

Pasatiempo

The children prepare: Aspen Santa Fe Ballet's "The Nutcracker"

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Photos Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

Can a seventeen-year-old feel a sense of nostalgia? Giovanni Echave, who is one of the oldest — and tallest — of the soldiers appearing in Aspen Santa Fe Ballet's *The Nutcracker*, fondly remembers every part he has danced since he was seven. He is such a knowledgeable participant in the ballet that at Saturday rehearsals for the many children performing this year, he is allowed to stand in for adult roles, including the toymaker Uncle Drosselmeyer, the evil Rat King, and the Nutcracker. Echave even mimes the part of the Christmas tree during a passage of glorious Tchaikovsky music as the ballet enters the dreamworld of Clara, the little girl at the heart of the story.

Ana Rees, fourteen, who is taking on the coveted role of Clara for the first time (sharing the part with a veteran Makenzie Valerio), has been dancing in *The Nutcracker* since she was five. Now that she has obtained the pinnacle part for a girl student dancer, she likes to look back. “I think a lot about the first time I saw it, and all the emotions I felt. The party scene was so happy, the battle scene was confusing — there was so much going on. The second act [Clara’s journey through the Land of Sweets] with all the adults dancing, just inspired me.”

Aspen Santa Fe Ballet’s *The Nutcracker* is performed in both of the company’s hometowns — one week apart. Different casts of children perform in each venue, but the costumes, sets, company dancers, and a specially hired group of guest artists travel between the two cities. Everything is tightly scheduled, although illness, injuries, and snowstorms can cause unexpected challenges. Last year, the truck carrying sets and costumes was stranded during a storm at the Raton Pass coming into New Mexico, throwing a wrench into the timetable.

If all this seems to be a perfect recipe for chaos, you would never know it, judging by the 40 young dancers rehearsing on a Saturday a few weeks before show time. Gisela Genschow, the Santa Fe school’s director and principal teacher, and Karen Brettschneider, the school’s administrator and teacher of the youngest students, work together to instruct and rehearse the children. They have had everything under control for weeks. At a recent rehearsal of the battle scene, Genschow managed a room full of excited girls — and a handful of boys — with near serenity. Every child in the room, even the tiniest of them, knew exactly what to do. During run-throughs, Genschow, smiling, watched from a stool by the CD player, balancing on the tips of her dance shoes like the ballerina she was. Everyone seemed to be having fun. “Personally, I’ve been doing *The Nutcracker* in some capacity for 33 years,” she said. A native of Germany, she danced in French and German holiday productions of *Cinderella* and *Pinocchio*, but never in this ballet. “In Europe we never danced *The Nutcracker*,” she said. “It’s an American tradition — in every school and every company.”

Genschow, along with Brettschneider, have their jobs down to a science. It helps that many of the students, like Echave and Rees, have danced in the show for their entire childhoods. “Some of the tall kids dance it for 10 years,” Genschow said. Brettschneider, who grew up in Illinois, first performed in her local *Nutcracker* in 1976. After dancing during her high-school and college years, she was called on to teach, choreograph, and direct in the suburbs of Chicago. This is her eighth year with Aspen Santa Fe Ballet. “I never get tired of the music, and the excitement and enthusiasm of the little kids I teach is always contagious. When I retire, I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

The logistics behind getting the ballet on stage definitely plays out in casting. While the students range in age from five to seventeen, the roles are decided by height as much as by age. “The kids in the party scene can’t be taller than the adults,” Genschow said. “The blocks [usually eight- and nine-year-olds] can’t be taller than Clara. Clara is usually an older dancer who is small and young-looking. She can’t look mature, even though she’s thirteen, fourteen, or fifteen.”

When she and Brettschneider start looking for boys to match the girls who dance in the party scene, they often head to Mauricio Lopez-Marquez, who runs Aspen Santa Fe Ballet’s Folklórico outreach program in the public schools. “I’ll tell Mauricio the heights I need. I’m looking for boys who are an inch or two taller than the girls,” she said. Lopez-Marquez spends hours with the Folklórico boys, teaching them the ins and outs of the music, as well as a new style of dancing. This year, Kevin Lopez, thirteen, is making his *Nutcracker* debut. Luis Lagunas, also thirteen, is a veteran — this is his fourth year in the party scene.

The bumblebees, who appear onstage during the “Waltz of the Flowers” scene, are the ballet’s youngest dancers. They are each paired with an adult dancer and run onstage to meet their flower, run around them, and run off. “It’s confidence-building,” Brettschneider said. “No one has ever made a mistake. It’s great.” There are 48 bees this year, 12 at each performance.

The blocks, dressed as toy alphabet building blocks, travel through the middle of the battle scene in a line, holding hands, spelling out A-P-P-L-A-U-S-E-!-! (with two added exclamation points because there are 10 children playing blocks at each performance). The candy canes, aged from nine to eleven, appear in the Land of Sweets, dancing around a maypole. “This is the youngest group that comes onto stage without any assistance,” Brettschneider said. There are four casts of eight.

While the soldiers, toy soldiers, and mice (played by dancers aged ten to seventeen) seemed to greatly enjoy fighting to music at the rehearsal, the most coveted roles for children, besides that of Clara and Fritz, Clara’s mischievous younger brother (played by Rylan Roder and Sam O’Sullivan), are the girls and boys in the party scene, according to Brettschneider. They arrive at the Christmas Eve celebration at the beginning of the ballet with their parents, who are played by the professional dancers of the company. “The kids get flipped out and excited,” Brettschneider said.

As Brettschneider pointed out, despite the multitudes of children on stage, it is still a professional production. Even the dance students who have grown too tall to be cast as toy soldiers or mice will be sitting in the audience, learning. “Seeing real professional dancers at work has a huge effect on all of the students. They can’t stop talking about it.”

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