

Ballet Austin's The Nutcracker: A Holiday Tradition

By Joe Moreland - December 5, 2018



Ballet Austin's The Nutcracker: Copyright 2013 Tony Spielberg

Ballet Austin has been performing [The Nutcracker](#) in Austin since 1962, meaning that 2018 will mark the 56th annual production of the holiday classic. Performances run December 7-23 at the Long Center for the Performing Arts (tickets can be purchased [here](#)).

A Holiday Tradition Begins

The original production of The Nutcracker was a two-act ballet that premiered in 1892 with a score written by [Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky](#) (who also wrote the music for Swan Lake and Sleeping Beauty). The ballet itself was not a success, but the 20 minute Nutcracker Suite was and eventually revivals of the full production in the 1960s led to the enormous popularity we see today.

The long tradition of The Nutcracker in Austin means that several generations of local families have made attending a performance part of their Christmas holiday tradition. Not only are parents taking their kids to see what they saw when their parents brought them to the ballet, but [Ballet Austin Academy](#) students are performing in a show that some of their parents performed in themselves.

Ballet Austin Today

Ballet Austin itself has done a lot of growing since 1962. From its beginning as a place where children could be introduced to, and learn ballet, it has grown into first a civic and community and then a professional ballet company. Even since it became a professional ballet, Ballet Austin has continued to grow into one of the 15 largest professional ballets in the U.S.

Ballet Austin's focus on teaching the art of classical ballet to children and students has grown as well. Each year more than 900 students participate in classes at the academy teaching kids from age eight and up. The company also sponsors a summer intensive program each year. Summer Intensive teaches advanced technique to more than 300 students from all over the country. Students aged 11-17 audition from all over the U.S. to participate.

Academy Director, Bill Piner, says that even after all these years, and all the changes that have been made, "training and bringing up young dancers is still what it's all about."

Ballet Austin II

In addition Ballet Austin II is an apprenticeship program that which offers an opportunity for post-high school, advanced dancers to hone their skills in a professional environment. The Butler Fellowship Program offers 15 fully-underwritten scholarships to outstanding dancers and features an innovative and personal approach to a traditional, professional-track training. They rehearse and perform with the main company and Ballet Austin II in main stage, touring and educational performances.

More than 70% of Ballet Austin's current professional company are dancers who came through the Ballet Austin II apprenticeship program. In essence, Ballet Austin has built their own version of a minor league system. One that can provide a path for an aspiring dancer from age eight all the way through high school. It's a system can even place them into an apprenticeship program and, eventually, into the professional company. One day a student might even dance the part of the Sugar Plum Fairy or the Nutcracker.

A Newer Nutcracker

For many kids, that dream begins with their first trip to see The Nutcracker. It is the only story in classical ballet where the hero is a young girl (Clara). It is also the one ballet that relies heavily on a large number of children in a variety of roles.

A few years ago, Ballet Austin's version of the Nutcracker was updated to an entirely new production. This included originally designed sets, costumes, and choreography. The facelift made it possible for Artistic Director Stephen Mills to finally (after more than a decade at the creative helm of the company) organize the choreography for the roles taken on by academy students by age and skill level. In the old production the Angel parts, for instance, might be a hodge-podge of kids—all at different training levels. Now choreography and costumes for Angels are designed for children at the same level and age group. It's another example of how the staff at Ballet Austin has worked to streamline the company into an ultra-professional organization.

In fact, "professional" and "organized" is a consistent theme with Ballet Austin. It comes up in nearly every conversation you have with anyone who works there. The main company staff and dancers emphasize those qualities. The Apprenticeship, Butler Fellowship, and Summer Intensive programs epitomize professionalism and organization. And, in the academy, a template exists for every facet of the school that is applied to achieve extreme consistency.

Some Reasons To See The Nutcracker Now

If you have never experienced the magic of The Nutcracker, then there are a few good reasons you should make an effort to attend this year. Not only is the new production beautiful and colorful, but two of Ballet Austin's most accomplished dancers are making their final appearances in the holiday classic.

Ballet Austin's 2018 production of The Nutcracker marks the final one for veteran dancers Aara Krumpe and Christopher Swaim. Both company members have announced their retirements at the end of the 2018/19 season. Swaim joined Ballet Austin's professional company in 2006, after dancing as an apprentice for two seasons with Ballet Austin II. Krumpe served as both a trainee and apprentice before being promoted to the professional company in 2001. The two will complete their Nutcracker experiences dancing the lead roles of Sugar Plum Fairy and Cavalier. Watch for them in the following performances: Dec. 8 (2 p.m.), 14, 16, 19, and 22 (2 p.m.).

"Aara and Chris have been audience favorites for many seasons, and this year's production of The Nutcracker will be especially meaningful as we watch them take their final turns in these iconic roles," Mills said. "We appreciate the investment they've made in Ballet Austin as artists and individuals. We will treasure these performances and what we know will be a special time on stage for both of them."

Mother Ginger



Mother Ginger: Copyright 2013 Tony Spielberg

Maybe you'll be more interested in Ballet Austin's unique Nutcracker tradition: Casting members of the community in the role of "Mother Ginger". The comical matriarch of a sugar-charged family of "Bon Bons" steals the show during the "Divertissements" in Act II.

This season features an all-star Mother Ginger cast. Four Austin-based luminaries kick things off opening weekend. Former University of Texas and NFL quarterback, Vince Young, dons Mother Ginger's big wig and skirt on opening night. You can see the full schedule of guests who will be performing as Mother Ginger here.

Enjoy The Magic

Whatever your reason, go to one of Ballet Austin's performances of The Nutcracker this holiday season. It is something you're sure to enjoy. You will see gorgeous sets and costumes and hear some of the most beautiful music ever written. You will also witness a classic story danced by people who are doing what they've always dreamed of doing. It doesn't get much more magical than that.

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Joe Moreland is the Editor of Austin Christian Voice. He is an award winning writer who is an experienced script and short story writer as well as a novelist currently working on his first manuscript for a publisher. He worked for many years as an actor/writer/director for several theatrical companies/touring shows and spent more than a dozen years working in children's ministry with his wife where he wrote what amounted to a 90 minute sketch comedy show every week for multiple children's programs. Joe and his wife, Pam, have been married more than thirty years while living in the Austin/Central Texas area and raising four wonderful children.

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