

## Oakland Ballet's 'Nutcracker' runs Dec. 21-24 at Paramount Theatre

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OAKLAND -- This time of the year, children dressed in their best finery flock to theaters throughout the Bay Area to see a nutcracker come to life and a little girl's dreams fulfilled.

The popularity of Tchaikovsky's "The Nutcracker" continues to grow around the world despite its less-than-warm reception when it debuted in Russia in 1892. Thanks to the San Francisco Ballet's 1944 production and George Balanchine's 1954 staging in New York, "The Nutcracker" has taken its place as one of the most beloved holiday entertainments.

A number of children in the Bay Area will receive more than the thrill of watching the story of Clara (sometimes known as Marie) and the magic Land of the Sweets unfold. They will be on stage in a variety of roles as the Oakland Ballet presents "The Nutcracker" from Dec. 21-24 at the Paramount Theatre in Oakland.

Close to 40 children from all over the Bay Area will join Oakland Ballet's professional dancers on stage while the Mount Eden High School Women's Ensemble and the Oakland Youth Chorus join the Oakland East Bay Symphony, conducted by Michael Morgan, to vocalize Tchaikovsky's beautiful score.

"It's an essential part of our 'Nutcracker' to include members of the community -- to share such a magical story with them this special time of the year," said Oakland Ballet artistic director Graham Lustig. "This is the fourth year we've performed my particular production, and we now have some 'Nutcracker' veterans -- children who started as party guests, progressed to frolicking snowballs in the blizzard scene, and now they're rats fighting with large knives and forks."

One such young dancer is 13-year-old Mai Corkins. The Alameda resident has been dancing since the age of 4.

"I began as a snowball and, the next year, I was a soldier, and, this year, I'm a rat," Corkins said. "I think I loved being a snowball the best, but the rat is also fun. It's just a challenge dancing in the big head."

Also finding the head a problem is 10-year-old Katharine Pope, who plays a mouse in this year's production. The student at Montclair Elementary School said: "It's kind of hard to see, especially when you're jumping around, and it's pretty hot. But, I love being on stage. It's very exciting."

Orinda's Julia Milani is also a veteran performer in "The Nutcracker." The 14-year-old student at Head-Royce School has performed as a snowball, a bonbon and a soldier.

"I love performing in the show with the professional dancers," she said. "Rehearsals are really tiring, but it's so much fun when we get on stage in front of an audience."

Lustig believes in integrating the young dancers with the professional dancers.

"Using both our professional company and the children together gives a very full, more textured picture

that along with the beautiful costumes and the gorgeous music played by the symphony, brings it to a higher dimension of art," he said.

The artistic director also noted the sense of mentorship that has developed between the company dancers and the children.

"Here you have these young dancers trying on point shoes, tiaras and tutus with such excitement, and it reminds the professional dancers of their own debut with this show when they were 8 or 10 years old," he said.

Lustig also feels the interaction gives the young dancers a real sense of what the profession demands.

"I think that is a very healthy thing, because while dancing is a joyous thing to do, there is a lot of hard work involved," he said. "It is also very gratifying for me to watch these young people grasp the challenging choreography and take the stage in a very professional manner."

Members of Oakland Ballet joining the young dancers for this year's "Nutcracker" include Megan Terry as Marie (also known as Clara), Greg DeSantis as the Nutcracker, Chantelle Pianetta as the Sugar Plus Fairy, and Connolly Strombeck as the Cavalier.

FYI

The Oakland Ballet "Nutcracker" performs at 2 p.m. on Dec. 21 and 22 and at 11 a.m. on Dec. 24 at 11 a.m. at the Paramount Theatre, 2025 Broadway, Oakland. Tickets, priced from \$20 to \$59.50, are available online at [www.ticketmaster.com](http://www.ticketmaster.com) or in person at the Paramount Theatre box office. For an additional \$15, children and families can attend the "Sweet Dreams" parties following the 2 p.m. matinees and meet the characters from the ballet while enjoying sweets and other refreshments. For more information, go to [www.oaklandballet.org](http://www.oaklandballet.org).