

NOUVELLES DU BALLET

Newsletter of Champaign Urbana Ballet

Fall 2018



GRACING THE STAGE FOR OVER TWO DECADES

SPECIAL BACKSTAGE EDITION
WITH PHOTOS BY ALUMNA CLAIRE DAILY

Behind the Curtain

You've seen the magic of *The Nutcracker* on stage, now join us behind the scenes—feel the anticipation and adrenaline—as we view the show through the eyes of some of the many who make this holiday favorite a yearly reality.



University of Illinois freshman Sophia Ebel is a *Nutcracker* veteran, having danced in 12 consecutive shows—as one of Mother Ginger’s polichinelles to rosebud, ice fairy, and the lead dancer in several Act II variations (Spanish, Chinese, and Russian). We asked this seasoned performer to be our guide backstage, as she prepares to take in the show as an audience member for this first time since 2005: “When someone watches *The Nutcracker* from the audience, they are really only seeing the tip of the iceberg. There is so much more happening out of sight! Backstage alone, dancers are entering, exiting, waiting, and changing costumes, set pieces and props are moving on and off stage incredibly quickly, and crew members and volunteers are working constantly to make sure everything gets done and goes smoothly. This all happens in nearly complete darkness. Simultaneously in other parts of the theater, dancers are in dressing rooms preparing and warming up, costumes are being altered and repaired, and so on. I wouldn’t say it’s chaotic as everything is highly structured and organized, but backstage—in contrast to the relative calm and elegance of the performance—is definitely a bustling, fast-paced environment that requires constant awareness.”

This vast, bustling world was not immediately apparent to Sophia when she first made her debut as a young dancer: “I don’t think I truly appreciated the scale of *The Nutcracker* when I started performing in it. All of the polichinelles, mice, and soldiers would play in the dressing room until it was time to go onstage, we’d do our parts, and then go back to the dressing room. It was easy, fun, and felt to me like we were at the center of the show!”

Ali Lewis, head wrangler in the Opera Room, where the children in younger roles congregate, witnesses, first hand, the experience of these younger dancers. Ali says, “The Opera Room is where the children bond and form a community of young performers.” A typical Opera Room scene: Clusters of dancers in little areas of their own—polichinelles in one corner, party girls in another, party boys on the left, mice on the right, troop of soldiers in the middle—coloring, playing games, doing crafts, trading good-luck gifts. At least 30 minutes before call time, the dancers set aside their games and crafts and begin preparing themselves for their moment on stage. Party girls apply their own makeup with enviable technique; polichinelles, mice, soldiers, and party boys line up at the makeup tables waiting for their whiskers to be drawn, cheeks to be rouged, eyes to shadowed and lined by a wranglers’ expert hands.



Wranglers are volunteers who help the younger dancers with their makeup and costumes and ensure that everyone is safe and happy. Ali, as head wrangler for the past five years, has the added responsibility of having “to be highly aware of the music and timing of the performance and to work with the wranglers in the Opera Room to stay on schedule.” She says, “We don’t want to be early, and we definitely don’t want to be late!” She also makes sure “costumes are being cared for, children are being as kind as they can be (considering the late hour), and that the wranglers know what to do and follow through on their volunteer work.” Ali notes, “It’s a busy room, but we want the children to have a sense of calm along with all of the excitement.” Most importantly, she wants “memories of *The Nutcracker* to be happy.”

With age and added experience comes perspective, notes Sophia: “As I got older, danced more roles, and got to watch both the rest of the show and everything that happened backstage, I saw what a truly massive undertaking *The Nutcracker* is, and how many people spend hundreds of hours each season making sure it goes smoothly.”

Indeed, many of the preparations begin long before “tech week” that leads to opening night. Costume planning, for example, starts in the summer. Costumers must devise ensembles that are not only beautiful, but up to the performance challenge. As costume mistress Masumi Iriye, a volunteer for 15 *Nutcracker* productions since 2003, explains, “the jumbo spandex we use for many of





our costumes is the same material that's used for pro-football uniforms. Our costumes may have more bling on them, but the underlying infrastructure is designed to give the same level of support and flexibility as for any athlete." Costume production for *The Nutcracker* can involve up to 45 volunteers/1,200 volunteer hours.

Mounting the production requires many hands, and the contributions come from all quarters, and draw on CU Ballet's longstanding community relationships. In 2017, four months before opening night of *The Nutcracker*, John Odum, art teacher at Carrie Busey Elementary School in Champaign, and seven of his fifth-grade students took on the creative responsibility of refashioning the horse heads that are attached to wooden poles, which the cavalry dancers carry in the battle scene. John's artistic expertise, along with the hard work of his students, considerably lightened the dancers' load. The original horse heads weighed seven pounds; the newly sculpted—their weight was reduced by half. The next time you see the cavalry leap into battle with their "horses," you'll know why their leaps are lighter and higher.

