

Tulsa Ballet gives life to Mother Ginger

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It takes a whole lot of time, effort and people to get one certain character on to the stage in Tulsa Ballet's "The Nutcracker."

Last year, as part of the 10th anniversary of the company's current production of "The Nutcracker," Tulsa Ballet artistic director Marcello Angelini decided to re-introduce the character of Mother Ginger, whose voluminous gown hides a host of tiny clowns.

She makes a relatively brief appearance in the ballet's second act, but the visual impact of the lady herself, as well as what she has secreted beneath her skirts, makes her one of the more popular characters in this character-filled ballet.

"Yes, everyone loves to see the big lady," Angelini said. "When we decided to bring her back last year, we had to use a costume from the original production. It worked, but it didn't fit in with the overall look of the ballet."

Tulsa Ballet's "Nutcracker" is set in the 1920s, with costumes and sets that evoke the elegance and glamour of the time. Angelini commissioned designer Christine Joly de Lotbiniere, who has created costumes for several Tulsa Ballet world premieres, to create a new Mother Ginger costume that would better integrate the character into the ballet.

"Christine is very meticulous about research, and she went back to images by Erte," Angelini said, referring to the artist and designer whose work was a major part of the Art Deco movement.

"She created a costume that is very refined and sophisticated," Angelini said. "Even the costumes for the little clowns that accompany her are just as elegant." It's also huge, requiring two dancers to give the character life.

Tulsa Ballet II members Christie Martin and Silas Campos will be collaborating as Mother Ginger for the second time this season —although in Campos' mind, "Christie is Mother Ginger. I'm just the legs."

The two dancers are both in their second year with Tulsa Ballet. They performed in the company's production of "Rite of Spring" earlier this year, and as TBll members perform all the company's educational outreach programs.

Mother Ginger may not involve the sort of dancing those other productions require, but it's still a challenge, the two say.

"I really just sort of shuffle out on stage, then shuffle off again," Campos said. "I'm hoping that they put in a panel they say they will, so I can see out a bit. Right now, it's pitch black under there."

"For me, it's pretty exciting to be up that high," Martin said, laughing. "It really gives you a different perspective. And I get to be this exuberant character. I just can't get too carried away."

That's because the Mother Ginger costume isn't simply a costume — it's practically a piece of scenery.

Jerry Wolf, the costume department manager for Tulsa Ballet, described how the costume is constructed.

"It starts with a harness that Christie wears, from the shoulders to the waist," he said. "Then, there's webbing that supports the PVC pipe that is the hoop that holds the dress out to hide all the little ones."

To the webbing is attached the petticoat, which is to hang down to the floor, and over all this goes the dress that the audience sees.

"I'm the one who dresses Mother Ginger — much to my shoulders' displeasure," Wolf said, laughing. "During the show, we have the dress hanging from a trapeze-like contraption that our crew rigged up in the PAC's green room."

When it's about time for Mother Ginger to make her grand entrance, Martin goes to the green room, gets fitted into the harness and dress, the skirt is then gathered up and there is a procession to the wings of the PAC's Chapman Music Hall.

"It's tricky because we have to get all this through a standard-size stage door," Wolf said. "And usually we have just a few minutes to spare."

Once backstage, Campos sits on the edge of a chair and Martin stands on the chair seat. Martin gets settled on Campos' shoulders, the dress is arranged and together the two dancers rise up to Mother Ginger's full height. The chair is removed and the little clowns gather around Campos under the dress.

"They're really good and well-behaved," Campos said about his smaller cohorts. "We haven't had any problems."

Once all the little clowns are back under the dress, Campos leads the company off-stage. Off comes the dress, which is carried back to the green room and hung up.

"I used to have it pretty easy during the second act of 'Nutcracker,'" Wolf said, laughing. "Not with Mother Ginger. She's a lot of work."

But then, for Wolf and his staff, "The Nutcracker" is quite a bit of work year round. Usually the costume staff spends the month of June rebuilding and refurbishing costumes for "The Nutcracker."

Most of these costume pieces are more than a decade old, but Wolf said the overall condition of the costumes is extremely good.

"That's due in large part to my predecessor Pat Gill, who did a marvelous job of maintaining all these costumes," he said. "But it is also a testament to spending the money up front. If you invest in quality materials, build the costumes the right way and take care of them, they'll last for decades."

Ballet to host 'Nutcracker' events

Tulsa Ballet is hosting several special events in conjunction with its annual production of "The Nutcracker."

Prior to the Dec. 15 matinee, the ballet will host a special "Nutcracker Brunch," 11:30 a.m. at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, 100 E. Second St. The kid-friendly brunch will include appearances by characters from the holiday-themed ballet, photo opportunities and holiday crafts.

Tickets for the brunch are \$50. To order, call Patrick Vaughn at 918-392-5903. The Dec. 21 and 22 matinee performances will be preceded by a variety of holiday festivities, including Christmas music and storytelling, held at 1 p.m. in the Tulsa PAC's Westby Pavilion.

Choirs from area high schools will perform in the Westby Pavilion prior to some "Nutcracker" shows. They are: Edison High School, Dec. 13; Owasso High School, Dec. 14; Bixby High School, Dec. 15; Booker T. Washington High School, Dec. 20. The ballet is also offering a "VIP Experience," which includes prime seating for the performance, a commemorative gift and a backstage tour after the show, where patrons will be able to meet with some of the Tulsa Ballet dancers.



Jerry Wolf, costume department manager, compares a drawing of the Mother Ginger costume to the actual dress, worn by dancer Christie Martin, perched atop fellow dancer Silas Campos.



An oversized dress is worn by Mother Ginger in "The Nutcracker." MATT BARNARD/Tulsa World