

THE ASPEN TIMES

Andrew Travers
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New company members center stage in Aspen Santa Fe Ballet's 'The Nutcracker'

"The Nutcracker" offers the rare opportunity to see the Aspen Santa Fe Ballet perform classical ballet, a departure from its usual contemporary programming.

If You Go ...

What: 'The Nutcracker,' presented by Aspen Santa Fe Ballet

Where: Aspen District Theatre

When: Saturday, Dec. 12, 2 & 7:30 p.m.; Sunday, Dec. 13, 1 & 3 p.m.

How much: \$25-\$74

Tickets: Wheeler Opera House box office; www.aspenshowtix.com

Jenelle Figgins and Pete Leo Walker are still relatively new to Aspen Santa Fe Ballet, but the pair looked at home in the company's studio rehearsing for "The Nutcracker."

They were among three pairs rehearsing the grand pas de deux, as the familiar notes of Tchaikovsky's score were boozing out of a CD player. After a particularly crisp run through some of the more intricate steps — Figgins a sugar plum fairy, Walker a cavalier — they high-fived and Walker let out a triumphant, semi-ironic yawp.



Figgins and Walker, both of them Princess Grace Award recipients, debuted with the company last summer. Figgins came from Dance Theatre of Harlem; Walker from Charlotte Ballet. After focusing on contemporary ballets over the summer, preparing for "The Nutcracker" had them doing a classical piece for the first time here.

Think of it as ballet boot camp. The rigors of staging a classical ballet help prepare the company for the season of contemporary works to come.

"Training in this way, doing classical ballet, automatically puts you in alignment, it puts everything on top of where it needs to be in your body and every layer of muscle," Figgins said. "It's so physically demanding. It definitely prepares us for the next side of the season."

And, for these high-country newcomers, jumping into the winter season with "The Nutcracker" has forced some accelerated altitude adjustment.

"Right now it's about the stamina, which has been a huge challenge in Colorado — overcoming the mountains," Figgins said.

In the studio, director Tom Mossbrucker walked the dancers through the finer points of the show-stopping grand pas de deux, breaking it into pieces. He focused on the gesticulation of a hand here, the duration of eye contact there. He stressed the communication between the characters.

"Jenelle and I are both very athletic dancers," Walker said later. "So we're high-energy. It can get a little wild. For the two of us, our biggest direction from Tom is taking the time to say things to one another."

Mossbrucker also offered a pointer or two on showmanship. At the conclusion of the scene, he reminded them to take in some applause before moving on.



"If you stay, they clap," he offered with a smile. "If you go, they say 'Oh, forget it.'"

And, of course, they will clap. The Aspen Santa Fe Ballet "Nutcracker" plays out on a near epic scale when compared with the elegant, intimate contemporary works that are its signature. In addition to the 12 Aspen Santa Fe dancers who perform those pieces, the company's "Nutcracker" enlists a cast of hundreds. There are 10 guest professional dancers from around the U.S., a group of guest artists to perform the divertissements and nearly 200 children and students in the roles of mice and soldiers, dolls and snowflakes.

This year's production also includes a first for Aspen Santa Fe in its two decades of performing "The Nutcracker" — a standout student from its school, Kyle LaCroix, has been selected to perform in the production's corps alongside the professionals.

Working with contemporary choreographers, Figgins noted, dancers rarely perform in characters as strictly defined as those in "The Nutcracker." Interpreting the beloved Christmas ballet challenges a dancer to be a vessel, to be on script rather than helping to write it. For her sugar plum fairy, Figgins said, she aimed to express the regality of a queen and the fluttering of a hummingbird.

"I try to maintain an air of control, yet with effervescence," she said.

Both new dancers came to Aspen Santa Fe, which is celebrating its 20th anniversary this season, because of its esteemed reputation for performing contemporary works. But they've found a palpable joy in returning to the tradition, the white tights and pink tutus, of "The Nutcracker."

"It feels really good — I guess I didn't realize how much I missed it," said Walker, who performed classical works more often in Charlotte. "The work that I've been doing this summer and pulling back from so much classical rep has given me a real respect for what it takes to do a classical variation."

Added Figgins: "I love the music and the magic of it all. It's so beautiful."

After four shows at the Aspen District Theatre on Saturday and Sunday, the company heads to Santa Fe for four more next weekend.

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Photos by Jeremy Wallace, The Aspen Times