

NEWSPAPER ARTICLE

Vacaville Ballet to stage 'Nightmare Before Nutcracker'

It's not as if the dancing snowflakes are terrorists. Or Drosselmeyer sings hip hop. Or Clara and Fritz turn out to be aliens.

Still, "Nightmare Before Nutcracker" by the Vacaville Ballet Company isn't your grandma's "Nutcracker." Even your mother's. Or sister's.

It's artistic director Cassandra Kamakeeaina's slightly bent version on the holiday classic running Dec. 12-14 at the Vacaville Performing Arts Theatre.

Yes, the second-year of this production is a take on Tim Burton's warped "The Nightmare Before Christmas." And the debut reaction went so well in Kamakeeaina's first year as artistic director, the lifetime Vacan brought it back for an encore.

"It was felt by many we should do something new, fresh and exciting that more represented my personal style," she said. "Having grown up listening to music ranging from Mozart to Metallica, I have an appreciation for a wide variety of styles, which is clearly presented in this production."

As a dancer, Kamakeeaina said she "preferred the darker and more exotic roles. They were more interesting to me and I identified with them more."

So Kamakeeaina emerged with "the pretty, glittery Nutcracker so many crave with something a little more like my preferences."

When introduced to this "edgier" version, the performers were excited, "then overwhelmed," Kamakeeaina said. "They have to dance a lot more. It was definitely an adjustment. They basically dance twice as much as they would if we were doing a standard Nutcracker because the characters they portray are represented in both the Land of Sweet Dreams and Land of Nightmares. This also means a lot of quick changes as well. This also requires more acting than they are accustomed to."

The off-the-wall theme also teaches versatility, the artistic director said, "which is needed if they choose to pursue a career in this field."

Parents can, well, be parents and Kamakeeaina said she expected some resistance last year "but received none."

"I think it really just showed how many were ready for something different," she said. "However, they were confused a little in the beginning as the story line I wrote is a bit intricate. Most (parents) saw it last year and now have a clearer understanding."

The set design challenge with "Nightmare" is the same with the standard Nutcracker and then some, said Kamakeeaina.

“We want to help the audience dive into the world we have created, but we still need the space to dance,” she said. “And we have two different worlds. You have to be creative with the order of the scenes and the placement of each backdrop and what it can reveal.”

Lightning can be tricky with timing so important, said Kamakeeaina.

“Fortunately, the technicians at the theater really know what they are doing,” she said.

Not that Kamakeeaina is stuck on her version of the annual tradition.

“Having done it for about 15 years, it definitely still holds a special place in my heart,” she said. “There is a reason it is referred to as a classic.”

This odd take on the classic has never been done “to my knowledge,” Kamakeeaina said.

“I would be very surprised to see it” elsewhere,” she said. “However, the dance world is changing. It seems everyone is trying new things to connect with a changing audience.”

Beyond the off-the-beaten-path production, it’s also the ballet company’s 20th anniversary, a milestone not lost on Kamakeeaina

“It covers my youth into my college years and then returning home and growing into the woman I am today,” she said. “The ballet was there through it all. I can remember things by what performances we did that year and what roles I danced or taught in the later years.”

Kamakeeaina said the Vallejo Ballet Company alumni are invited to celebrate the 20th year production.

“Whether they are able to attend or not, we want them to know they are remembered and paved the way for today’s youth to follow in their footsteps,” Kamakeeaina said.

“Nightmare before Nutcracker” runs Friday, Dec. 12, at 7 p.m., Sat., Dec. 13, at 1 and 7 p.m., and Sunday, Dec. 14, at 1 p.m. Tickets range from \$15-\$20. For more information, visit vacavilleballetcompany.org or vpat.net.

Freedman, Richard. “Vaca Ballet does ‘Nightmare Before Nutcracker’” *The Vacaville Reporter*. 08 December 2014. WEB.