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Noted theater costumer Bette Kelley drawn to numerous areas of artistry

By TERRY MORRIS

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Bette Kelley typically spends days and weeks designing and making costumes without receiving even a mention.

Wouldn't you know it? She was taking a long-delayed "sabbatical to avoid burnout" last year when her name appeared in *The New York Times* in a review of a performance by the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company.

"It's nice to be noticed," said Kelley, 57, who came to Dayton in 1986 from Lawrence, Kan., to be the costumer for the Dayton Ballet. She didn't plan to stay more than a few years but is still here.

"Here" is Yellow Springs, where she and husband Wayne Gulden have lived for 11 years. The couple also have a place on Amherst Island in Ontario, the westernmost of the Thousand Islands.

While she left the Dayton Ballet after three years to free lance, she still spends time in downtown while designing for DCDC and Rhythm in Shoes, or working backstage in wardrobe for productions including *Phantom of the Opera*, *Mamma Mia!* and *Nutcracker* at the Schuster Performing Arts Center.

Increasingly, however, other long-held interests — including stained glass, beading, embroidery and dancing — are taking up more of her time.

"Looking at that list, I guess it's safe to call myself an artist," said Kelley, who comes "from a family of artists." She still has the carved wooden door her father made for her mother on their 25th anniversary. "He wanted to be sure the marriage was going to last before he put in all the time on it," she said.

She's a member of a local slavic dance group, teaches children's classes in the form and is organizing a language class in Serbo-Croatian, even though her heritage is Swedish and Irish.

Her mother taught the hula while she was growing up, but the daughter was drawn to Bulgarian and Macedonian dance. "The rhythms aren't even. They use 11ths and 16ths. That makes them very interesting. Another great thing is that you don't need a partner," she said.

But Kelley doesn't identify herself as a dancer or a designer. Asked what she does, she says, "I'm somebody who makes things. Whenever I've gone a long time without making something, I know I'm not right inside."

For the past several years, through her business, Phoenix Rising, she's been making and selling broad-collar, beaded neckwear designs and teaching others how to do the same.

After being cited in the *Times*, she won a Juror's Award for three pieces in the upcoming 18th annual Through the Needle's Eye embroidery exhibit, which will open April 16 in Los Alamos, N.M., and tour the country.

Again, a bit coincidentally, she's been winding down that outlet for her creativity.

She's in the midst of what may be her final beaded-collar original. "I want it to look like a whole bunch of autumn leaves just fell down on you," she said. "There's a different stitch for each leaf. I've come up with a couple of ways to do that, predicated on the fact that it will be marvelous. The truth is I have no idea how it's



JIM WITMER/DAYTON DAILY NEWS

BETTE KELLEY'S Yellow Springs home is filled with artwork, including a hand-carved door that her father made as a 25th anniversary present for her mother and a stained-glass work Kelley made and titled 'The Day Said Goodbye.'

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going to turn out. It might be horrible."

Beading, a skill that has made her a valuable member of the theatrical wardrobe union when costumes like those for *Phantom* require repairs or alteration, is suddenly "really hot in the embroidery world. It's making a crossover," she said, and so is she.

Although she still loves "picking out the fabrics and doing the designs," the demands of working with local arts organizations have begun to weigh on her. "Time, money and resources are very limited."

Her hope is to get started by the end of this year on a three-year course of study offered by the Embroidery Guild of England.

Although she has a master's degree in costume design, when it comes to beading and embroidery, "I always feel I'm so self-taught. I've always had to make all of the mistakes and develop all of the techniques by trial and error," she said.

All of that may mean the local dance community will soon be short one longtime, trusted designer — at least for a while.

"It's always hard for me to say no when someone asks me to do costumes. I always want to make everyone happy. But if I do this, I'm going to have to say no. I'll have to say that I'm in school now."

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For photographs and more information about Kelley's designs, see her Web site for Phoenix Rising at www.phoerising.com.