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After more than half a century, Ballet Austin's The Nutcracker continues Austin holiday tradition

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BY [ACACIA CORONADO \(/AUTHOR/ACACIA-CORONADO\)](/AUTHOR/ACACIA-CORONADO)

A stout bearded man projected across the terrace of the Long Center for the Performing Arts will mark the start of the Christmas season. As Ballet Austin's "The Nutcracker" kicks off its 55th season on Dec. 8, patrons will gather here to watch dancers bring a magical world of rat kings and sugar plum fairies to life.

"The Nutcracker,' besides being a very special ballet, has become a part of a community's holiday tradition, just like Hanukkah or Christmas or whatever you celebrate," said Stephen Mills, artistic director of Ballet Austin.

Mills first choreographed Ballet Austin's performance in 1999, and they've continued performing his adaptations ever since. His later work with Ballet Austin has incorporated increased innovation, such as in his choreography for "Light/The Holocaust and Humanity Project," a human rights collaboration. But for 200-year-old source material such as "The Nutcracker," Mills said he tries to stick to the core of tradition loved by so many.

Mills said the biggest difference so far came four years ago, when they got new sets and costumes for the entire performance. Instead of making drastic changes each season, what makes every year unique is the dancers that portray each historic role.

Aara Krumpe, who has been dancing with Ballet Austin since 1999, said this will be her 19th season performing in Ballet Austin's "The Nutcracker." After taking on roles such as a rat, flower and the coveted Sugar Plum Fairy, she said it has become a central part of her holiday tradition.

"(The Nutcracker) has been a part of my life, my December holiday season since I was 10," Krumpe said. "It is a way great way to celebrate the holidays."

For Krumpe, she said her most memorable "The Nutcracker" moment came when she was given the opportunity to take on the role of Sugar Plum Fairy for the first time in 2005. She said for any little girl training in ballet, that is her biggest dream part.

“I was terrified, I was so nervous,” Krumpe said. “My husband came to that show, and I had told my husband, ‘I don’t want flowers until I do Sugar Plum,’ so it was a big deal for him to come and after my first performance, give me flowers.”

Mills said his favorite part so far of working on “The Nutcracker” has been witnessing the growth of those who take on smaller roles. He said he specifically enjoys watching the more than 200 Ballet Austin academy students, ages 9 and up, who participate throughout the season representing the future of the ballet tradition.

“The first role they will do is as an angel,” Mills said. “We send them out on the stage, sometimes for the very first time in their lives.”

Plan II freshman Audrey Balliette said she danced as an academy student for Ballet Austin’s “Nutcracker” from second to 10th grade. As someone whose childhood dream was to become a professional dancer, she said this experience was as magical as the events in the play.

“The first year I was in it, all I had to do was run onto the stage and run back off, and I remember being super nervous,” Balliette said. “As I got older and got more comfortable, there was an excitement of getting to perform. ‘The Nutcracker’ is something that for so many families is part of their holiday tradition, and getting to be a part of that was really cool.”

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