Of course, no show can begin until the long-planned and assembled costumes, scenery, and props actually arrive at Krannert Center for the Performing Art's Tryon Festival Theatre. The metamorphic Christmas tree, Mother Ginger's giant skirt, enchanting costumes, none of these could magically appear on stage without the dedicated work of the logistics crew under the leadership of Brett Feddersen, who, for many years, has been an integral part of *The Nutcracker* production. Under Brett's guidance, Andrew Hall has volunteered with the crew for the past six years. Days before opening night, Brett, Andrew, and other hard-working volunteers spend hours loading, unloading, and setting up, making sure that every piece is in its right place. Andrew says, "Getting everything delivered and set-up on-time with minimal repairs is always a challenge," but "it's always a pleasure when a new set piece is unveiled."

And then there's the dancing. Lots of it. Hours of rehearsal, from Labor Day on, of course. But did you know that dancers take a class on stage prior to performances to ready their bodies and minds for their roles? Or that some performers are parents of dancers? Sophia's father, Jon Ebel, will be in his ninth *Nutcracker* this season, and his roles have ranged from party dad and the maid, Madame Dustmoppe, to a rat, an Arabian bearer, and a Russian dancer. Jon cites the camaraderie that builds backstage as one of the perks that keep drawing him back to the show: "Being in the production has been more fun than I ever imagined. Many of the dads have been performing together for a long time, so it's just really great to get together and start preparing again. I tend to get very nervous waiting backstage, but it helps me to look around and see old friends."

Jon marvels at how unique each show can be. Like dipping your toe in a stream, it's never the same *Nutcracker* twice: "It's always amazing to me how the show can be so different from night to night. We're more aware of it because we see every show, but each time the curtain comes up, something new is going to happen." Part of that variety stems from improvisation. "Although most of the roles and scenes in *The Nutcracker* are highly choreographed," Jon's daughter Sophia explains, "there are some where this is not at all the case. In the party scene, for example, a lot of the acting and interactions on the sides of the stage are either improvisation or self-choreographed. As long as we're in our spots when the dancing starts, we're allowed to, within reason, be as creative as we want with our characters." As Jon observes, "I have to decide who I'm going to be for the twenty minutes of the party scene and what I'm going to do to help the scene be alive."



Speaking of being alive, our dancers have to be “on their toes,” on stage and off. For Sophia, “One of the most stressful parts of *The Nutcracker* that happens on a regular basis are ‘quick changes,’ times when a dancer has four minutes or less to transition from one role to another. This can involve changing shoes, headpieces, costumes, earrings, and even hair or makeup, and is always crazy.” With no time for a journey to the dressing room, these instant transformations must take place backstage. Other dancers and volunteers wait in the wings to assist—and to attend to any disasters. Because dancing—not to mention scenery and quick changes—will always be tough on seams and costumes.

That’s where the essential Green Room volunteers come in during performances. This *Nutcracker* 2018 will mark Masumi’s 11th year in the Green Room, where half a dozen costumer wizards stand at the ready with needle and thread to mend any split seams, tears, lost snaps, broken hairpieces, and countless other wardrobe mishaps. Sometimes, though, there isn’t even enough time for costumes to travel back to the Green Room for repairs, relates Alicia Trezise—veteran of 13 *Nutcrackers*, costumer extraordinaire, and one of Masumi’s longtime aides de campe in the Green Room. That’s why volunteers assisting with quick-changes backstage need to be adept at sewing. They carry safety pins and have several needles—pre-threaded in a few colors—at the ready. Alicia recalls an instance when she was working quick-change and had to, lightning quick, stitch a party boy’s pants back together before he made his re-entry on stage: “There wasn’t even time to knot the quick whipstitch”. Mercifully, her handiwork held together long enough for the young dancer to finish the scene.

Now it’s opening night, when dancers—tall, small, and in-between—are warmed up and dressed, makeup applied. Sets and props are at the ready, lights wait to go on. How do we know it’s time for the show? The music! Sophia reminisces, “Most of the memories I have of my first *Nutcracker* are connected to the music in some way. Whenever I listen to the end of the ribbon candy variation (it came right before polichinelles), I still feel the nervousness and excitement I felt as a six-year-old waiting under Mother Ginger’s skirt.” As I’ve grown older, musicality and the music itself have remained just as important to me as a dancer, and I’ve come to appreciate more and more just how lucky we are to be able to perform with a live orchestra. There is so much additional energy that the live music brings to a production, and being able to draw on that energy and feel the relationship between the dancing and the music so clearly is an incredible experience.”

