

NEWSPAPER ARTICLE

Vacaville Ballet puts twist on tradition

A scary "Nutcracker" coming to Vacaville? Hasn't Halloween come and gone?

Apparently not, according to the leaders at Vacaville Ballet Company.

This year, they are adding to the company December holiday repertory. It already includes "Clara's Gift," "A Christmas Carol," and "Nutcracker Suite." All were based on Tchaikovsky's beloved "Nutcracker," and all were the brainchild of former company artistic director Heidi LuMaye, who last year resigned her post at the nonprofit dance group and moved to Idaho.

Continuing a company tradition of new, full-length works based on ballet or theater classics, new company artistic director and choreographer Cassandra Kamakeeaina will unveil "The Nightmare Before Nutcracker" in several performances from Friday to Sunday at the Vacaville Performing Arts Theatre. (Two free public school performances also will be staged there at 10 a.m. Thursday and 10 a.m. Friday.)

For some people, she said, this latest company offering may recall Tim Burton's cult classic film "The Nightmare Before Christmas." The imaginative 1993 stop-motion animation feature told the story of Jack Skellington, the Pumpkin King, who tires of the old routine in Halloween Town and becomes enthralled about Christmas, unaware that his Grand Guignol and the winter holiday do not really go together.

Not to worry, the film serves merely as a loose-fitting template, said Kamakeeaina, 31, a Vacaville native, Wood High graduate, former longtime company member, and alumna of the University of California, Irvine.

In her new piece, the audience will see many traditional characters, though they may go by slightly different names: The Queen of Sweet Dreams, Spanish Chocolate Cherry Cordials, Turkish Delights, Chinese Moon Cakes, Gummie Bee and Candy Flowers. The Sugar Plum and Nutcracker are among the 60-member cast, too, but new are Queen of Nightmares, Spider, Bride of Frankenstein, the Sugar Skulls, Ghosts, the Three Fates, Vampires, Witches, Cats and Crows.

In Kamakeeaina's twist on "Nutcracker," Act 1 (The Land of Sweet Dreams) features Tchaikovsky's familiar, highly melodic music from Act 2 of his 1892 classic, while Act 2 (The Land of Nightmares) moves to music from Burton's film and includes some rock 'n' roll.

"We wanted to keep the classic 'Nutcracker' but add something new and fresh to the story," said Kamakeeaina, who last week rehearsed at Unity of the Valley Church on North Orchard Street. "We wanted a wide variety of music."

So audiences can expect something edgier, with contemporary choreography and sounds in Act 2, she added, clad in gray sweatshirt over black dance tights.

Edgier, indeed. The Act 1 synopsis reads nothing like Tchaikovsky's ballet, based on E.T.A. Hoffmann's story: "The frightfully alluring Queen of Nightmares has grown tired of the mundane life of thrills and chills. Something is missing. She feels cold and empty. Just a shadow of who she once was not all that long ago."

Still, in the end, what themes, or main ideas, should the audience keep an eye and ear out for during the performance?

"Forgiveness," said Kamakeeiana, who shares a home with husband Kelly and their four children. "Not try to change who you are and lose yourself."

Rehearsing for the show was not without some logistical challenges, she noted. For several weeks the company has rehearsed at a variety of venues -- gyms, churches, and schools, among them. Kama-keeiana and her students await a new permanent home at 409 Main St., which is being refurbished.

"It was great to have the support we did, and the dancers learned to be adaptable," she said of the company's roving journey.

The cast includes Katelyn Reid and Macie La Grand double-cast as the Queen of Sweet Dreams; Victoria Joyce and Jill Oates double-cast as the Sugar Plum and the Bride of Frankenstein; Mary (Lexi) Parmer as Nutcracker; Abbie Sculley as Queen of Nightmares; and Megan Dreesen as Spider. For Kamakeeiana, dance has been in her blood since early childhood.

"I've always loved the lines," she said. "It's a visually stunning art form."

The appeal of dance, for her, is as fundamental as speaking.

"It's how I naturally express myself," said Kamakeeiana. "You're painting a picture with your body of what the music would sound like."

Tickets for the Friday the 13th gala and champagne reception, at 6 p.m., are \$20 at the box office, 1010 Ulatis Drive, Vacaville. Separate tickets for the 7 p.m. performance range from \$15 to \$20. Tickets for the remaining regular evening and matinee performances also range from \$15 to \$20, also available at the box office, noon to 6 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays. Call 469-4013.

Other company performances are 1 and 7 p.m. Saturday and 1 p.m. Sunday.

Visit www.vpat.net or www.vacavilleballetcompany.org for more.

Bammer, Richard. "Vacaville Ballet puts twist on tradition." *The Vacaville Reporter*. 11 Dec. 2013. Web.