

Q & A from the Director of The Nutcracker Ballet

Is The Nutcracker Ballet the same every year?

The choreography for The Nutcracker at the FOA is loosely based off the Balanchine Nutcracker, which is set from year to year as a baseline onto which the director or choreographers can introduce a new step each year. The purpose for this is to keep consistent and continuous technique and performance, and at the same time while adding and introducing new steps to each level each year the dancer's technique and skills continue to progress.

The story of the Nutcracker remains the same every year, and the baseline choreography is meant to follow this storyline. However, the director has the right to modify certain elements of the show in order to highlight and focus on specific aspects of the story. For example this year, I have decided to highlight the dream element, where when Clara falls asleep on Christmas Eve after her family's Christmas party she dreams that mice invade her house and her Nutcracker grows to be life size and stands as her protector from the Mouse King, the dream continues as they get transported into the snowy forest and the Land of the Sweets. In order to better portray this, I have decided to cast two Claras, one as the "Reality" Clara, who will be younger and performs the real-life portions of the story, and the other as "Dream" Clara, who will be older and who performs the dream portions of the story.

So yes, the story and choreography of The Nutcracker is the same each year, but there may be small elements that will differ from year to year depending on the director's vision for the show.

Why have I been cast in the same role?

I have been on the casting team for the past several years and we try our very best to give everyone something new or different every year, however sometimes, whether it be due to schedule availability, level, age, or simply the fact that you have been in the Nutcracker for many years, there are times that you may be cast in the same role as you were the year before. If this happens, please do not look at this as me not thinking you are capable of anything else, I know you all are capable of great things and much growth, so look at it rather as an opportunity to do even better than last year or the year before. Every role is vital, and every person is important to our story, we want everyone who auditions to be involved and to know how valuable they are.

How do you choose the lead dancers?

When looking at who to cast as leads my mind is always on the bigger picture, of the entire show process from start to finish. A few of the questions I ask when

casting leads are: Who can carry the weight of the story with their acting, confidence, and technique? Who will take direction well and constructive criticism with grace? Who will maintain a good attitude and will be a good example to others? Who will be dedicated in coming to rehearsals and improving their technique? These are all things that make us good dancers and performers, as well as good humans and the kind of people that I and others would want to work with and alongside.

How do you choose the choreographers?

I always try to choose people who are currently or have been at one time a part of the FOA family, who share a passion and skill for dance and the arts and who will show love to the cast. Having worked with them for years I have observed their strongest qualities as dancers, teachers or choreographers and I try to place them with groups that will both fit their strengths and challenge them and their creativity.

How do you choose who is in each dance?

As mentioned above, I am always looking at the big picture. When deciding who is in each dance I try my best to place each dancer by age or level, in a dance for which the choreography is well suited to them. In some cases a dancer may be placed in a specific dance because of their acting abilities, or experience in other types of dance or activities. In corps or group pieces there are a few things I may consider, like how they dance together? Is their height similar or gradient? Do they have similar or different strengths from each other that can be utilized in the piece? Or does their schedule allow them to attend the majority of the rehearsals for that piece?

There are many different things of this kind to consider when casting each dancer, but when you put your trust in me to guide and design, and I put my trust in all of you to create, we have the ability to make something beautiful.

Why didn't you cast my child as Clara or the Sugar Plum Fairy?

While I would love to be able to see every child get the opportunity to perform their dream role, as the director I get tasked with the responsibility to make the tough call on who "the one" will be to play each role, because by tradition there is only one Sugar Plum and one Clara per year. There may be multiple who would be wonderful in the role, however when I direct a show I always have a specific vision for the story and how I want it to be told, and the dancers I will choose for these roles are the ones in whom I see the acting, technique, good attitude, and storytelling ability to best fulfill my vision, and in whom we see dedication and motivation both in classes and in the audition room.