



Not Your Typical Nutcracker

MoCo Arts Performance Returns with New Elements

By Nicole S. Colson

Sugar plum fairies will be dancing in our heads – and in front of our eyes, along with all the other sweets in Clara’s dream, when MoCo Arts School of Dance presents its eighth biannual production of “The Nutcracker” this Friday, Dec. 16, through Sunday, Dec. 18, at Keene State College’s Redfern Arts Center.

While the MoCo Arts rendition of the classic ballet with a score composed by Tchaikovsky follows the traditional story of a little girl’s Christmas toy that comes to life and takes her on a trip to a fantasy world, the school of dance has always done its own adaptation since the first performance.

“It isn’t your typical ‘Nutcracker,’” said Reagan Messer, MoCo Arts director of dance who has played both Uncle Drosselmeyer and done the pas de deux (dance for two) in the show.

That’s because MoCo’s version of the play, performed by 160 students of all skill levels in 2nd through 12th grade (and 20 adult cast members), was designed to incorporate all the styles of dance taught at the center – tap, hip-hop, modern, jazz and ballroom – in addition to ballet. Any dance student who wishes to participate in the production is accommodated.

“The ballet has such a deep tradition,” said Messer. “People want to see the classic, but now choreographers are putting twists on things making them new. We want to show all our strengths (at MoCo Arts).”

Over the years, several enhancements and changes have been made to MoCo’s “Nutcracker.” The opening party scene reverted to traditional ballet in the last performance, while in past years it was all ballroom. That same scene, along with the battle scene between the Nutcracker and the rat soldiers, was lengthened. In 2010, a scene was added in which Drosselmeyer was crafting the Nutcracker in his shop



Tessa Minahen, left, 11, of Keene, cradles the Nutcracker during a rehearsal session of MoCo Arts' production of "The Nutcracker" last Saturday. At right is her understudy, Carly Newbold, 12, of Keene. Opposite page: Tessa and Carly dance in sync during rehearsal for the show in a scene with the Nutcracker character, played by Sam Induni, 15, of Keene. Photos by Michael Moore.

before he gives it to his goddaughter Clara as a Christmas gift – thus beginning the story.

Of course, dazzling audiences is a priority. In 2008, there was a cannon shot off during the play's battle scene. Other special effects added to the show have been a simulated snowfall and, in 2014, a scrim. A scrim is a screen that appears as a solid piece of fabric when lit from the front, but when lit from behind it becomes semi-transparent, creating an ethereal and mysterious silhouette effect.

A Christmas tree set piece, which appears in the first scene, had been in discussion for a year before it appeared. In 2008, it grew on-stage from 8 to 15 feet with help from a lift and some chains. Two years later, it grew even taller, so much so that a larger grandfather clock –out of which the rat soldiers file for the battle scene – was required so it didn't look dwarfed on the stage by the scale of the tree.

This year, the tree will rise on-stage with the help of a pneumatic system. While it had to be hand-cranked before, now it will grow with the push of a button. Other new or redesigned elements include the opening party scene, rat soldier costumes and stage projections (which set each scene). Some of Tchaikovsky's original "Nutcracker" score was removed from the play in past years, but Messer said it has all been restored because the number of students participating has increased and more roles were created.

The lead role was a challenge to cast this time around.

"This year was one of the toughest years to pick a Clara," said Messer. "We called back eight girls."

Tessa Minihan, a long-time dance student with MoCo Arts, plays Clara.

"She lights up the room," said Messer.

This year's pas de deux will be performed by Kathleen Breen Combes and Yuri Yanowsky, principal dancers with The Boston Ballet.

"Yuri is retired, but he's coming to dance for us," said Messer, adding that both dancers work with students in rehearsals.

As can be imagined, it literally takes a village to bring this show to the stage. The number of choreographers working on the show has doubled since the first year. In addition to teaching dance and creating sets and costumes, the volunteers serve as make-up artists, chaperone 160 young dancers backstage, sell tickets, greet patrons at the door and move props onto the stage. During the weekend of the show, between 50 and 60 volunteers help out.

"We all get so excited about "The Nutcracker,"" said Messer. "It's all about the kids and the community – that's why we're here."

The MoCo Arts School of Dance will perform "The Nutcracker" Friday and Saturday, Dec. 16 and 17, at 7 p.m., with 2 p.m. performances Saturday and Sunday, Dec. 17 and 18. Tickets are \$18-\$24 and can be ordered online at keene.edu/arts/redfern or by calling 358-2168.

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