durable, quiet, light, transportable and safe tree.

Not only did the teams meet all the requirements, they came up with two designs — one for the touring "Nutcracker" at 2 p.m. Nov. 26 at the Caribou Performing Arts Center, and 2 p.m. Dec. 16 and 17 at The Grand Auditorium in Ellsworth, and one for the Maine Center for the Arts at 2 and 7:30 p.m. Dec. 2, and 3 p.m. Dec. 3, with the Bangor Symphony Orchestra.

The touring tree grows from 8 to 16 feet and is made of increasingly smaller conical rings that extend like a car antenna. The MCA tree is 18 feet and is made of individual aluminum branches. A Genie Lift, used for commercial building projects, quietly hoists each tree upward. It costs about \$1,500, and was the only expense to Robinson.

The students donated their time, about 1,000 hours total, in conjunction with capstone projects, a senior program in which they design and fabricate projects for the community. In the past, teams

have designed a kayak for a person with no arms and an improved pill crusher for a nursing home. The trees were the program's first performing arts undertaking.

"The students loved this when they got into it," said Herbert Crosby, UM professor of mechanical engineering technology and adviser for senior projects. "There was even a rivalry between the two teams. But they bonded and became like family."

Crosby estimated that each tree would cost between \$5,000 and \$10,000 if sold commercially.

"It's not just a rolling green thing that grows," said Lynch. "It looks like a real-life tree."

The growth of the tree is a pivotal moment in the ballet. That's when we know something magical is going to take place." Now, if only the rest of us could find the perfect tree for our own magical holidays.