Before the curtain rises, the dissonance of the strings, woodwinds, and horns—the sound of the musicians warming up and tuning their instruments—weaves through the theater, a sure sign that something special is to come. The lights dim, a brief anticipatory silence, then the magical Nutcracker Suite swells from the pit and fills the theater. As the Principal Cello for The Champaign-Urbana Symphony Orchestra, a position she has held for the past 34 years, Barbara Hedlund has only missed one season of performing *The Nutcracker*. She says performing for a ballet presents unique challenges for musicians, which include “preparing and performing Tchaikovsky’s technically and musically demanding ballet score, sustaining the stamina for repeat performances to sound like opening night every night, adapting to tempo changes to accompany the dancers,” and dueling with the fog from the dry ice that roams off the stage masking the sheet music. Although she has yet to see the ballet as an audience member because she is always sharing her talents as a member of the orchestra, Barbara still very much appreciates being a part of *The Nutcracker*. The pleasures, she says, are many, notably, “playing the beautiful music; collaborating with the dancers, dedicated musicians performing with dedicated colleagues, working with the stage crew, feeling the excitement and adrenaline buzz throughout rehearsals and performances . . . looking out to see full houses, friends and fans coming to say hello at the edge of the pit before and after the performance” and, of course, “valuing and appreciating the work, dedication, and support of so many people and businesses to create such a wonderful opportunity for our community.”

So now you are in the know, having walked (and danced!) in the shoes of a few of the production’s many vital players. When next you join us this December for *The Nutcracker*, we hope this brief glimpse behind the curtain will help you appreciate not only the amazing spectacle on stage before you, but also the unseen world of preparation and activity that brings the show to you. See you at the Krannert Center!



Dutch Dairy Debuts this December

In an art form as steeped in tradition as ballet, change can be hard to imagine and even harder to implement. The combination of inspiration and perspiration has to be strong enough to overcome the affection that choreographers, dancers, and audiences have for familiar, yet magical, moments. For a decade now, the second act of Champaign Urbana Ballet's *The Nutcracker* has featured a parade of tea cups emerging from the enormous hoop skirt of Mother Ginger to dance to Tchaikovsky's rousing Polichinelle variation. Since the curtain came down last year, however, there has been a bull – or, rather, a cow – loose in CU Ballet's china shop, which is why the company has reimagined this beloved scene for 2018.

The differences between a ballet studio and a dairy farm are many. Whether as cast members or audience members, many of us are nourished by ballet. But the nourishment that flows from a dairy farm out into the world consists of actual calories in the form of milk, which becomes cheese, ice cream, yogurt, and hundreds of other edible products. And though anyone who has been around a ballet studio after an intense day of rehearsal can attest that the air gets heavy and the floor gets crowded, the sensory experience of a large, working dairy farm is altogether more intense. The reasons for watching where you step are also different.

Those committed to producing a ballet and those committed to producing milk could go about their work without ever crossing paths. Most members of the CU Ballet family are likely unaware that one of Illinois' largest dairy farms is just thirty minutes west of the studio. Most of the thirty employees of that farm, Stone Ridge Dairy, don't think much about pointe shoes and jetés, partnering classes and tech week. But CU Ballet takes seriously its mission of building bridges between the world of ballet and the broader community, and has found inspiration in this unlikely place.

When George Kasbergen, owner of Stone Ridge Dairy, started his operation just north of Mansfield, ballet was not on his mind. He was focused then, as he is now, on bringing top quality milk to market and on expanding the agricultural legacy that his father built in California. Kasbergen has done more than carry on the family enterprise. He has passed on to his children and his employees the work ethic and the values that brought the family through hard times to the stunning success they now enjoy. He knows that success does not come by accident. That it is the result of vision, focus, study, and hard, hard work. George and his team work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Not only do they milk each of their three thousand cows three times per day, but those cows also need food and water, and someone needs to clean up after them. The work never stops. And then there's the challenge of getting thirty-three thousand gallons of milk to market every day regardless of weather and road conditions.

Stone Ridge Dairy is an incredible operation. When CU Ballet Artistic Director Deanna Doty, first toured the farm and visited with George, she recognized someone as committed as she is to moving bodies artfully through space and making the most complex systems appear simple, effortless. For his part, George has come to love CU Ballet, not just because ballet offers many interesting parallels to and metaphors for his work, but because attending the ballet offers him and his family a chance to be part of something else extraordinary, to be transported by movement and music and scenery away from the routines of everyday life. In that escape, though, is something deeply familiar to George. After all, who can appreciate the years of training and the months of practice that go into a perfect lift, better than a guy who knows the startling complexity of a simple glass of milk.

This December, we raise a glass (of milk) to the George Kasbergen family for their inspiration and generous contribution toward the artistry and merriment of the new Dutch Dairy scene; midwest style.





Champaign Urbana Ballet

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THE NUTCRACKER

Champaign Urbana Ballet



With The Champaign-Urbana Symphony Orchestra at Krannert Center for the Performing Arts

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Stone Ridge Consolidated communications

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