

## Oakland Ballet's 'Nutcracker' breaks ice with kids

Sara Hayden, Chronicle Staff Writer

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A ballerina extends one arm and arcs the other over her head, her fingers curved as though holding a delicate bubble. Her peach satin shoes shimmer as she floats across the stage en pointe. One might liken her to a nightingale or a princess, but those are not the first comparisons that come to the audience's mind.

"It looks like Michael Jackson!" raves one member. The critic is perhaps 7 years old, a student at the Melrose Leadership Academy in Oakland, and is attending a special presentation of "The Nutcracker." The K-8 crowd goes wild, squealing and cheering in front of the school's cafeteria stage.

Many young people have never been exposed to ballet, but Oakland Ballet Company's artistic director, Graham Lustig, aims to change this and get them involved. One way he is accomplishing this is by incorporating "The Nutcracker" into community outreach efforts.

In 2010, when Lustig took over as artistic director, he met with the Oakland Unified School District. "I'm taking charge of the ballet," he said. "What can we do to help your students? We have artists who love presenting this work, who love talking about their art form, who love sharing it. Can we work with you?"

Teachers, principals and students were only too happy to oblige. Since then, Lustig's company has presented comprehensive programs at schools that offer information about ballet's history, training, performance highlights and a choreography workshop. Through donations, the company is able to give away thousands of tickets to families who otherwise would not have the chance to see the ballet.

"I don't want anybody to feel that what we're doing is something elitist, that you have to have a degree to understand it," Lustig says. "I think that that's the greatest power of this art form - you don't have to be verbally proficient to understand 'The Nutcracker.' "

For many Americans, "The Nutcracker" is a holiday tradition. But this is not always the case. "I went to a school where I'd never been exposed to ballet," says Oakland Ballet dancer Alec Lytton. When an outreach program performing "The Nutcracker" visited Lytton's school, he found his calling.

"As soon as I saw that, I knew that is what I wanted to be doing," he says. Fourteen years later, he is the Nutcracker in this current production. "It works," he says with a smile.

In addition to dancing the title role, the dancers are offering mini lessons to the children, ages 5 to 14, on ballet's history, training, the story of "The Nutcracker" and choreography.

"What is the name of the special ballet we're performing?" ask the dancers at one program.

"The Nutcracker!" the kids shout.

"Where did ballet begin?"

"France!"

Because Melrose Leadership Academy offers a bilingual immersion program, the students slide seamlessly between Spanish and English throughout the ballet's visit. Part of the school's mission is to promote multiculturalism. Although the children have the opportunity to participate in folklorico and salsa, they seem equally excited about the ballet.

As students add their personal twists to the choreography, Moyra Contreras, the school's principal, seems pleased. "I think this will spark a lot of interest," she says. "I don't think most of our kids have had the chance to see ballet, so this is a good opportunity for them."

The company dancers have also discovered new value in their art. "What we in our studio work find mundane and ordinary, other people find compelling and graceful," says Lustig. "You have no idea what a great message that can be."

The ballet has inspired young dancers to sign up for dance classes and encourages them to audition for future "Nutcracker" performances.

For "The Nutcracker" this weekend at the Paramount Theatre, 47 community members, including nine young dancers ages 7 to 16, are dancing with the company. Also participating in the performances will be the Pacific Boychoir Academy, Mount Eden High School's girls choir and Oakland East Bay Symphony.

"It takes a community to support a company. ... I feel there's a basic universality of what the arts can mean to people and what they bring to people's lives," says Lustig, "There's entertainment in this, and there's nothing shameful about being entertained."

**Graham Lustig's "The Nutcracker":** Through Sat. Oakland Paramount Theatre, 2025 Broadway. \$15-\$59.50. (800) 745-3000. oaklandballet.org.

E-mail Sara Hayden at [shayden@sfchronicle.com](mailto:shayden@sfchronicle.com).

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