



Suite talk: Jenelle Figgins and Pete Leo Walker join the cast of Aspen Santa Fe Ballet's "The Nutcracker"

Friday, December 18, 2015

By Jennifer Levin

Details

▼ Aspen Santa Fe Ballet presents *The Nutcracker*

▼ Lensic Performing Arts Center, 211 W. San Francisco St.

▼ 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m Saturday, Dec. 19.; 1 p.m. and 5 p.m Sunday, Dec. 20

▼ \$25-\$92; 505-988-1234, www.tickets-santafe.org

I really love working with the kids. They make you believe in the magic of it. — Jenelle Figgins

In 1944, the first complete production of *The Nutcracker* was staged in America by San Francisco Ballet. Ten years later, George Balanchine choreographed his classic version for New York City Ballet. Today *The Nutcracker* is a holiday staple at theaters across the country. It is performed whole and in parts, by professionals dancing on grand stages with extravagant sets, and by children in homemade costumes, dancing at local recreation centers. The score by Tchaikovsky is familiar to many as background music for the season — even to people who have never watched the ballet. But seeing one performance of *The Nutcracker* doesn't mean you've seen them all.

The ballet was originally loosely adapted in 1892 from *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*, a story by E.T.A. Hoffmann, and performed at the Maryinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg. Though the music remains basically the same in subsequent versions — with extra songs thrown in from time to time — different ballet companies' productions contain major and minor variations in storylines, including radical adaptations that veer far away from a fancy 19th-century Christmas party followed by a little girl's fantastical journey with a handsome prince to a land ruled by a beautiful fairy. There is even flexibility in the choreography, such as in Aspen Santa Fe Ballet's annual production at the Lensic Performing Arts

Center, opening this year on Saturday, Dec. 19. Though the company uses a traditional version of the basic story, in Act 2, the dancers from the Land of the Sweets are replaced with flamenco and aerial dancers, giving the production the feel of a circus carousel.

“I’m even more excited to watch this *Nutcracker* than I am to be in it,” said Jenelle Figgins, a new company member who is dancing the role of the Sugar Plum Fairy. “I haven’t had the opportunity to collaborate with lots of different kinds of dancers before, and I think it’s really cool.”

Figgins joins Aspen Santa Fe Ballet from Dance Theatre of Harlem. The Washington, D.C. native began dancing seriously in her mid-teens, at the Jones-Haywood Dance School, founded in 1941 to give African-American children a chance to study classical ballet, and the Duke Ellington School of the Arts. She enhanced her training with several summer intensives, receiving a full scholarship to Dance Theatre of Harlem’s Kennedy Center residency, and went on to earn a bachelor of fine arts degree in dance from the State University of New York at Purchase. Her role model is her older sister, Dionne, who was a ballerina who transitioned into doing musical theater on Broadway and acting on television. Jenelle, 10 years younger, watched as her sister traveled and performed all over the world. “Seeing all the opportunities she was afforded because she chose a career in arts and dance was a huge contributing factor in me deciding to have a career in it as well,” she said. As a teen, she worked as hard as she could to be as good as she could because dance is an expensive extracurricular activity. “I couldn’t necessarily afford to do what I wanted. I needed to earn the scholarships.” In 2014, she received the Princess Grace Award, a prestigious monetary grant for emerging talent in dance, theater, and film, named after Princess Grace of Monaco.



Though she has danced in *The Nutcracker* a handful of times, this is Figgins’ first experience in the role of the Sugarplum Fairy — the main female role and the aspiration of thousands of ballerinas, big and small, the world over. “When I was in school they kind of told me I couldn’t do the role, in so many words,” she said. “I guess at the time one of my teachers didn’t think I was refined enough, which could be true, but hopefully after all these years I’ve found some refinement and can prove her wrong in that way.”

The Sugar Plum Fairy’s Cavalier, Pete Leo Walker, is also new to Aspen Santa Fe Ballet, but he has danced the role many times before. “I think I’ve done every male role in *The Nutcracker*, with several different companies,” he told *Pasatiempo*. “Parents, Spanish, Chinese, Russian.” As the Cavalier, he is responsible for lifting the Sugar Plum Fairy on numerous occasions. The grace and strength to manage these feats is what first attracted him to ballet at thirteen years old. He’d been a hip-hop dancer, brought into it at a young age by his mother, a break-dancer who taught him salsa and ballroom while they cleaned together on Saturday mornings when he was growing up, first in Brooklyn and then in Jacksonville, Florida.

“Initially I thought ballet would help me with my isolations in hip-hop. I thought it would clean me up and give me a little discipline. Then I saw the male dancers making these big jumps and throwing girls in the air,” he said. He trained at Jacksonville’s Dansations and continued at the Nutmeg Conservatory for the Arts; he received a Princess Grace Award in 2011 and has a BFA from Juilliard. Before joining ASFB, he was with the Charlotte Ballet, where he danced the role of the Cavalier for four years with the same partner. Dancing with Figgins has been a physical and emotional transition. “Working with someone new means a totally new energy that is exciting. It makes me want to work that much harder, because there’s no room to be complacent. We have to have a lot of communication: She tells me what she needs and I tell her what I need.”



“I feel like I’m dancing with a friend I’ve known for a long time, even though we really just met,” Figgins said. “This role is a huge milestone for me, and a huge challenge. There can be pressure around this particular role, so I’m trying to keep that at bay, but I really do love it. I feel like a queen.”

Her enthusiasm is higher than it might be, she explained, perhaps because she hasn’t been in *The Nutcracker* as many times as other dancers. “I still have this really childlike infatuation with it.” She said her favorite part is the Dance of the Snowflakes. “There are so many different renditions, different ways you can allude to the idea of snow with bodies in space. But I also really love the battle scene between the mice and the toys,” she added. “I think it’s hilarious. I really love working with the kids. They make you believe in the magic of it. I’m just so excited to laugh, and be entertained, and to entertain.” ◀