

A Vision On Stage Festival Ballet Providence's The Nutcracker

While some in RI continue to debate whether it's a Christmas tree or a holiday tree, it's refreshing to see that several local *Christmas* traditions remain unaffected: Festival Ballet Providence's *The Nutcracker* and The State Ballet of Rhode Island's *Coppelia*.

Recently, I sat with FBP Artistic Director Mihailo Djuric before the start of rehearsal. With the company celebrating its 35th season, this marks Djuric's 15th *Nutcracker* since taking the reins. And while there has been talk about staging a new production, tough economic times have put such plans on hold.

When asked how he continues to get excited about *The Nutcracker*, Djuric replies with a twinkle in his eye, "It's the holidays, Christmas, kids, presents and fun." I sense, however, a bit of sarcasm in his retort, indicative, perhaps, of the daily struggles confronting many in the arts.

When rehearsal commences, the troupe runs through two of the ballet's longer numbers consisting mostly of corps dancers: "Waltz of the Snowflakes" and "Waltz of the Flowers." During "Snow," the music stops frequently as Djuric removes his glasses and rubs the bridge of his nose. After a pause, he barks, "Again." About an hour later, the first run-through is complete. When performed onstage, this piece will take approximately 10 minutes.

Emily Loscocco and Alex Lantz (Snow Queen and Snow King) are especially impressive. Lantz brings an understated confidence to the pas de deux, executing crisp double sauté de basques before dropping to a knee. Loscocco captivates with endless, elegant lines and dizzying supported pirouettes. Vilia Putrius with Mindaugas Bauzys and Ruth Bronwen Whitney with Alan Alberto will dance these roles during alternating performances. They will also share the lead roles of Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier with Elizabeth Mochizuki and Toleu Mukanov.

Rhode Island native and fan favorite Jennifer Ricci returns once again to reprise her most famous role, Arabian. Now in her remarkable 22nd season, audiences are left breathless during this seductive number highlighting Ricci's ethereal grace and flexibility.

In addition, over 120 children from local dance schools will perform alongside the professional dancers. And, of course, Archie the Nutcracker dog, who has been in more than 100 productions, will make his annual dash across the stage.

Growing Local Talent **State Ballet of Rhode Island's *Coppelia***

To see some of R.I.'s younger aspiring ballet dancers, one must head North to SBRI's headquarters in Lincoln. Now in its amazing 53rd season, the company prepares for its traditional Christmas offering; though not a "holiday" ballet, Artistic Director Herci Marsden continues to honor an agreement she reached with old friend and former Boston Ballet Artistic Director Virginia Williams not to present competing December ballets. Thus explains their selection of *Coppelia*, the heartfelt story about a doll maker who falls in love with one of his dolls.

As a first, this year's performance will feature some children from area ballet schools. "It is about community," explains Ms. Marsden. "We are the *State* Ballet." All told, the production requires close to 100 dancers, with almost 70 onstage for the finale.

During rehearsal, young dancers, crammed along the floor and back wall, wait their turn, watching with an intense curiosity or listening with rapt attention whenever Ms. Marsden speaks. All the while, Derek Kunz (male lead Frantz) calmly maneuvers the animated and feisty Melissa Sorkin (female lead Swanhilda) through the three-act ballet.

Fifteen-year-old Emily O'Hier especially stands out. As one of Swanhilda's friends in Act I and with two solo variations in Act III, she emerges as one of the finest young dancers I have seen in quite some time; her exceptional talent as a dancer upstaged only by her remarkable stage presence and acting ability - a pure joy to watch.

FBP's *Nutcracker* and SBRI's *Coppelia* open Friday December 14, so plan accordingly and see them both. Don't be a Scrooge! For that, you need to go to a different theatre.