ON THEIR TOES

Multiple ‘Nutcracker’ roles make Joffrey dancers quick-change artists as well

BY HEDY WEISS
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While most of us are eating, shopping and party-going our way through the holiday season, the dancers of the Joffrey Ballet are working up a serious sweat.

By the time they arrive for their annual Chicago engagement of “The Nutcracker,” running Dec. 10-26 at the Auditorium Theatre, they will have performed the company’s Victorian American version of the classic at Washington D.C.’s Kennedy Center and the Fox Theatre in St. Louis, Mo. And along the way, some of the performers in this “no stars, all stars” troupe will be responsible for keeping a dozen different roles at the ready.

April Daly is at various times called on to play the aunts and mother in the opening party scene, as well dancing as the Snow Queen, the Sugar Plum Fairy, the Spanish and Chinese variations, and the Waltz of the Flowers.

“I’ve danced all these roles before, and some of them are really part of my muscle memory by now,” said Daly.

“What has made it all so challenging this season is that I had a very demanding rehearsal and performance schedule for our fall season. And in between we’ve been learning a new ballet by Edward Liang for our spring season. So if I was able to carve out time for a one-hour rehearsal on any given day for ‘Nutcracker’ I was cheering.

“I also watchet videos to refresh my memory of some roles, or took a lunch break to run through the Spanish variation, or rehersed Sugar Plum Fairy after our morning class.

“One tricky thing is that your partner can change, and you have to be ready to make adjustments for that — sometimes just getting reacquainted at intermission. I do often run through a new role in my head at bedtime, though recently I woke up at night and realized I was going through the Sugar Plum.”

April Daly (pictured with Jonathan Dummar) dances numerous roles in the Joffrey’s “Nutcracker” including aunts and the mother in the opening party scene, the Snow Queen and the Sugar Plum Fairy. She is also part of the Spanish and Chinese variations, and the Waltz of the Flowers.  | HERBERT Migolla PHOTO

Daly is a stickler about presetting every costume and headpiece personally so there are no panicked moments during quick changes, especially those requiring a shift from character shoes to pointe shoes.

Matthew Adamczyk is another “Nutcracker” workhorse.

“Over the course of the run I think I’ll be dancing 18 or 14 different roles, including the Snow King and the Prince, and, for the first time this year, Drosselmeyer (the magician-like uncle to Clara and Fritz), a role that requires the synchronization of about four people to make the tricks work,” said Adamczyk. “I’m also responsible for coaching the Arabian dance, the Trepak (Russian dance), the Waltz of the Flowers and five different party scene roles.”

“Just remembering which wing you should enter from can be completely overwhelming,” Adamczyk confessed. “But Ashley (Wheater, the Joffrey’s artistic director) is admirably about having enough rehearsal to feel comfortable.

“And luckily we have a great wardrobe and stage management team to help with quick costume changes. I’ve also learned to layer costume pieces so I can be as efficient as possible. I’ve got only about 30 seconds to go from being a parent at the party to a mouse.”

Adamczyk also has developed his own methods for maintaining the physical fuel he needs for the demands of the dance.

“This is the season when I eat a lot of pasta,” he said. “And a good pancake breakfast is the best thing for me on the days I’m partnering the Sugar Plum.”

There has been talk of a new “Nutcracker” production for the Joffrey for some years now, and Wheater admits his goal is to realize that plan by 2015. “I love the Joffrey version, which I danced myself years ago,” Wheater said. “But it was created in 1987, and we live in a different world now, so I do think it’s time to look at the story in a different way. My hope is that Christopher Wheeldon might create a version for us.”

JOFFREY BALLET
‘THE NUTCRACKER’

♦ Dec. 10-26
♦ Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Congress
♦ Tickets, $30-$115
♦ (800) 982-2787; joffrey.org

BET hosts Black Playwrights Festival

The Black Ensemble Theatre’s Black Playwrights Festival — a series of readings of new works by writers involved in the company’s Black Playwrights Initiative — is heading into its sixth season. It kicks off at BET’s home at 4520 N. Beacon on Dec. 6, with a wine and cheese reception, excerpts from plays by Rueben Echoes, Wendell Etherly and Runako Jahl, and a tribute to Eric Monte, a force in the film and TV world in the '50s.

Among the highlights:
Dec. 7, 7:30 p.m.: “The Rare Pearl (The Story of Pearl Bailey),” by Etherly.
Dec. 8, 7:30 p.m.: “Urban Legend (The History of Tupac Shakur),” by Lyle Miller.
Dec. 9, 7:30 p.m.: “The Punk Ain’t No Punk No More,” by Jackie Tyler, the story of a young criminal who “saves himself.”
Dec. 11, 3 p.m.: “Sounds So Sweet,” by Echoes.
Dec. 11, 11 p.m.: “More Than Words (A Tribute to Poets Langston Hughes and Paul Lawrence Dunbar),” written and performed by Jahl.

Dec. 13, 7 p.m.: A celebratory networking party with light refreshments, dancing and open-mike opportunities for poets, singers, actors and storytellers.

Tickets are $15 per show. A Flex Pass for $40 is good for all programs. Call (773) 769-4451.

Hedy Weiss