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Graham Lustig leapt at chance with Oakland Ballet

Allan Ulrich, Chronicle Dance Correspondent
Sunday, December 19, 2010

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Adm Golub / The Chronicle

Follow the sound of flutes and they lead you to a basement studio in Mills College's Haas Pavilion, where the Oakland Ballet Company's new artistic director, Graham Lustig, is rehearsing two girls in the Chinese divertissement of his "Nutcracker."

The former dancer, now a trim 55, drapes himself with ribbons, demonstrates a combination, observes the performers and

offers his verdict: "Crisper! The jumps are equally as musical as the steps."

Bowing in a community with your own version of the most popular and beloved of all dances, thus risking comparison with myriad settings of the piece, can be fraught with peril.

Ready for a challenge

But Lustig, who retired in May from directing New Jersey's American Repertory Ballet after a decade's stewardship, doesn't seem the type to flinch from a challenge. He has found one in the East Bay company, which has been rudderless since founder Ronn Guidi's sudden retirement in 2009. While respectful of the organization's prominent place in Bay Area (and American) dance history, Lustig admits that restoring the company to its glory days won't happen overnight.

"Oakland has had a tough time of it; everybody can agree with that," he says. "I want to establish artistic credibility as well as demonstrating viability. With those two in concert, I hope people can feel comfortable and positive about an organization with which everybody has a strong relationship. With great respect to the past, I want to rewrite history."

He speaks not out of arrogance, but from experience. London-born Lustig first encountered the Oakland Ballet back in the 1980s, when he was transitioning from a

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dancing career at the Dutch National Ballet and the Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet. He visited this country on a traveling scholarship and, mindful of the company's reputation, arrived here when Guidi was restaging Eugene Loring's "Tender Land." On accepting the job, he discovered that none of the sets or costumes for Oakland's famed Ballets Russes restorations remained in the warehouse.

Thinking modestly

So Lustig is thinking modestly. For at least this season and next, the programming will consist of "Nutcracker" at the Paramount, and in May a mixed-repertory bill of contemporary choreography at Laney College Theater. Here, he will feature his own dances, notably "Vista" (to recordings by John Lurie) and works by Bay Area artists, including Mills faculty member Sonia Delwaide. Lustig has also scheduled a two-week summer intensive, "ballet boot camp" for young dancers on the Oakland campus.

He is keen, too, on instituting an Oakland version of the Dancing Through the Ceiling program he started in New Jersey. "It was designed for women choreographers interested in making works in the ballet mode. They should be encouraged, but they need to learn the elements of composition," Lustig notes. Back east, he commissioned 12 pieces, including two from Smuin Ballet resident choreographer Amy Seiwert.

But for the moment, there's "Nutcracker" to prepare. Lustig's was unveiled at ARB in 2000 and is graced with decor and costumes by the acclaimed Zack Brown. The production is set in Vienna around 1910 and will include 20 company members and 45 children.

"When I made it," Lustig says, "I was inspired to set it at a time when women were fighting for the vote, when they had abandoned corsets and hoop skirts for free-flowing gowns. The idea is that my protagonist, who is named Marie, takes charge of her destiny in a dream.

Inspired by Modernism

"I was inspired, too, by the Modernism movement in Austria and the lack of Victorian clutter. I was much taken by those portraits of women by Gustav Klimt, those confections in white, and those silver birch forests he painted. In my production, they stand in for coniferous trees."

Lustig was also much taken by the Tchaikovsky score. "In England and the continent, 'Nutcracker' wasn't much performed when I was dancing. So I came to the music late, and fell in love with it. In New Jersey, the dancers, who grew up with Tchaikovsky, teased me for my infatuation."

Caught up in the spirit

Lustig has committed himself to 12 to 14 weeks a year in the East Bay, and he is caught up in the spirit of the place.

"The energy of the dance scene in Oakland is palpable," he says. "It feels a bit like what happened a few years ago with the exodus of talent from Manhattan to Brooklyn."

Lustig retired from dancing at 36, and, in some profound way, his life has not been the same since.

"I don't miss the grind of rehearsing a role that I've already danced 100 times. But,



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honestly, there's something exhilarating about being onstage that's like nothing else in the world." {sbox}

Oakland Ballet Company: Graham Lustig's "Nutmcracker." Thurs.-Dec. 26. Paramount Theater, 2025 Broadway, Oakland. \$35-\$50. (510) 465-6400. www.oaklandballet.org.

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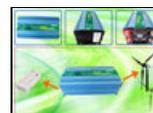
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