



A Magical Makeover

Cincinnati Ballet's The New Nutcracker gets its stellar act together

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Imagine what goes into creating a brand-new production of a beloved full-length ballet, top to bottom.

The time is finally here: Cincinnati Ballet's long-awaited, eagerly anticipated *The New Nutcracker* premieres Thursday at the Aronoff Center.

It takes a lot to make any ballet look effortless, and an undertaking as big as a new *Nutcracker* demands more than most.

Sure, the stats tell part of the story — 200 costumes, 20 sets, 15 scenes, more than 80 children per cast — but there's more than meets the eye.

The Ballet's CEO/Artistic Director Victoria Morgan (who choreographed *The New Nutcracker*) and Production Manager Robert Eubanks talked to *CityBeat* recently to shed light on what's involved in making the magic real. It's often the little things — or even the *big* things — you might not think about.

The Nutcracker has always been a well-known seasonal and box office mainstay for the company, but could we dare say this production has more in common with a Broadway show than a ballet? Hundreds of people have been involved, from Tony Award-nominated, New York City-based costume designer Carrie F. Robbins to renowned set designer John Ezell to crews in Houston and Cincinnati, including Michael Hagan's set-painting studio, Playhouse in the Park, Madcap Puppets workshop and the Ballet's wardrobe department.

"It's really exciting and also somewhat stressful to have it all come together," Morgan says.

New ideas began popping into her mind as early as four or five years ago, long after Val Caniparoli's version, seen by audiences for the past several seasons, was in full swing. Her *Nutcracker* is more informal, accessible and breaks through the lines a bit, she says.

“It is ballet ... but it does need to have an accessibility, and I think that our definition of what is accessible has shifted a little bit in the last 10 years,” she says.

Though it’s family-friendly, the visuals shouldn’t overshadow the technically demanding choreography performed by exceptional dancers.

“I also felt that we’re in this place where we’re constantly balancing between our aristocratic heritage and the more earthy, *So You Think You Can Dance* popularity,” Morgan says.

“I wanted people to laugh and have a good time,” she adds, “so I wanted to surprise them with unexpected characters and magic.”

Morgan was in for some surprises, too.

Once she began choreographing, she says she heard different things in the music she hadn’t heard before — despite having listened to the score countless times *and* having danced every female role at some point in her career.

Working with kids was also surprising for Morgan.

“I’ve learned a lot about control — or lack thereof,” she says with a laugh. “I dare you to try and get some of those kids to do the same thing two times in a row!”

Eubanks, who’s spent years with Houston Ballet and in theater, says this production is the largest he’s ever worked on in terms of scale, cost and ambition.

“This *Nutcracker* is full-size,” he says. “It’s just jam-packed. There’s all kinds of effects, from flying to confetti cannons and magical tricks ... not to mention the huge orchestra presence.”

Sixty members of Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra will play the classic Tchaikovsky score in the pit, which has been expanded for the first time in the Aronoff Center’s history.

Although initial planning and design work had begun in 2007, Eubanks only joined the project in late October of last year. Fourteen months might sound like plenty of time, but the timeline was tight, according to Eubanks. Only a few contracts had been signed when he came on board.

“We’ve really done due diligence with the people that we’ve hired to be part of this show,” he says.

He says that making it all happen is a testament to the teams of talented people who collaborated to get the job done.

Still, this production was not without its share of complications.

For instance, the presents looked great visually, but when Morgan actually saw them in the warehouse she realized the lovely wooden gifts weighed about 20 pounds each — too heavy for the children to carry. So they had to start over. Morgan says during the course of production there were “about a million stories like that.”

Flying also presented new and unexpected challenges. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) recently implemented stricter new rules and regulations, reportedly in the wake of problems experienced with Julie Taymor’s *Spiderman* Broadway production.

“There’s a real precision around the flying: What the cueing is, who does it and when, how much time they have, how they trigger it and how there’s gotta be total visual availability on each side,” Morgan explains.

Eubanks’ primary concerns revolve around fitting all of the elements together onstage, such as a large costume and a large piece of scenery having to share the same space at the same time. It’s like a jigsaw, he says.

Not only do the pieces have to fit together, set transitions should dovetail elegantly.

“Scene changes should be something that people applaud,” Eubanks says. “They should be like a magical kind of thing.”

Contrasting it with television, he says, “It has to be like a flawless, mechanical, almost organic kind of shift, and it should be beautiful.”

But you have to keep a certain perspective.

“You get mired down in the details sometimes in the position that I have, and you don’t really get to take a step back and look at it,” Eubanks says. “But every time someone new comes into the process and looks at it, it’s always, ‘Wow! This is gonna be really amazing when it all (comes together).’

“It’s pretty cool to see all the stuff that’s only existed on paper for so long, you know, in drawings or whatever, then to see it sitting in front of you,” he says, “and you never get tired of that.”

This show promises to be pretty amazing — not to mention magical — for audiences as well. ©

THE NEW NUTCRACKER runs Thursday-Dec. 24 at the Aronoff Center's Procter & Gamble Hall. For tickets, visit www.cincinnatiarts.org.