

Parade of Tubas, Tutus, Taiko and Towing

By Dennis Knight

When you're so lucky to have a kid in the band, it's a cinch you'll be going to parades. Thomas, my older son, focused on music at Horizon High School. He learned to play all of the brass instruments, moving easily from one to another, playing French horn in concert bands, mellophone for marching and field performances, trombone for jazz, and even the euphonium and tuba.

One season Horizon was invited to march in Denver's Parade of Lights, and Thomas decided to join the tuba section. To make the parade even more festive, the different sections of the bands were encouraged to depart from uniform and design their own marching attire. The tuba line at Horizon, eight strapping boys, answered the challenge. They assembled white leotards and, with the help of some band mothers, made chiffon tutus in all the bright shades, from lime green to hot pink, a different color for each tubist.

It was a hit. Crowds along the route and viewers of the broadcast had a vision of eight big, masculine boys with sousaphones, pirouetting in tutus up Broadway and through the streets of downtown Denver. If I may be so bold, it was lovely, perhaps even graceful, like a scene from Fantasia. Footage was carried on 9News, morning and evening for several days.

Horizon won the award for best marching band that year, but it seems not to have pleased the right folks, because that was the end of creative cross dressing for high school bands in the Parade of Lights.

Just a year or two later, Thomas and his younger brother Robert were involved in taiko, the Japanese art of high energy performance drumming that has become very popular around the world. Taiko drums are massive, and playing them is very much a martial art like karate or judo.

It was about 1999 when the Parade of Lights committee asked Denver Taiko to join their event, but the group was reluctant because taiko drums, wonderful in festivals, are not designed for parades. Undaunted, the committee promised to build a conveyance for drums and drummers. The flat cart they built, with a steel bar for two helpers to push, did the trick, surviving both Friday and Saturday night editions of that year's parade.

The next year, with the same cart back in service, I volunteered to push. It really didn't seem too hard, and my partner and I maneuvered the cart through the staging area and into the procession precisely as choreographed. Denver Taiko was an eruption of energy, movement and booming rhythm as we neared Channel Nine's cameras and announcers. Perhaps it was my own adrenalin that did it, but I felt a snap as the iron push bar gave way, breaking off at the weld. The parade halted momentarily as we cleared the way, and then continued, if slightly out of order.

Within a few minutes, a quick thinking parade marshal had tied two twenty foot lengths of rope to the front corners of the float. I took the rope on the left, my partner got the right and together we towed Denver Taiko back into the parade. I had several different towing partners that night but I managed to hold my corner from beginning to end. I did resolve however, that if I ever again volunteer to join a parade, it will be in a tutu.